

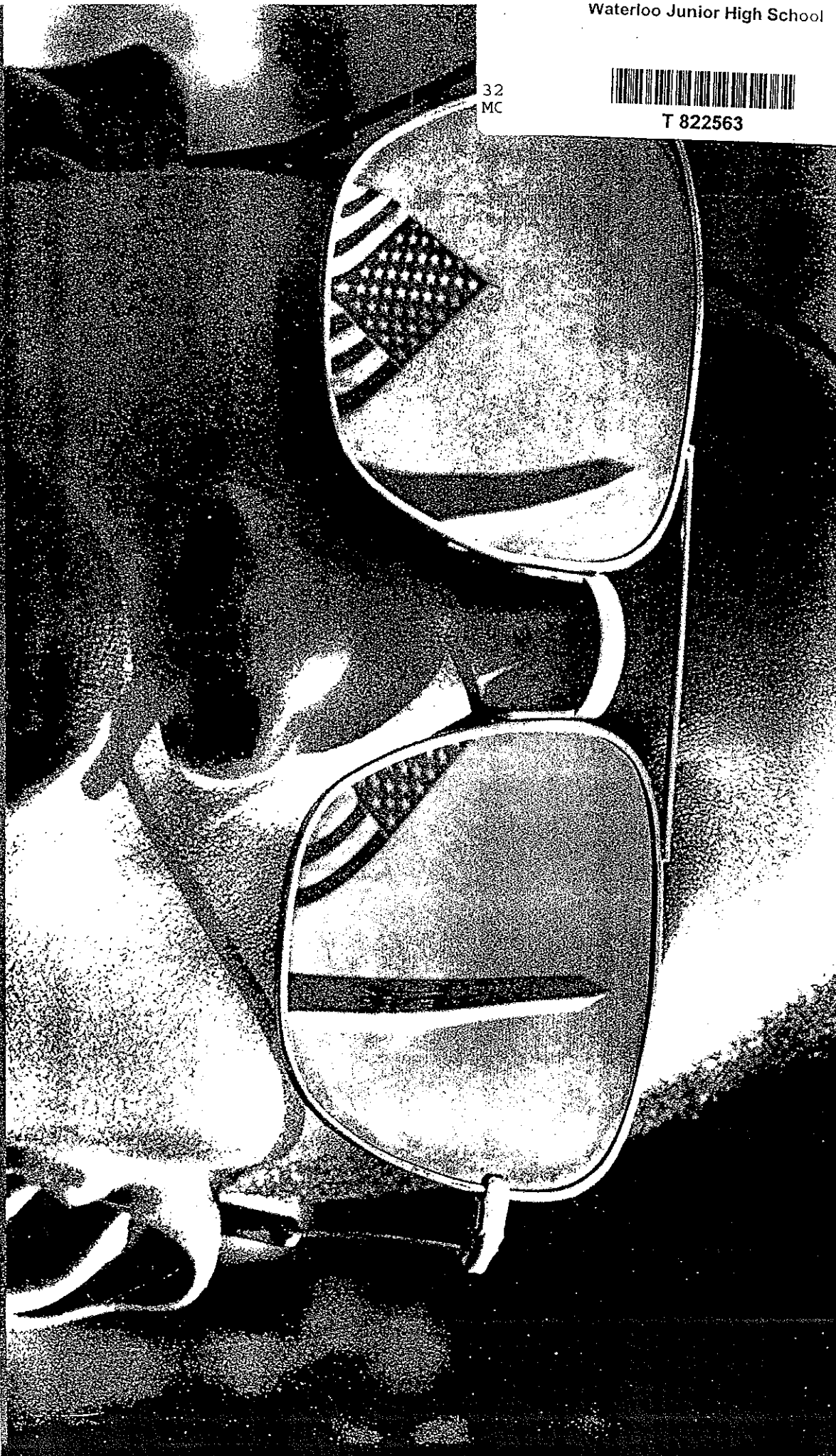
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THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT FROM 1954 TO 1968



EMMETT TILL

"Let the people see what I've seen."

—Mamie Till Bradley, mother of Emmett Till, August 1955

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Emmett Louis "Bo" Till, a chubby 14-year-old marna's boy from Chicago, had been showing off his northern big-city ways to the cousins he was visiting way down in tiny Money, Mississippi. That hot Wednesday evening in August 1955, in front of a little country store, Bo flashed pictures of his schoolmates, among them a white girl he said was his girlfriend.

Egged on by his friends, Bo went inside the store and said "Bye, baby" to Carolyn Bryant, the 21-year-old white storekeep-



er minding the cash register. Though the details of what happened next are a subject of debate, it is said that Bo followed his remark with a "wolf whistle." The black locals told Bo to clear out. Every black male in the South knew that to get "familiar" with a white woman was to invite the ultimate punishment: lynching.

Three days later, well after midnight on Saturday, Carolyn Bryant's husband, Roy, and his half-brother, J. W. Milam, pulled up in a truck to the unpainted three-room shack where Bo was staying with his 64-year-old

great-uncle, Mose "Preacher" Wright. The men yanked Bo out of bed and put him in their truck. They drove him around for hours and beat him bloody. Finally, they took Till to the banks of the Tallahatchie River. There, on Sunday, August 28, 1955, Milam fired his Colt .45 pistol at Bo's head. Then the white men threw the boy's body into the river. A heavy machine part from a cotton gin was wired to Bo's neck so his body wouldn't float.

THE CORPSE

Most murders of African Americans went unpunished and virtually unnoticed in Mississippi, which had historically led the nation in lynchings. Between 1882 and 1962, out of 4,736 blacks and whites lynched in the entire United States, 538 of the African-American victims were from Mississippi. In the months before Emmett Till's visit, an NAACP worker in Mississippi and another black man were shot dead for trying to register blacks to vote. But the lynching of Emmett Till would not be ignored, thanks to the boldness of his mother.

Mamie Till Bradley was a 33-year-old government worker in Chicago with two hard-luck marriages behind her (Emmett's father was dead). She had warned her son about how to act around white people before he took the train

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Mamie Bradley holds her son, the boy whose son Emmett Till, in his arms at the Chicago train station. She was the only woman to see the body.

humble yourself, then just do it. Get on your knees, if you have to."

After the murder, the State of Mississippi had made the Chicago funeral director sign papers agreeing not to open Till's casket. But Mamie Bradley insisted on seeing her son's body. The sight of it hit her like "an electric shock": the monstrously swollen tongue, the right eyeball resting on his cheek, his nose chopped. Daylight shined through the bullet hole in his head.

Thousands of people lined up in tribute at the Chicago church where Mamie Till Bradley put

her son's mangled body on view, dressed in his last Christmas suit. The horror of it made some faint and sent others into fits. *Jet*, a black newsweekly, published a picture of the corpse. It became an instant touchstone in African-American culture. The Emmett Till case unified black Americans far more than the year-old *Brown* decision had. Contributions poured into the NAACP.

"THAR HE"

Mamie Bradley had made "Emmett Till" a household name. The eyes of the country turned to Mississippi in September for the trial of Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam. There, the next shock of the case occurred. Mose Wright, from whose house Bo had been snatched, took the witness stand. Though the killers had threatened his life, Wright pointed his finger at Bryant, then at Milam, and named them as Bo's kidnapers: "Thar he," Wright said. They were perhaps the two bravest words ever spoken in Mississippi. For his own safety, Wright was whisked off to Chicago, never to live in his home state again.

Milam and Bryant were found not guilty. They later confessed to the crime in *Look* magazine, in exchange for a fee of \$4,000. The killers became outcasts in the community. Southerners knew that murdering a young boy was wrong. They just didn't want outsiders to tell them what to do.

The Till case caused cracks in the southern landscape: lynchers were made to stand trial; a powerless black man stood to accuse them. But nothing predicted the earthquake of democracy that would hit the state next door only three months later.



The jury in the trial of Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam, the killers of Emmett Till.

