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## Different Assignments, Different Perspectives: How Reporters Reconstruct the Emmett Till Civil Rights Murder Trial

by John R. Tisdale

When 14-year-old Chicago native Emmett Till walked into a grocery store in the Delta town of Money, Mississippi on an August evening in 1955 and “wolf whistled” at the store owner’s wife working behind the counter, he set off a chain of events that resulted in his decomposed body being dragged from the Tallahatchie River less than three days later. Roy Bryant, the storeowner, and J.W. Milam, his half-brother, were charged with the kidnapping and murder of Till. The murder trial, in which the jury acquitted the brothers, was a “critical increment” in civil rights history because it drew the attention of national and international media to Mississippi on a scale unmatched in the middle of the century.<sup>1</sup> Sandwiched between the *Brown* decision in May 1954 and the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott in December 1955, it was also one of the first civil rights events covered by the emerging medium of television.

This paper analyzes how three journalists who covered the weeklong trial remembered what they witnessed and wrote. John Herbers, who served as United Press bureau chief in Jackson, Mississippi; Harry Marsh of *The Delta Democrat-Times* of Greenville, Mississippi; and Wilson F. “Bill” Minor of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* all covered the 1955 trial. The

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John R. Tisdale is Assistant Professor of Journalism at Baylor University. He previously published an article in *OHR 27/2*, Summer/Fall 2000. He is currently interviewing workers who participated in labor strikes in Port Arthur, Texas, during the 1950s. He would like to thank the Baylor University Research Committee, which provided the funding to conduct this research.

<sup>1</sup> David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998), 483; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 54–55.

author interviewed the journalists, asking each to recount how their organizations covered the trial and what they most remembered about the trial. All three wrote for different audiences, a factor that is largely ignored in oral history studies of media events. Herbers wrote for United Press, the strongest wire service presence in Mississippi. Marsh worked for what historians cite as the most progressive newspaper in Mississippi, Hodding Carter's *The Delta Democrat-Times*. Minor continues to write a syndicated column on Mississippi politics; journalists recognize Minor as the "eyes and ears of the daily occurrences" in Mississippi.<sup>2</sup> His newspaper circulated primarily south of Interstate 20 in Mississippi and he reported for the *Times-Picayune* from 1947 until the newspaper closed the bureau in the mid-1970s.<sup>3</sup>

Oral historians have tried to understand and explain why people attending the same event can have completely different interpretations. Civil rights activist Joan Trumpauer Mulholland, one of the three students attacked at a lunch counter in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1963, said, "different accounts are because of the different personalities, not because of contradiction. I think there is truth in what all of us are saying."<sup>4</sup> Differing personalities can contribute to different accounts, but oral historians studying media coverage have rarely studied the variables of differing assignments and audiences. Oral historians have acknowledged and debated the validity of whether separate eyewitness accounts of a single event produce congruent stories. Interviewees can interpret factual events differently, but this, too, provides a window into how memory is retrieved and thus adds another layer of complexity and interpretation for oral historians. Psychologist Marigold Linton cites research showing that positive memories are better recalled than negative ones, but that dramatic negative events (the Till trial) can

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<sup>2</sup> Claude Sitton, the *New York Times* journalist who covered the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s, informed me by telephone in May 1992 that he believed Bill Minor knew more about civil rights in Mississippi than any other journalist.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Nossiter, *Of Long Memory: Mississippi and the Murder of Medgar Evers* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1994), 84; Dittmer, 66.

<sup>4</sup> Joan Trumpauer Mulholland, panel discussion on civil rights at the annual meeting of the Oral History Association, Buffalo, N.Y., October 1998.

result in “superior recallability” because the event is exceptionally emotional and tied to personal recollection.<sup>5</sup> Linton also believes media coverage contributes to recall.

But oral history often reveals less about the event and more about what that event meant to the participant. To these three journalists, their different assignments and their different audiences created divergent memories of the same event. “Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.”<sup>6</sup> Social scientists who study journalists believe events do not enter the public record until reporters assign them a contextual “home” and give them meaning.<sup>7</sup> In this paper, the biases and the news sources—or people they interviewed—for the three journalists are the same.

Oral historians accept subjectivity because attempting to confine oral history into the box of objectivity is a spurious activity. This paper does not address the subjectivity/objectivity debate nor the role of environmental influences on journalists, but rather proposes that the recollections of reporters who covered the same event are at times different because of the assignment, the organizational expectations or constraints, and because the intended audiences were different. Marsh wrote for a Mississippi daily with limited regional circulation. Minor wrote for a newspaper distributed statewide in Louisiana and the southern half of Mississippi. Herbers’s audience was the world. These three variables in the process of remembering events are in addition to—and not in lieu of—the variable of selective memory. In fact, these variables are subsets of selective memory with the intention of further explaining why people, when interviewed, chose to emphasize different aspects of an event.

This study attempts to fill a gap in the study of the Emmett

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<sup>5</sup> Marigold Linton, “Phoenix and Chimera: The Changing Face of Memory,” in *Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 50.

<sup>7</sup> S. Holly Stocking and Page H. Gross, *How Do Journalists Think? A Proposal for the Study of Cognitive Bias in Newsmaking* (Bloomington: Smith Research Center, 1989), 14.

Till trial. Mass media scholars have analyzed the content of newspaper coverage of the Till trial, although only one of the analyses has included the coverage of New Orleans and Greenville newspapers. Furthermore, none of the papers included oral history interviews. Mass communication scholar Warren Breed analyzed stereotype bias among eleven newspapers and found one Mississippi newspaper that failed the objectivity test. He tested bias in seven symbols and studied eleven newspapers and found that the use of wire service copy in the dailies contributed to a lack of regional bias.<sup>8</sup> Jane Rhodes, however, dismissed Breed's explanation that the use of wire copy contributed to uniform coverage. In other words, the use of wire copy in the Greenville and New Orleans newspapers would not result in uniform recall among the three journalists interviewed for this study. She contended that a study of story placement, headline wording and size, selective editing, and the rearrangement of facts might produce different results.<sup>9</sup> A 1999 conference paper analyzed the Till trial by studying two Mississippi dailies (*Grenada Sentinel Star* and the *Greenwood Commonwealth*), the *Chicago Defender* and the *Chicago Tribune*. The conclusions point toward different constructions of news, citing the *Chicago Defender* as "better able than the traditional mainstream press to give voice to those who challenge an entrenched status quo."<sup>10</sup> One explanation for the difference in reporting the events of the trial could be the audiences of the publication. Daily newspapers have a different audience than the *Defender*, whose primary function was to serve as an advocate for African Americans. Baldasty's study addresses the issue of different audiences, but does not include an oral history component and the rationale for using the Grenada and Greenwood newspapers is not explained. Even in 1955, journalists recognized the Greenville newspaper as the least racist in its

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<sup>8</sup> Warren Breed, "Comparative Newspaper Handling of the Emmett Till Case," *Journalism Quarterly* 35 (Spring 1958): 291-298.

<sup>9</sup> Jane Rhodes, "Racial Coverage of the 1950s Print Media and the Case of Emmett Till" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, San Antonio, Texas, August 1987), 8-10.

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Baldasty, et. al., "News, Race and the Status Quo: The Case of Emmett Louis Till" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Journalism Historians Association, Portland, Oregon, October 1999), 22-23.

reporting of civil rights, and Minor continues to be recognized as the most knowledgeable reporter on civil rights.

John Herbers knew well his role when he covered the Till murder trial in Sumner, Mississippi, along with fifty to seventy mostly print reporters.<sup>11</sup> As head of the United Press bureau in Jackson, he was to cover the trial testimony with as many updates as humanly possible. All but three daily newspapers in the state were afternoon publications, and most used the United Press as their primary wire service. The UP also had contracts with thirty to forty radio stations in the state. Although Herbers's primary concern was satisfying his editors in Atlanta and New York, he also understood that most Mississippi newspapers would balk at wire service reports of the trial. Most Mississippi newspapers were owned by local families who didn't support the civil rights movement, and preferred not to publish stories either sympathetic or neutral in tone.<sup>12</sup>

The UP, however, "never gave an inch" when Mississippi publishers threatened to cancel a contract. Herbers knew that newspapers outside the Deep South demanded fair and accurate reporting. Besides, the trial had the elements of murder and sex that gave it the quality of a Greek tragedy, he recalled in an interview.<sup>13</sup> And despite the protests from member newspapers in Mississippi and the rest of the South, Herbers knew the Till trial would produce the type of drama readers wanted, regardless of their views on civil rights.

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 33. Even the number of journalists who covered the trial is debated. Harry Marsh reported in *The Delta Democrat-Times* of September 19, 1995, "about a hundred newsmen . . . crowded into the small courtroom." Bill Minor reported in his September 19 story for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* that he filed from Sumner that "more than 50 newspapers, wire services, television networks, and other news media" were at the trial. In a 1987 interview, Minor put the number at 75 media members.

<sup>12</sup> John Herbers interview, *Covering the South: A National Symposium on the Media and the Civil Rights Movement*, April 3–5, 1987, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi.

<sup>13</sup> John Herbers, interview with the author, Bethesda, Maryland, July 24, 1999. Herbers, a Memphis, Tennessee native, graduated from Emory University in Atlanta before taking a job with the *Greenwood Morning Star* in Mississippi. He then worked at the *Jackson Daily News* for a year before moving over to the United Press bureau in Jackson. He later worked for the *New York Times*. A grant from the University Research Committee at Baylor University provided funds for the interviews with Herbers and Harry Marsh. Earlier grants from the Oral History Institute at Baylor University provided funding to interview Bill Minor.

Harry Marsh was the son of a Baptist minister; his father and mother retired to Leland, Mississippi, to be near Marsh's sister. The Baylor journalism graduate moved to Leland to live with his parents after serving in the U.S. Army in Korea. He commuted eight miles west to work for the nearest daily, the Carter paper in Greenville. The Till murder occurred in *The Delta Democrat-Times* circulation area; Marsh and city editor Dave Brown decided to use United Press wire service coverage of the trial, and Marsh would write features on the media covering the trial. Brown and Marsh decided to cover the media angle because of telephone inquiries about the Till murder from journalists around the country.<sup>14</sup> Although Carter won the Pulitzer for editorial writing he did not write the editorials criticizing the jury's decision to acquit Milam and Bryant.<sup>15</sup> The few Mississippi newspapers that ventured to comment on their editorial pages applauded the acquittal. Herbers's UP would provide the straight news coverage, and Marsh would photograph the event and write feature stories on the media.<sup>16</sup> Whether by design or default, the lack of editorial comment and the use of locally-generated feature stories allowed the Greenville newspaper to avoid the appearance of overzealously covering a civil rights issue that already had the state on the edge of implosion.

Wilson F. "Bill" Minor covered the state of Mississippi for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* in a one-person bureau in Jack-

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<sup>14</sup> Marsh, interview with the author, Asheville, North Carolina, May 21, 1999. Marsh worked in Greenville from 1954 to 1960, except for 1956–1957, when he left the newspaper to earn a master's degree at Columbia University. He then worked at the *New York Herald-Tribune* for seven years before earning a doctorate at the University of Texas at Austin. He taught journalism at Baylor University, the University of Arkansas, and Kansas State University before retiring to Asheville, where he is an adjunct professor at the University of North Carolina at Asheville

<sup>15</sup> Hodding Carter to William F. Freehoff Jr., September 29, 1955, Hodding Carter Papers, Mississippi State University Library. Freehoff, the editorial page editor of *The Freeport News* in Freeport, Tennessee, asked Carter to send to him the editorial on the Till case. Carter's response: "I'm enclosing copies of a couple of our editorials. I didn't do them as I was up in Maine during the summer but of course followed the case very closely. The whole situation is the worst I have known since running a paper." Ann Waldron's biography, *Hodding Carter: The Reconstruction of a Racist* (256–257) and Stephen J. Whitfield's *A Death In The Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (43) mistakenly cite Carter as the author of the editorials on the Till case.

<sup>16</sup> Harry Marsh, interview with the author.

son. His newspaper circulated in the southern half of Mississippi and subscribed to the Associated Press wire service. Although his editors knew the story had national interest, they downplayed the first story about Till from the wire service. Afterward, Minor believed the *Times-Picayune* editors placed his stories on the front page because he was covering the trial and not necessarily because of its news value. Locally-generated stories received “better play” than wire service stories, especially in the regional edition that circulated throughout the state south of Jackson.<sup>17</sup> As a regional newspaper, Minor covered events throughout Mississippi, and often used his Sunday column, “Eyes on Mississippi,” to interpret the news events he covered during the week.

### The Trial and News Coverage

On August 31, *The Delta Democrat-Times* carried a United Press wire story reporting that a fisherman found Till’s decomposed body tied to a gin fan in the Tallahatchie River. Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam had already been charged with kidnapping after the pair took Till from his uncle’s home early Sunday, August 28. An editorial on Friday, September 2, asked that the “people who are guilty of this savage crime should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”<sup>18</sup> Another editorial four days later blamed both the friends of the accused and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for inciting hatred of Mississippi. The editorial writer said the NAACP wanted an acquittal as “an excuse to apply the torch of world-wide scorn to Mississippi.”<sup>19</sup> On September 8, Circuit

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<sup>17</sup> Bill Minor interview, *Covering the South: A National Symposium on the Media and the Civil Rights Movement*, April 3–5, 1987, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi. Also, interview with the author, Jackson, Mississippi, July 21, 1992. Minor was the “only good reporter in Mississippi during those crucial, historic years of the civil rights struggle,” according to Joseph Bryan Cumming, Jr., “The Lower Truth of Bill Minor: An Examination of the Role of a Reporter in a Free Society” (master’s thesis, Emory University, 1981), 1. Higher truth, as defined by Cumming, refers to absolutes. Lower truth refers to the facts and accuracy of news reporting. Cumming also worked as a journalist.

<sup>18</sup> “A Brutal Slaying,” editorial, *The Delta Democrat-Times*, September 2, 1955. It is unclear who wrote the unsigned editorials during this period because Carter’s correspondence indicates that he was at his summer home in Maine during the trial.

<sup>19</sup> “Lynching Post-Facto,” editorial, *The Delta Democrat-Times*, September 6, 1955.

Judge Curtis M. Swango set the trial date for Monday, September 19.

The first pre-trial stories appeared Sunday, September 18. The Sunday newspaper in the 1950s was much like the Sunday newspapers today, with a variety of feature stories and news analyses. Herbers filed an analysis piece that *The Delta Democrat-Times* placed above the fold on the front page the day before the trial began. Herbers's story on the first day of the trial chronicled how the prosecutors and defense attorneys were unable to pick one juror before recessing for lunch. African-American reporters sat at a table separate from white reporters because Sheriff H.C. Strider said, "we haven't mixed so far and we don't intend to." Herbers's lone personal observation was that Strider weighed 270 pounds. His story also chronicled whether the prosecution would seek the death penalty.<sup>20</sup>

Marsh's first feature story, published that Monday and which editors placed on the front page beneath Herbers's story, chronicled the number of media attending the event. Representatives from the *New York Times*, *New York Daily News*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Chicago Daily News*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Detroit Daily News* covered the trial. Six magazines, *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Nation*, *Jet*, and *Ebony* sent reporters. African-American newspapers from Atlanta, Philadelphia, and Memphis also sent reporters. Rob Hall of the Communist *Daily Worker* also covered the trial. One room on the first floor of the courthouse had been converted into an editorial office that contained typewriters, tables, and a teletype machine. Representatives from the National Broadcasting Company and Columbia Broadcasting System also sent reporters, but in the era before instantaneous transmission, the networks had to put the film on a bus to Memphis, and then have the film flown to New York. Marsh's number of 100 media representatives divided the camps into 40 "practicing reporters" and 60 "radio, television, and newsreel" operators.<sup>21</sup> His first story set the stage for the media atmosphere engulfing the trial.

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<sup>20</sup> "Till Trial Bogs Down In Jury-Picking Job," *The Delta Democrat-Times*, September 19, 1955.

<sup>21</sup> "Hundred Newsmen Jam Scene Of Till Trial," *The Delta Democrat-Times*, September 19, 1955.

The sheriff “frisked” the media representatives as they walked into the courtroom, which Marsh described as “liberated” because journalists were allowed to take photographs during recesses. The *New York Times’s* John Popham worked with Judge Swango to construct a set of guidelines for the media in covering the trial.<sup>22</sup> As a reporter at the highly respected *Times*, Popham was viewed by other journalists as the dean of reporters covering the trial, Marsh wrote. Popham had a “strong Bronx accent” and wore a white suit and tie, and, “in true *Times’s* fashion, kept his coat on throughout the steaming day.”<sup>23</sup> The judge, who quickly shed his jacket, rarely addressed the press from the bench, leaving the enforcement to Sheriff Strider.

In both the interview and in his feature, he remembered Sheriff Strider more vividly than either Herbers or Minor. In 1955, Marsh described Strider as “firm but cordial, dressed in a sport suit” in his first-day story; in his second story of September 20, he described the sheriff as “portly.” More than 45 years later, Marsh painted a less flattering picture of “a fat guy with a cigar in his mouth. It was the caricature of what you would expect it would be.”<sup>24</sup>

The New Orleans newspaper used the Associated Press stories leading up to the trial, and continued to do so throughout the trial to supplement Minor’s reporting. Minor first mentioned that the trial “moved through a humid, listless first day with two members of the trial jury still to be selected.”<sup>25</sup> In a 1987 interview, Minor compared the environment with the trial in Harper Lee’s “*To Kill a Mockingbird*.” The trial occurred in

this little tiny courtroom; it was on a hot, I mean scorching hot, September day. But here you have these people sitting around

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<sup>22</sup> Marsh, interview with the author.

<sup>23</sup> “Unanswered Questions Nag Newsmen At Trial,” *The Delta Democrat-Times*, September 20, 1955, p. 2. The story started on the front page, but was jumped to the second page.

<sup>24</sup> Marsh, interview with the author.

<sup>25</sup> “Till Trial Jury Selection Held,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, September 20, 1955. The New Orleans paper published in the mornings. Minor’s stories contained details from the full day’s events. The trial usually convened at about 9 a.m. and recessed around 5 p.m. The Greenville paper was published in the afternoons; the stories from Marsh and Herbers carried in the Greenville paper usually chronicled the events before the trial recessed for lunch each day.

cane bottom chairs, with the little fans whirling very slowly overhead, the naked light bulb from the ceiling, you know, and everybody sitting around, all the whites sitting around with a big chaw of tobacco in their jaw. . . .<sup>26</sup>

By Tuesday, September 20, the jury of ten farmers, an insurance salesman and a laborer was ready to hear opening arguments. One of the first witnesses on Wednesday was Mose Wright, the 65-year-old uncle of Till. Herbers's lead for his story published in the Greenville newspaper used the observation techniques reporters employed in an era before television made the style all but obsolete:

A gray-haired negro who gestured dramatically with toil-worn hands told a hushed court today that one of the defendants on trial for slaying his nephew came for the boy with a "pistol in one hand and a flashlight in the other."<sup>27</sup>

While Herbers covered the trial, Marsh carried out his assignment of writing feature stories and photographing the event. On the first day, Marsh wrote a feature on Judge Swango and continued to take photographs, of which the Greenville editors used three to five in each afternoon edition. On Wednesday, September 21, the editors created a collage when they used thirteen photographs on page six. Marsh captured photographs of a sketch artist from *Life* magazine, reporters questioning the sheriff, a photographer atop a step ladder shooting down at the jury, portraits of the defendants and their families, the movie cameras from the networks, and a vertical shot of the Confederate memorial outside the courthouse. Marsh remembered the television coverage as galvanizing African Americans in a way the print media could not. The coverage of Till's funeral in Chicago was broadcast nationwide. Till's mother, Mamie Bradley, insisted on an open-coffin service so that everyone could see the bloated face of her son. Although the African-American national magazine *Jet* published a photograph of Till in his coffin, Marsh believed the national networks' ability to reach a wider audience furthered the national backlash against civil rights violations.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Minor interview, *Covering the South*.

<sup>27</sup> "Wright Tells Of Kidnapping Of Till Boy," United Press, September 21, 1955.

<sup>28</sup> Marsh, interview with the author.

As the reporters returned Thursday morning, the prosecutors questioned a teenage farm laborer who testified that he saw Bryant and Milam with an African-American teenager who resembled Till. Carolyn Bryant, who told her husband that Till whistled at her in the country store, was allowed to testify, but not in front of the jury. The judge had ruled her testimony was not competent evidence in the murder trial, but defense attorneys requested that her testimony be read into the record should the case go to an appeal court. Both Herbers and Minor covered those two aspects of the trial. Marsh continued to write feature stories to augment the United Press coverage. On that Thursday, he photographed the proceedings and filed two stories—a feature on Rob Hall of the Communist *Daily Worker* and a story on the number of words reporters generated and filed through the Western Union office.<sup>29</sup>

Although the “genial, gray-haired pipe smoker” and native of Pascagoula, Mississippi, wanted to see “an evolutionary change toward socialism,” Marsh quoted other reporters who said Hall’s stories were not slanted. Hall believed the people of Sumner had behaved well, and Marsh noted that reporters could get a “good plate lunch for less than a dollar” and that “cold Cokes are just a dime and you can take the bottle with you.”<sup>30</sup> The sodas, however, were much more expensive in the courtroom. Marsh remembered that one entrepreneur sold drinks for \$1 apiece.<sup>31</sup> The inflation on the cost of a soft drink was due to the lack of air conditioning and the stifling September heat, a fact that all three journalists remembered well when interviewed more than 40 years later.

Hall told Marsh that he sent 1,000 words daily and sent 2,000 for the Sunday newspaper the day before the trial began. Tommy Woodard, manager of the Greenville Western Union office, told Marsh that his office sent 19,000 words out on Monday and another 22,000 on Tuesday from Western Union’s temporary quarters on the first floor of the Sumner Courthouse. As a resident of Greenville for 17 years, Woodard merited a fea-

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<sup>29</sup> Marsh, interview with the author.

<sup>30</sup> “Communist Writer At Trial Lauds Citizens,” *The Delta Democrat-Times*, September 22, 1955.

<sup>31</sup> Marsh, interview with the author.

ture story on his role at the trial. *The Delta Democrat-Times* quoted the telegraph manager's report that his office sent out 140,000 words during the trial.<sup>32</sup> The feature story on the number of words filed through the Western Union office is a testament to the number of media members who covered the trial and is another piece of evidence supporting the thesis that the Till trial generated unprecedented national media coverage of a civil rights event.

Herbers "telephones four new leads directly to Atlanta's UP area office during each day, and he has to uncover new aspects of the case after the session is over for late evening leads to be used by morning newspapers." Marsh ended his story with the note that journalists were planning a post-trial party, "with their expense accounts suffering the consequences."<sup>33</sup>

The aspect of the trial Herbers remembered most was the amount of work and the constant pressure to match the Associated Press dispatches. He remembered one story where he beat the AP by three minutes, resulting in "all kinds of kudos" from the Atlanta bureau. Beating the AP and the International News Service reporters was the primary goal although Herbers didn't mention INS, which had few subscribers in Mississippi.

The UP had only one person—me—and the AP had about three people, but the trial was on the second floor of the courthouse. We had to have a special telephone put in but on the first floor. You had to run up and down this circle of stairs to get back and forth. By the time the trial was over, I was not only emotionally drained, I was physically drained as well. The muscles in my legs had grown about a half an inch from running up and down the stairs.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the pressure to top his lead every few hours, Herbers found time to write a sidebar that he sent to Atlanta on Thursday morning. *The Delta Democrat-Times* carried the descriptive analysis on the front page:

The usual courthouse loiterers, retired farmers and politicians, stare in amazement at the scores of newsmen and cameramen who swarm around the Negro principals in the trial.

<sup>32</sup> "Where There's News Or Sports In State, You'll Find 'WU Man'," *The Delta Democrat-Times*, September 29, 1955.

<sup>33</sup> "Communist Writer At Trial Lauds Citizens," *The Delta Democrat-Times*, September 22, 1955.

<sup>34</sup> Herbers, interview with the author.

The physical wear is hard on the old courthouse. At least one window broke when spectators jammed against it. Several window shades have come dangling from their rollers. Deputies have to lock the courtroom during noon recess to clean up the debris. The newly-painted green walls are showing smudges.<sup>35</sup>

Herbers's analysis story was written the same day he beat the AP and INS in reporting that the state had rested its case. It was a big enough scoop that Marsh mentioned Herbers's achievement in his feature story for the Friday, September 23 front page. The headline on Marsh's story, "Editors Eye Clock In Awaiting Verdict," described the predicament of every afternoon newspaper with a noon deadline. In fact, Marsh had decided not to make the 75-mile drive Friday morning because he believed the jury would acquit the pair, and the newspaper could use the United Press dispatches. Circulation director Charles McDonald had earlier questioned the wisdom of sending a reporter to cover the trial. During the week, however, circulation had skyrocketed. When Marsh arrived in the office Friday morning with the intention of not attending the trial, he recalled an exchange with McDonald: "'What are you doing here? Get out to Sumner and cover that trial.' So he (McDonald) had a complete turnaround and interest in the trial. The interest in Mississippi was unbelievable."<sup>36</sup> The thesis of different assignments, different perspectives is best illustrated by comparing the Herbers and Marsh interviews. The bulk of the Herbers interview focused on the competitive nature of the wire services. For Marsh, the interview was more philosophical because he operated under a different set of organizational expectations. Yes, Marsh had deadlines, but his assignment was to cover the more peripheral aspects of the trial and his discussion of the trial was directly related to the characters such as Swango and Hall. Marsh's newspaper published the United Press accounts, but Marsh, in the interview, was more reflective of what the trial meant to Mississippi and the nation. Although Marsh would continue to work in journalism at the *New York Herald Tribune*, he would also enter the world of aca-

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<sup>35</sup> "Cross-Burning At Sumner Went Almost Un-Noticed Yesterday," United Press, September 22, 1955.

<sup>36</sup> Marsh, interview with the author.

deme in the late 1960s. Both Herbers and Minor would work their entire careers as full-time journalists, and the Till story may not have rated as highly in comparison with other stories in their lengthier journalistic careers.

Minor recalled not worrying about the lack of a verdict on Friday morning because he worked for a morning circulation newspaper. Like Marsh and Herbers, he expected an acquittal:

I happened to be sitting next to the door of the jury room, and I could hear them in there just laughing, and they spent an hour and five minutes in the room. They had their minds made up before they ever walked in there; they just did that for show.<sup>37</sup>

In his lead paragraph for the Saturday newspaper, Minor pointed out that the jury “deliberated only 1 hour and five minutes” before returning to the courtroom at 3:40 p.m. to hand the bailiff a “not guilty” verdict. The rest of his story focused on the kidnapping charges against Bryant and Milam. Till’s body had been found in the Tallahatchie River in Tallahatchie County, where the murder trial was held. Till was actually taken from his uncle’s home in the hamlet of Money in LeFlore County, where the grand jury had indicted the pair for kidnapping.<sup>38</sup>

Since the Greenville paper didn’t publish a Saturday edition, the Sunday United Press story by Herbers focused on the kidnapping angle, and the fact that the three African-American witnesses were moving to Chicago because they feared retribution. Marsh made one more trip concerning the Till trial. He drove the fifty miles east to the LeFlore County seat of Greenwood to talk with Sheriff George Smith, who was in his office opening mail with a clasp knife that Marsh described as ten or twelve inches long.

I asked him why they weren’t trying the pair (Bryant and Milam). He said, “You know, I took this [the clasp knife] away from a black man last night.” That was about all he would say about that. What I could surmise from that was that public opinion was so opposed to a trial that there was no sense in doing it. That was the atmosphere at the time.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Minor interview, *Covering the South*.

<sup>38</sup> “Two Not Guilty Of Till Murder, Jury Declares,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, September 24, 1955. Herbers’s recap of the trial timed the jury’s deliberations as one hour, seven minutes, a two-minute discrepancy with the Minor’s dispatch.

<sup>39</sup> Marsh, interview with the author.

The majority of newspapers in Mississippi reflected the prevailing attitudes of its residents in that atmosphere. Marsh's Greenville newspaper, the *Delta Democrat-Times*, and the United Press were exceptions to the rule. Their saturation coverage of the Till trial angered Mississippi publishers and broadcasters who would have preferred not to print or to broadcast reports of the trial. Herbers vividly remembers the reaction from radio broadcasters, with which the UP had more than thirty contracts across the state. The adverse reaction to the trial was a more salient memory for Herbers because of his daily contact with the editors and publishers in Mississippi. As the bureau chief in Jackson, he was responsible for the business side of signing newspapers and radio stations to contracts. As reporters without management responsibilities, neither Marsh nor Minor discussed at length audience reaction because it was not an integral part of their responsibilities. All three had distinctly different audiences; for Marsh and Minor, those audiences were the readers. Herbers had little contact with readers and more contact with the editors and publishers of Mississippi newspapers.

Herbers remembers member newspapers and radio stations didn't object to the content of the story, but the fact that the story was reported "because those kind of stories had never appeared in most newspapers. . . . And they did not want it. They thought they could beat it by intimidating us."<sup>40</sup> The United Press bureau office was located in the WLBT-TV building in Jackson. Fred Beard, the station manager of the NBC affiliate, had the station carry a "Cable Difficulty" logo on the screen when the "Today" show interviewed NAACP legal counselor Thurgood Marshall about the Till trial.<sup>41</sup> WLBT was one of only two television clients of United Press in 1955, and Herbers was responsible for placating the station manager, who had threatened to cancel the station's UP contract. Beard agreed to continue the UP service if Herbers would read "about six volumes of these extreme right-wing books." Herbers took the books and promptly "dumped them in the closest garbage can when I got away from him." Herbers visited a dis-

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<sup>40</sup> Herbers, interview with the author.

<sup>41</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 65.

grunted radio station owner in Brookhaven who “kept me locked up a whole afternoon berating me, and trying to persuade me that in Mississippi massive resistance was the only way to go. And he didn’t cancel his contract either, but he sure made life miserable for me.”<sup>42</sup>

Both Herbers and Minor worked in the state capital of Jackson, where WLBT used television to lead resistance to social change. The *Clarion-Ledger* and *Jackson Daily News*, the state’s largest daily newspapers, used acidic, race-baiting editorials, and selective reporting and editing to whip up resistance among their readers. An editorial in the *Clarion-Ledger* on Sunday following the Till verdict best exemplified the wall of resistance Herbers and other fair-minded reporters experienced daily. The unsigned editorial urged readers to forget the case “as quickly as possible. It has received far more publicity than should have been given.”<sup>43</sup> Although the majority of Mississippi’s editors and publishers winced at what they perceived to be unwarranted and excessive coverage of the Till trial, Herbers, Marsh, and Minor are representative of how the media serves as a conduit for informing the public. The basic ability to transport information from the source to the audience has been a staple of American journalism throughout history.

## Conclusion

Oral history is subjective, which is not necessarily a pejorative assessment. Herman Ebbinghaus constructed a forgetting curve, which concluded that information is lost rapidly at first, but the rate of loss levels out over time. Interviewing journalists more than forty years after the fact does not invalidate their experiences and observations. In the case of Herbers and Minor, both were interviewed about the civil rights movement at a civil rights symposium at the University of Mississippi in 1987 and again by the author—Herbers (1999) and Minor (1992). Although the interviews in 1987 and then those with the author employed differently worded questions, both Herbers and Minor discussed the Till trial with exacting clarity, repeat-

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<sup>42</sup> Herbers, interview with the author.

<sup>43</sup> “The Verdict At Sumner,” editorial, *The Clarion-Ledger*, September 25, 1955.

ing what they recalled in 1987. Comparing interviews does not necessarily negate the possibility of discovering errors in facts, but the experience with Herbers and Minor confirms, albeit broadly, the Ebbinghaus thesis.

It was apparent that the differing assignments, the organizational expectations, and differences in audiences contributed to how the three journalists remembered the Till trial. As a wire service bureau manager with responsibilities for securing contracts with newspapers and radio and television stations, Herbers remembered the organizational requirements of writing for a larger audience. The UP's editorial leadership in Atlanta and New York wanted the story, but Herbers struggled with the daily harassment from unhappy wire service customers at Mississippi media outlets. That type of tension between the organization and its contract members in Mississippi was a theme in the interview. He specifically and nostalgically recalled the "deadline every minute" philosophy required of wire service reporters, and the expectation that *all* news stories reflected the straight news approach required of his position. Marsh worked for an afternoon publication; if he covered the trial testimony, his stories would be only nominally complete because of the noon deadline for copy. By the time most readers unfolded the newspaper in the afternoon, more testimony would have occurred. The *Delta Democrat-Times* circulated Monday through Friday afternoons; the Carters did not publish a Saturday newspaper and the Sunday newspaper appeared on doorsteps in the early morning. That pattern of publication was not uncommon among small dailies in the 1950s. The advantage for Minor is that he worked for a morning publication; thus, he covered the full day's testimony before having to file in the early evening. Marsh's two sidebars about reporters nervously seeking answers to questions and waiting for the verdict on Friday morning reflected more of his own concerns for the afternoon newspaper reporters. These organization constraints on each of the three reporters was reflected not only in how they covered the Till trial, but also what they remembered about the trial.

Another difference could be attributed to an accumulation of events. Minor's recollections are different because he has witnessed and reported on Mississippi for six decades; both

Herbers and Marsh left the state in 1960. Minor's longevity in Mississippi has given him a broader, richer perspective as a resident since 1947. For Minor, the Till trial represents one of many chapters of the civil rights struggle in Mississippi. Although Marsh later worked for the *New York Herald-Tribune* and Herbers for the *New York Times*, they both recalled the Till trial as the most important news story during their Mississippi careers.

Minor believed the trial an important event, but again, his work over six decades muted somewhat his enthusiasm in recalling a singular event in six decades of reporting. Minor filed straight news stories like his counterpart Herbers at United Press, but the *Times-Picayune* correspondent also wrote Sunday news analysis columns. These columns represented his observations and interpretations of events in Mississippi. His work as a single-person bureau for a metropolitan daily whose goal was to reach a largely white audience of Louisiana and Mississippi represented a divergence from Herbers's role. Marsh eagerly wanted to cover the trial, and he was assigned to write feature stories and photograph the trial for the Greenville, Mississippi newspaper. Hodding and Betty Carter had been recruited by Walker Percy and other leading Greenville families to run the newspaper. Even with community support from the educated and tiny artisan enclave in the Delta, the Carters were often the targets of advertising and subscriber boycotts.<sup>44</sup> Hodding Carter's growing national reputation with journalists and the support from leading residents made the reporting of the Till trial at least manageable. Marsh felt the tension in the community, but he believed the newspaper was "doing important work . . . the rewards of working there were quite high in a professional sense."<sup>45</sup> Being assigned to write feature stories, he remembered the details of the trial's periphery—Judge Swango taking off his jacket, talking to the reporter from the Communist *Daily Worker* who smoked a pipe, and how a *London Express* reporter expressed amazement at how the judicial sys-

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<sup>44</sup> Betty W. Carter, interview by Orelly B. Caudill, 1979. Mississippi Oral History Program of the University of Southern Mississippi. Bound oral history transcript in the Hodding Carter files, Mississippi State University.

<sup>45</sup> Marsh, interview with the author.

tem allowed the defendants to interact with the spectators. Marsh and city editor David Brown decided on the feature approach because they correctly gauged reader interest among the national and international media representatives who covered the trial. The feature approach also gave the pair an “out” with their audience. Marsh did not have to interpret testimony for a story most readers of the Greenville newspaper wished would go away.<sup>46</sup>

The rationale for studying these variables as subsets of selective memory was to add another layer to understanding how reporters remember events, and not to roil the waters of the selective retention, selective recall debate. As Ronald Grele commented, oral histories are often “too rich” because they tell not only what happened, but “what people thought happened and how they have internalized and interpreted what happened.”<sup>47</sup> The introduction of these variables—story assignments, organizational expectations or constraints, and different intended audiences—may also seem to add another layer to that richness, and should also help further clarify why reporters covering the same event recall events differently.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ronald J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art Of Oral History*, 2d ed. (Westport: Praeger, 1991), 245.

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