

Publishing and the Public Humanities: Dave Tell, The Emmett Till Memory Project: Building Trust

https://youtu.be/qAcroYxT_uk

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I've grown very close with the Commission to the extent like um uh uh one month after we launched the Emmet Till Memory Project on its new version its current version um the Commission cut down its sign at Graball Landing because they had put up a new one and that one got shot too. And they put up and this got some news they put up a bulletproof sign and I think it's the only bulletproof roadside marker in the country to my knowledge.

And they held this dedication on October 17, 2019 and they invited me that I was the only uh white outsider that they invited to speak at the dedication. And then what was it two years after that when the Smithsonian institution took that bullet-riddled sign and put it in the Flag Hall their grand ball side entry of the National Museum of American History they asked the family and the Commission well who do you want to sort of host this conversation and well they chose me and so what I'm saying is the development of the memory project really can't be divorced from these relationships that um you know did not come naturally.

I will stress that uh I really had to work to win the trust of the till family you know they get a lot of people coming to them um and I had to work to win the trust of the uh the non-profit but when you stick with the same project for eight years right you can do things you can win some trust that you can't win on a one-time um pitch.

And so because the family of the nonprofit have worked with me on multiple failed grant proposals a few successful grant proposals a couple high-profile stories like it now just seems like okay what's the next thing we're doing together. Um I'll tell you

one uh great story about working with the non-profit uh for years I was trying, they had been meeting regularly since 2005. And keeping regular minutes and no one had ever seen the full run of those minutes and as a memory scholar I'm like well, damn this group has done more than any other group in the world. This was true at the time it might not be true anymore but at the time this group had done more than any other group in the world to commemorate the Till story and I want to see those minutes. And I tried for years to see those minutes and and it's not like it's a public institution you can't FOI [freedom of information] these things right uh it's not like there's a building where like they have a a um Administrative Assistant who kept the minutes and she was the one who knew where they were. So eventually I took her out to lunch in Sumner and uh you know we we sat right in Sumner Square looking out on the town square right across the street is the courthouse and uh and I just explained what I was doing and I'm like we would love I would love to be able to see these minutes and she's like well I have them but I can't let you see them uh you would need to get the permission of Frank Michener and Frank is a sort of he was the white co-chair of the commission at the time. And I'm like well his office is right across the street so we finished lunch I go across the street I sit with Frank in this beautiful gracious office um doesn't even have a typewriter like that's the level of technology Frank is working with here um because I don't well I'll just say that at the end of like an hour of him telling me stories I said well Frank can I see the minutes and he said well I'm I'd let you see him but it's not really my call uh you'd have to get the permission of John Wilchey, the black co-chair and I didn't know John at the time and so I said well can you hook me up with John and I'll give him a call and Frank said no I'm gonna call him for you and if I call you back that means you can see him and I walked out of Frank's office totally dejected. I'm like there is no way I'm getting a call back and I was driving back to my hotel which is like you know in Tallahatchee County that's an hour commute um and my phone rings and it's Frank and he's like Dave, John said it's okay he just gave me an address and said meet me at this address at 8.30 in the morning I'm like see you there.

So the next morning I wake up plug the address into my phone and like my phone starts taking me through one of the poorest towns in the Delta that's saying something right out the other side of the town for miles into these cotton fields and also I'm starting to get a little bit nervous I'm like wait a second and like the day before I was so excited it hadn't occurred to me to actually like look up where this address was I just like plugged it into my phone and started driving and I end up at

this metal building you can only see cornfields as far as the eye can see gravel parking lot one door a couple windows looks like a warehouse to me.

So, I kind of get out of my car I check my phone um and I sort of walk up and I open the door and lo and behold I walk into one of like the single most plush sort of fancy office buildings I've ever been inside um and it turns out that that was the the sort of headquarters of the Sturdivant Plantation and if you know the Sturdivant name Mike Sturdivant ran from Mississippi Governor from that building twice in the 1980s um the Sturdivants own a lot of the farmland in the area and maybe even some of the land relevant to the till story um and when I walked in Martha Ann Clark the administrative assistant was sitting at the front desk that's where she worked and uh.

So, like she pulled she's like Dave good to see you and so she pulls off she pulls out of the closet these three three-inch um binders black binders and she takes me back to this conference hall with this like conference table that goes as far as the eye can see surrounded by all this like big game on the walls and I'm like getting out my camera and setting up my tripod and she's like wait you can't open those. I'm like what do you mean I can't open those she's like John Wilchey is gonna come and he's going to be here in about 15 minutes and if you can sell him you can look at him but it's his decision.

And so I'm like okay so 15 minutes past John, John comes and goodness the first thing to say one of my most pronounced memories is John has a thick, thick rural southern accent like I had to pay attention uh to sort of be able to track this conversation but he asked what I was doing and why I wanted to look at the minutes and I explained that I was writing a book and and he was fine with that and he said well what do we get if you look at these minutes and the timing was perfect because that \$240,000 grant to fund the Emmett Till Memory Project um had just come through about a month ago and it was funding his staff and I'm like John that \$240,000 you just got I wrote that grant and he just like got this big smile on his face and he just pushed those black binders across the table and said 'have at it' right and so that is a cool story because it's like a very concrete reminder that building these projects does not happen outside of relationships uh with these communities, and it does not happen if like forget relationships it's about like I was doing things that helped them with what they cared about. Like, I was paying their, I was helping that grant helped pay staff salary for a year. Um, so once they saw that I

was helping them do what they needed like they didn't have a grant writer on their team and grant writing you know I'm an academic it's one of my few marketable skills uh so the fact that I was willing to sort of lend that skill to their cause they were willing to share with me those three binders which became like ... one of the backbone narratives of the stories I tell comes from those binders um.

There's I won't go into all of it there the Martha Ann eventually would not let me look at binder three for another year after that but I eventually got binder three, um, there was no smoking guns like he spent so long chasing something you think there's gonna be like smoking guns inside them and there wasn't there was just good stories and good records of sort of the unglamorous and often invisible labor of citizens working together to do memory work and that in itself I think is a valuable valuable thing.