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Till's cousin discusses infamous whistle

Wright hopes to set record straight with book

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January 17, 2010

BY LAUREN FITZPATRICK

Simeon Wright once kept a secret at his 14-year-old cousin Emmett Till's urging: Not to tell his father that Emmett, a black teen, had let out a whistle at Carolyn Bryant, the white owner of a local store in 1955 Mississippi.

Emmett was scared that Wright's father, Moses Wright, would send him away from his cousin's home to Chicago.

» Click to enlarge image



Simeon Wright looks over the gravesite of his second cousin Emmett Till in Burr Oak Cemetery in Alsip. Wright recently published a book about Till's kidnapping. (Joseph P. Meier/SouthtownStar)

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Simeon Wright, of Summit, talks about his new book, "Simeon's Story: An Eyewitness Account of the Kidnapping of Emmett Till." (Joseph P. Meier/SouthtownStar)

"Please don't tell your father I whistled at that lady," Bobo (Emmett's nickname) pleaded. It never occurred to me that Bobo would be killed for whistling at a white woman. I thought he might be whipped if he were caught - but never murdered," Wright wrote in his new book, "Simeon's Story: An Eyewitness Account of the Kidnapping of Emmett Till."

So instead of affording a chance to Emmett to maybe apologize to Bryant or to get himself on a northbound train, the then-12-year-old Wright kept quiet, he wrote, "Either way, perhaps Bobo would be alive today."

"We should have" told, Wright said during a recent interview near Burr Oak Cemetery in Alsip, where Emmett and his mother are buried. "We thought we were doing him a favor."

"He was afraid he was going to get sent home. We was having so much fun we didn't want that to happen."

And, as the youngest of 12 children, "I was known as the one to tell," he continued.

Now, at age 67, longtime Summit resident Simeon Wright won't keep quiet any longer about details surrounding Emmett's lynching that he believes, as an eyewitness, have been wrongly portrayed. Wright was with Emmett at the store, shared a bed with Emmett the night of the kidnapping and was ordered to go back to sleep by one of his cousin's killers.

So the quiet cousin, who remains unassuming, is quick to smile and has forgiven the killers, headed his wife to correct the record in writing.

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For one thing, Emmett Till did whistle that day at Carolyn Bryant, Wright said. Though his mother, Mamie Till Mobley, believed he only whistled to correct his stutter, Emmett let one out outside the Bryant store in Money, Miss.

Emmett whistled because he thought it would make his cousins laugh. He wasn't dared to do it or egged on, Wright said.

"To him it was funny - whistling at Carolyn Bryant was funny," Wright recalled. "He didn't get scared until he saw our reaction. It was just funny play."

Though tortured by confessed killers Roy Bryant, Carolyn's husband, and J. W. Milam, Emmett wasn't castrated, either, Wright said, correcting another misconception.

There was no girl with them on Aug. 24, 1955, when the boy cousins went into Money. And Wright's brother, Maurice, never showed the two men where the Wrights lived for a 50-cent reward. Nor did Wright's mother hold back a train ticket for Emmett to return to Chicago.

Son of a preacher man

Wright was born in Doddsville, Miss., the youngest of Moses Wright's 12 children raised under Jim Crow segregation laws. By age 8, he was picking cotton on the farmland in East Money his father leased as a sharecropper from neighboring whites. The only thing harder than picking cotton, Wright recalled, was chopping cotton - hacking at the weeds and grass with a hoe to clear the rows - for six weeks every summer, 7 a.m. to sundown.

"If you were sleeping and you heard that sound, you wanted to cry, but it wouldn't do you no good," he said.

Moses - known as Mose - Wright was a preacher who married Simeon's mother, a schoolteacher, after his first wife died of the flu.

Though Wright writes at length about the farm work expected of the children, he spent a happy childhood with a loving family.

Until Bobo's last visit.

Wright didn't know his cousin's name was Emmett until after the murder. "Bobo" was a name that stuck after a lady brought clothes over for the new baby, saying they were for "little Bobo."

Emmett had only been south once before, and at age 14, he liked to prove people wrong.

"He always wanted to be the toughest guy in the crowd," Wright said.

Perhaps because his mother warned him about Jim Crow, Wright said, he became determined to show his cousins he wasn't afraid.

So after the cousins left the Bryant store, to their horror, Emmett whistled.

Two nights later, Simeon Wright was asleep in bed with Bobo when a ruckus woke him up.

"J. W. was the first man I saw when I woke up that night," he said. "You have to meet him to sense the evil in that man. To me, J. W. Milam was a bully."

At Milam's and Bryant's trial by an all-white jury, Mose Wright stood up and identified Milam as the man who entered the house with Bryant and took Emmett, saying, "There he is."

Wright believes his father was the first black man to finger a white offender, but his stance was all for naught. The men were acquitted. They later sold their confession to Look magazine. And within days, the Wright family left Mississippi for Chicago and settled in what was then, and by some is still considered, Argo - named for the sprawling corn starch factory.

Wright went to Argo Elementary School, graduated from Argo Community High School and went on to train as a pipefitter for the Reynolds Metals Company in McCook.

He met and married Annie Cole, of LaGrange, and at age 24, he was saved, joining the Argo Temple Church of God in Christ.

"I've been smiling ever since," he said. "There's a joy goes with salvation."

'Spirit remains with us'

During the year and a half it took to create his book, Wright collaborated with writer Herb Boyd, writing down some of the stories, and dictating others.

But he couldn't quite finish reading his finished copy for all the sadness he felt.

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"I had to put it down," he said of the book, shedding a few tears as he poked under the snow at Burr Oak Cemetery, searching for Emmett's headstone.

Because the same night Emmett was yanked out of bed, Wright's mother left the house with relatives, leaving her husband and children behind to deal with the investigation, trial and acquittal of the killers. She had offered the kidnappers money to leave Emmett alone, but they refused, threatening her husband if he squealed. She just couldn't stand the South anymore, he said.

Her departure - for 31 days - is a wound for Wright that seems as deep as the killers' acquittal.

Filmmaker Keith Beauchamp, who made "The Untold Story of Emmett Till," said a reluctant Wright begged off for a year before agreeing to be interviewed. Beauchamp's documentary was key in getting the FBI to reopen the Till case in 2004.

"Simeon was my missing link to the whole Emmett Till case," he said. "If it wasn't for him, I could not have gotten all these witnesses to come forward to talk.

"What's even more amazing is the point that his father was so courageous. When I see (Simeon) stand up now, when I see him speak to students now, it really reminds me of his father," he said.

Over the years, Wright turned down most interview requests. Until her death in 2003, Mobley did all the family's talking, Beauchamp said.

"It's overwhelming and it's rewarding to see Simeon have his day," Beauchamp said.

Though Mississippi authorities said in 2007 they didn't have enough to indict anyone believed to have been involved in the kidnapping or killing, Beauchamp and Wright refuse to call the case closed.

"It's not closed for him, and to be clear, the case is still open," Beauchamp said. "The book's going to raise people's awareness of the case even more."

For Wright, who wishes he could talk to Carolyn Bryant while she's still alive, he'll have to content himself with telling Emmett's story on his own.

"They killed his body. His spirit remains with us," he said.

"Segregationists, eat your heart out."

TILL COUSIN TO SPEAK IN OAK LAWN

Simeon Wright will be the featured keynote speaker on Monday for Christ Medical Center and Hope Children's Hospital's annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day Celebration. The public is invited to attend the event, which starts at 11:30 a.m. in the Christ Medical Center auditorium, 4440 W. 95th St., in Oak Lawn. During the presentation, "Forgiveness: The Essence of Healing," Wright will talk about witnessing the horrific 1955 kidnapping and murder of his 14-year-old cousin, Emmett Till, and share how he found peace and forgiveness through God for his cousin's confessed killers.

Wright also will appear at the DuSable Museum of African American History, 740 E. 56th Place, Chicago, from 2 to 4 p.m. Saturday to sign copies of his book.

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