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# THE GREENWOOD Commonwealth

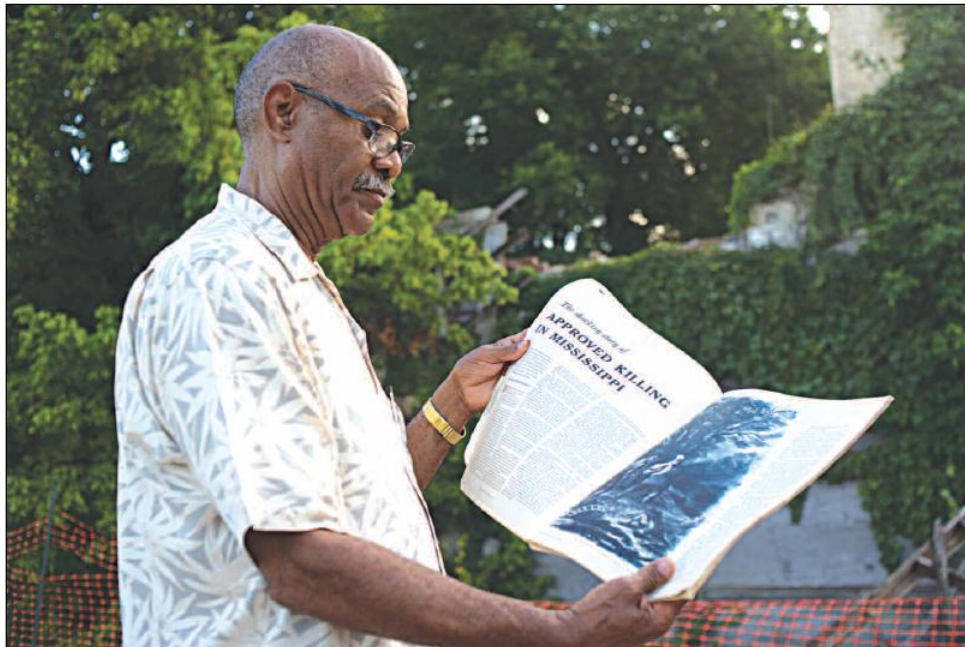


JULY 17, 2016 – 120th YEAR

SUNDAY

GREENWOOD, MISS. \$1.25

## Diving into Delta



Simeon Wright examines the 1956 Look magazine story in which Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam confessed in detail to abducting and murdering Emmett Till in 1955.

## Weeklong course immerses teachers in area's history, culture

**THE RT. REV. DUNCAN MONTGOMERY GRAY JR.:  
1926-2016**

## Ex-bishop champion of civil rights

By KATHRYN EASTBURN  
Staff Writer

The Rt. Rev. Duncan Montgomery Gray Jr., 89, retired bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Mississippi, died on Friday at his home in Jackson following a brief illness.

Known as a moral leader in the civil rights movement in Mississippi, Gray was the son of an Episcopal bishop and the grandfather of Greenwood Church of the Nativity's current pastor, the Rev. Peter Gray.

Visitation will be held from 5 to 7 p.m. Monday at St. Andrew's Cathedral in Jackson, and another visitation will be held from noon to 2 p.m. Tuesday. The funeral will follow at 2 p.m., also at St. Andrew's, and burial will be in Canton.



Gray

Duncan Montgomery Gray Jr. was born in Canton on Sept. 21, 1926 and attended Greenwood High School for three years before graduating in 1944 from Jackson's Central High School. He served in the Navy and afterward studied at Tulane. He married Ruth Spivey of Canton in 1948, the same year he received his bachelor's degree.

He received a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Sewanee: The University of the South in 1953, followed by a long career in the church in Mississippi. In 1972 he was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Divinity from Sewanee.

Gray was the seventh bishop of Mississippi, serving from 1974 to 1993. His father, the Rt. Rev. Duncan Gray Sr., had been the fifth bishop, and one of his sons, the Rt. Rev. Duncan Gray III, was the ninth.

"My grandfather would have said, and it's true, that he just continually found him-

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# Weeklong course immerses teachers in area's history, culture

By KATHRYN EASTBURN  
*Staff Writer*

On a rain-washed July day in the Mississippi Delta, a large bus filled with school teachers from across America criss-crossed the fertile alluvian plain from Cleveland to Mound Bayou to Sumner.

These teachers comprised the second class this summer of Delta State University's weeklong immersion course into all things

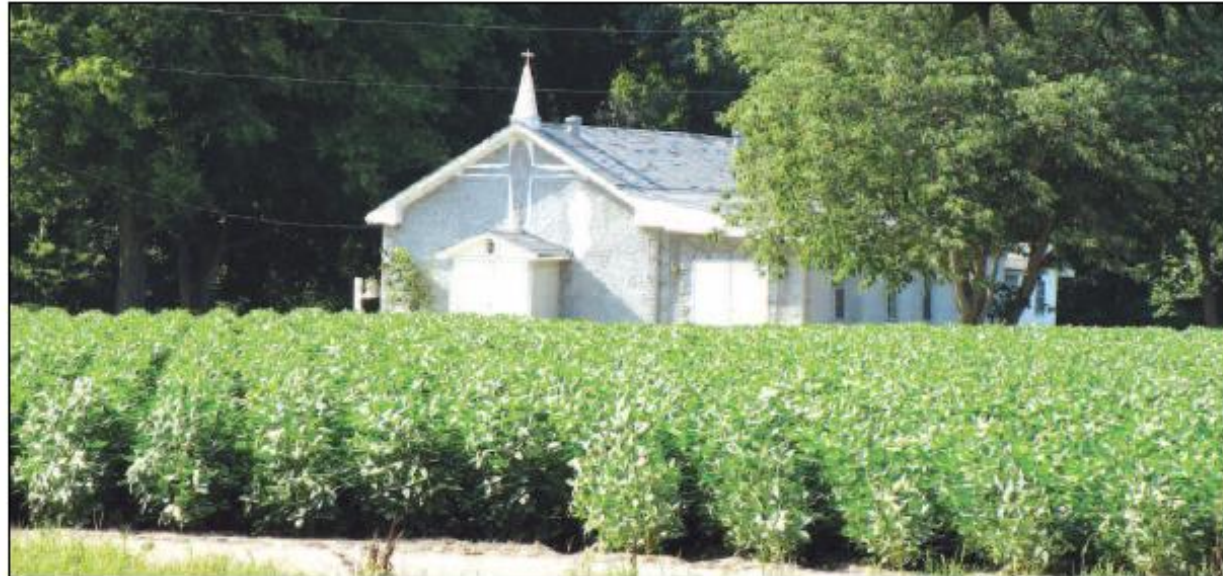


Till

Delta, part of the National Endowment for the Arts' Summer Programs in the Humanities for School and College Educators.

The purpose is to learn about the blues, race relations in the South, the civil rights movement in Mississippi, food, art and Delta culture, all in one big, rich gumbo of learning.

Ann Bienvenue of Lowell



Kathryn Eastburn

**This church provides an idyllic backdrop to the site where J.W. Milam's home once stood near the Emmett Till Museum in Glendora.**

High School in the historic American industrial town of Lowell, Massachusetts, arrived last Sunday and said she has loved every minute.

Dressed in orange from head to toe, Bienvenue said she plans to take what she learned at this seminar, "The Most Southern Place on Earth," and combine it into a course she already teaches on the role of American rivers in

industrial, commercial and cultural history.

"Lowell, of course, is on the Merrimack River, and I took another NEH course on the Hudson," she said. "Now I can add the Mississippi River and the Delta to the course, based on what I've learned here this week."

Each summer, the NEH offers tuition-free workshops like this one at Delta State

through their Landmarks in American History and Culture program, giving teachers the opportunity to study a wide variety of humanitarian topics. Generous stipends help cover expenses for the one- to five-week programs at learning institutions across America.

Delta State saw one group

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# Delta

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complete their one-week "Most Southern Place" course on June 25, then ushered in this group last week.

"We have 36 teachers from 20 states here," said Dr. Rolando Herts, director of the program. They are all K-12 teachers and were chosen from between 300 to 400 applicants.

The Delta immersion experience promises teachers that, in a week's time, they will come to see the Delta as "a microcosm of America," a place of paradox, contrast, incomparable history and unique beauty.

On Thursday, the class focused on the brutal American tale of Emmett Till's 1955 murder in Money and the avalanche of civil rights and legal history it set off.

The first stop of the afternoon was Sumner. Brilliant pink crepe myrtles bloomed against the gray stone former Tallahatchie County Courthouse where Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, the men accused of murdering Till, were found not guilty by an all-white, all-male jury in just 67 minutes of deliberation.

Less than a year later, Bryant and Milam admitted their crime to *Look* magazine in a detailed expose of the murder. They were never convicted and now are both deceased.

Across the street, a repurposed storefront houses the Emmett Till Interpretive Center where groups of school children and other visitors come to hear about the dark history of the Till murder and trial.

John Weems, the Center's director, said it came about as part of a process started by black legislators in 2006 and promoted by the William Winter Center for Racial Reconciliation at the University of Mississippi, where he also works.

As Weems explained to the students gathered in the former Tallahatchie Courthouse, restored to the way it looked when the Till trial happened in 1955, the courthouse stands as a place to learn race history in Tallahatchie County, and was restored as an act of reparative justice.

"It's part of a truth-telling effort," said Weems. "The Emmett Till Memorial Commission was formed to acknowledge that the murderers were let go here, in the Tallahatchie County Courthouse. Step one in reconciliation is to tell the truth, to prevent this from happening again."

♦ ♦ ♦

Four people sat at the front of the courtroom, two black and

two white. Stephanie Wheeler Parker of Illinois was Till's childhood friend who brought him along to Mississippi to visit family in 1955. Simeon Wright, Parker's uncle, was at the Bryant store in Money when Emmett whistled at a white woman, Carolyn Bryant, and was sharing a bed with Till at home when Till was dragged away in the middle of the night. FBI agent Dale Killinger of Washington investigated the Till case when it was re-opened in 2004. Retired FBI agent Lent Rice, a native of Sumner, assisted Killinger in that historic investigation.

The four explained how after Bryant and Milam were let off, 30 years passed before Wright and Parker, eyewitnesses to the event at Bryant Store in Money and to Till's capture in the middle of the night, were asked what really happened. Rumors were spread, misinformation was passed as fact, and the story of Till basically lay dormant until the activities of the Till commission and the FBI brought it back into the spotlight.

Kevin Means, a 10th-grade teacher at Expeditionary Learning School for Community Leaders in Brooklyn said he looks forward to adding the story of Till, so vividly taught here, to the African-American history course he teaches in New York.

"It's a regular public school of 250 students," he said, "but 22 different languages are spoken there. It's really a United Nations of a high school."

Ninety-six percent of Expeditionary's students graduate and many of them, who speak English as their second language, go on to colleges like Skidmore, Brandeis and Franklin and Marshall.

Means said "marinating in the culture of the Delta" has been a profound experience for him. He plans to bring the blues into his class too, now that he sees the connection between the Delta's native music and the nation's racial history.

When the Till case was re-opened in 2004, then-District Attorney Joyce Chiles of the Mississippi Fourth Judicial District presented the case to a grand jury that decided not to reopen it. Chiles is now attorney for the Leflore County Board of Supervisors.

Despite the decision not to take the case back to trial, a lot of important information was uncovered, Killinger and the others agreed, including evidence that showed Milam and Bryant did not act alone.

A student raised her hand. In the largely African-American school where she teaches, she said, she doesn't know what to say to young black men about the current state of race rela-



From left Stephanie Wheeler Parker, Dale Killinger, Simeon Wright and Lent Rice lead a panel discussion of the Till murder and the 2004 reopening of the investigation by the FBI.

tions in the U.S.

"I tell young people, 'it's your world now,'" Parker said. "You're gonna have to carry it on. Pretty soon you're gonna run the world."

Wright chimed in, "Ask them: If you had been there, would you have helped us?"

"When they took Emmett from his father's house, Simeon couldn't do anything," Parker said. "They couldn't call the sheriff because they were black. Point out to (your students) how that's different now."

Killinger explained how the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act of 2007, signed into law in 2008, opened the door for "100 more cases."

The session ended and students lined up to have their photos made with civil rights heroes whose names most had never heard.

♦ ♦ ♦

The next stop was the village of Glendora, site of J.W. Milam's house, birthplace of blues harmonica legend Sonny Boy Williamson and home of the recently founded Emmett Till Museum in a reclaimed cotton gin.

In typical Delta fashion, among the crumbling shacks and recollections of brutal history on historic markers, the sight of a small church across a farm field, framed in shades of green, created an idyllic backdrop.

Collette Berard of Somerville, Massachusetts, was still shaking off the visceral impact of what she'd learned about the Till murder and trial. Berard teaches seventh grade in Andover public schools, just outside of Boston. Her students are middle class and, she said,

have no idea about how people live in other parts of the country, like the Delta.

"It's such a mythical part of American culture," she said. "And such an important part of the American psyche."

Berard said she plans to emphasize to her young male students that "they are not that much younger than Emmett Till was when he died." Impulsive class downs, she said, might take to heart the lesson of Till's innocent act, an attempt to get a laugh, that turned into a blood bath.

Berard said her immersion into the Delta had been an eye-opener for a Jewish vegetarian who found all the food fried and a culture where Christian religion permeates everything.

Inside the museum, Glendora Mayor Johnny B. Collins introduced an 18-minute film that places Glendora at the center of the events of the night Emmett Till was murdered.

"Five African-Americans were made accomplices under Jim Crow," Collins said, "all from Glendora."

Collins said his father admitted that he tied the cotton gin

fan to Till and dropped his body into the water of Black Bayou, not the main body of the Tallahatchie River as popular history has taught. He has told this story many times, and this time, didn't flinch at the hard truth he was telling.

"This site is holy ground," he said. "On this site, they beat the child, on this site they burned his clothes after bringing him here from Money."

Collins said the museum he and the citizens of Glendora have erected stands to teach the struggle of civil rights and, as written in the museum's brochure, "The Struggle to Prevent Human Wrong."

The film mixed in a brief clip of Sonny Boy Williamson huffing on his harmonica, reminding the group once again that in the Delta, everything is all mixed up together in one tortured and glorious stew.

Students loaded onto the bus again for the day's final destinations: the Bryant Store on Money Road, just up from Greenwood, and Little Zion Church and the Robert Johnson memorial marker, just a little farther down the road. Till

trees shaded the Little Zion graveyard, softened the afternoon heat and muffled the voices of the group, wandering among the tombstones.

Emily Chadwick of McMinnville, Oregon, said this program, for her, had been a life-changing event.

"To meet so many friends and fellow teachers from all over, and to witness the riches of the Delta were experiences that would never leave her, she said.

In the fall, Chadwick will teach a class of first-graders. About mid-week, she said, she was struggling to articulate exactly how she would take this experience back to the classroom.

"Then I realized something, talking to a friend in the program," Chadwick said. "What I've learned this week is what it means to be an American."

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Chadwick

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