

EMMETT TILL INTERPRETIVE CENTER

RACIAL RECONCILIATION BEGINS BY TELLING THE TRUTH

Ellen Whitten Reflects on Donation of Whitten Papers to FSU's Emmett Till Archives

In July of this year, Ellen Whitten, daughter of ETIC Board Member Libby Whitten, donated an envelope of papers to Florida State University's Emmett Till Archives. The papers belonged to her late grandfather, John Whitten, Jr., a lawyer who served on the defense team for J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant during the trial for Emmett's kidnapping and murder. The envelope was labeled "M + B Destroy," but the files were not destroyed. Now that the files are public, they expose the lies in William Bradford Huie's *Look* magazine piece, which became the story of record of the Till murder for many years, even into the present.

"They're part of a lie that a journalist used to change the way people looked at what happened to Emmett Till for decades," Ellen said. "It doesn't change what happened, but it changes what we know about it."

Thinking back over twenty years, Ellen did not remember when she learned about Emmett Till's story nor about her family's involvement in it. She said that "it felt new" when she heard about Emmett's story in college, and conversations with others affirmed that she hadn't just missed that chapter; the Till story was rarely mentioned in Mississippi schools.

However she came by the story and her family's connection to it, she did a summer research project on the Till case at Rhodes College a few short years after her grandfather's passing, bringing her into the orbit of FSU staff Dr. Steve Whitaker and Dr. Davis Houck. She stayed in touch with them thereafter. That connection would prove instrumental years later.

Ellen described her grandfather as a dapper sort of attorney who chose his words carefully. He lived with Parkinson's disease for years before he died, and at that time Ellen and her family assisted with his care. One day John pulled aside his daughter-in-law, Ellen's mother, and told her where the envelope was. Knowing the decline he was experiencing, he instructed her—not either of his two sons—to take it out of the house if anything should happen to him. Some years later, during a move after Ellen's father died, her mother returned her old Till research materials to her, which included the "M + B Destroy" envelope.

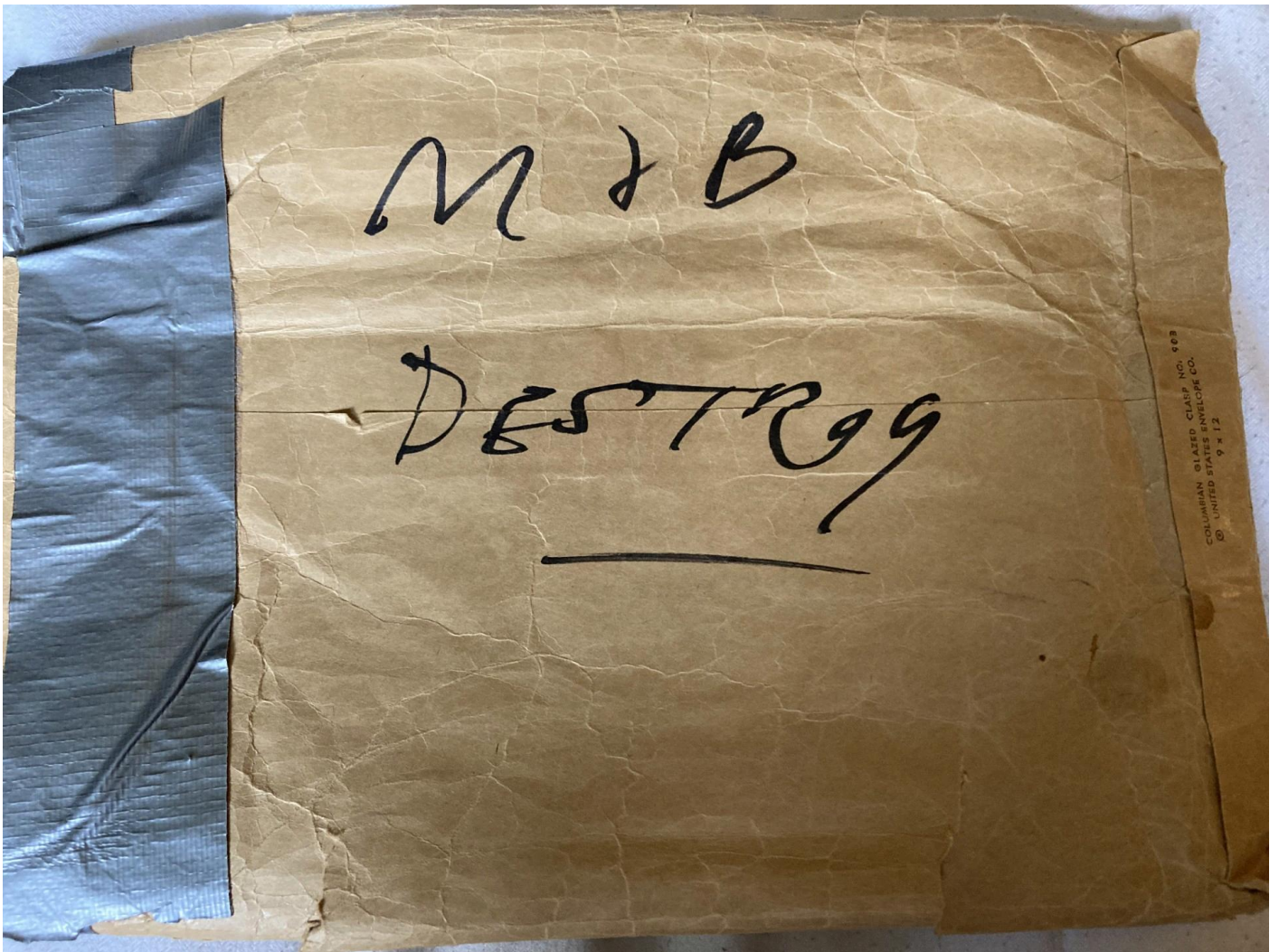


Photo courtesy of Davis Houck

For several years, the files remained in storage in Ellen's home until she rediscovered them this spring and inspected them more closely. They contained legal agreements, correspondence, and research notes pertaining to the murder of Emmett Till and the *Look* magazine “confession” that appeared in January of 1956. The various documents proved that Huie withheld information and published lies in his article. Though Ellen admitted she didn't realize the significance of the contents, she discussed the possibility of donating them to the FSU archive with her mother, who left the decision in Ellen's hands. Ellen reached out to Dr. Houck at FSU and the files became part of their archival holdings. “It doesn't really feel like undoing our family’s involvement or anything quite that drastic, but it’s good to be on the right side of history in this instance,” Ellen said.

The donation was covered in multiple news outlets such as [The Washington Post](#) and [Mississippi Today](#), suggesting that the nation is more receptive to these topics and conversations now compared with when Ellen did her undergraduate research.

“We're so grateful to Libby and Ellen Whitten for their actions to make these important documents available and for choosing FSU Libraries’ Emmett Till Archives as the place to steward, share, and preserve this piece of history,” said Katie McCormick, FSU's Associate Dean of Libraries for Special Collections & Archives. “Having the Whitten Papers, especially Huie's correspondence, in the Till

Archives alongside the Joseph Tobias Papers (Mamie Till-Mobley's lawyer) and other Till research collections contributes to the comprehensiveness of evidence.”

Dr. Houck echoed that sentiment of gratitude. “The memorandum and correspondence re-write much of what we thought we knew about William Bradford Huie’s article. We can’t thank the Whitten family enough for trusting us with these remarkable documents; their courage in exposing these secrets gives us hope that others, too, who have yet to speak might find their voice, too.”

One theme that arose continuously in our conversation with Ellen was the fragility of memory, the threat of impermanence. She never got to speak with her grandfather about any of his involvement in the trial, how he felt about it with the benefit of hindsight. Fewer and fewer people who were alive in 1955 will be available to share recollections of that time, and historical artifacts will, intentionally or not, vanish. “Imagine after 70 years trying to put that puzzle back together, when maybe 10 or 15 years later the pieces were [already] missing,” she said. Some parts of the story, then, will always remain unknown.

Despite the inevitability of gaps in the record, Ellen was heartened that these documents could now be public. “The story that has become most mainstream is Mr. Huie’s version,” she said. “And if that is not true and if that conceals the involvement of other people who could have been brought to justice had that work been done at an earlier date, it’s just another injustice, right? It’s another layer of what was done to Emmett. If bringing these papers to light brings a little bit more of the truth or discredits a person who is responsible for perpetuating a story that was not truthful about how all this went down, then I think that’s a good thing.”

You can view the John Whitten, Jr. Papers [here in FSU’s Emmett Till Archives](#).

VISIT FSU'S TILL ARCHIVES

Wright Thompson's Book 'The Barn' Releases This Week

As we wrote in the previous newsletter, Wright Thompson's latest book, *The Barn: The Secret History of a Murder in Mississippi*, released on September 24th. Among other venues, the book has been covered in [The Washington Post](#), [The Boston Globe](#), and [MSNBC](#).

Wright is currently [on tour](#) in support of the book, with scheduled events in Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Iowa.

We are grateful to Wright for his work and wish him success with the new book!

'THE BARN' TOUR DATES



Photo credit: Evan France

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