

In 1871, during the height of the Reconstruction, Representative Andrew King of Missouri proposed that Congress introduce a nationwide ban on interracial marriages, but Congress, dominated by northern states that had forced the former slave states to end slavery, refused to enact such a law. However, the “anti-miscegenation laws” already in the books in many states were left standing.

In the South, in particular, a black man having sexual access to white women remained a totally unacceptable idea. It produced outrage and revulsion when it became known that the first black heavyweight boxing champion, Jack Johnson, had married first one white woman, Etta Duryea, and then another, Lucille Cameron. In 1913, Representative Seaborn Roddenberry of Georgia spoke in Congress:

No brutality, no infamy, no degradation in all the years of southern slavery, possessed such villainous character and such atrocious qualities as the provision of the laws of Illinois, Massachusetts, and other states which allow the marriage of the Negro, Jack Johnson, to a woman of Caucasian strain. Gentleman, I offer this resolution... that the States of the Union may have an opportunity to ratify it... Intermarriage between whites and blacks is repulsive and averse to every sentiment of pure American spirit. It is abhorrent and repugnant to the very principles of Saxon government. It is subversive of social peace. It is destructive of moral supremacy, and ultimately this slavery of white women to black beasts will bring this nation a conflict as fatal as ever reddened the soil of Virginia or crimsoned the mountain paths of Pennsylvania... Let us uproot and exterminate now this debasing, ultra-demoralizing, un-American and inhuman leprosy.¹

Roddenberry’s proposal of a nationwide ban on marriages between whites and blacks did not get enacted into federal law but found many sympathetic listeners. Political representatives proposed such bans in nineteen states that did not already have them. Singled out by Rep. Roddenberry as an offender of all decency, Massachusetts, in response, enacted a law that did not allow marriages in that state of people who were legally barred from marrying in their home states. It mirrored later legal efforts to prevent same-sex marriages.

In the South, the civil rights movement began to stir in the early 1950s, and it caused a flare-up of white fear and hatred there. The idea of abandoning strict segregation raised the frightening specter of racial mingling and the alleged damage that it would cause to the white race. It seems obvious, however, that the fear of the black rapist stereotype did not stem predominantly from any risk of possible damage to the white race from racial mixing. White feelings on the subject would have changed little if white women had access to the Pill and avoided pregnancy in every case of interracial liaisons. What created the strongest feelings of rage and revulsion

¹ *Congressional Record*, 62d. Congr., 3d. Sess., December 11, 1912, pp. 502–503

was the mere thought of a pure, white virgin forced to have rough, bestial sex with a hugely endowed black man. It was declared to be the most traumatic and horrifying experience a young woman could have and could be expected to leave her damaged for life, if not in body, at least in her soul. The prevention of sex between black men and white women—not the maintenance of what people believed to be white racial purity—was the true overriding goal of maintaining segregation.

In a 1956 interview with *Look* magazine in which Roy Bryant and his half-brother J. W. Milam admitted to having killed Emmett Till (discussed earlier in this book), the two men described the whole series of events that occurred during the murder. Bryant and Milam took Till to the edge of the Tallahatchie River in their truck, where they ordered him to take all his clothes off; they then asked him whether he had ever had a sexual experience with a white woman. When Till defiantly affirmed that he had, Milam, in a rage, pistol-whipped him and then shot him in the head. Milam explained his action in this way:

As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place. Niggers ain't gonna vote where I live. If they did, they'd control the government. They ain't gonna go to school with my kids. And when a nigger gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he's tired o' livin'. I'm likely to kill him.²

When Milam pulled the trigger to blow Emmet's brains out with a .45 caliber bullet, he did not contemplate any of the potential and allegedly tragic consequences of Till's experience, such as a mixed-race child being born to the couple. It was just the thought that Till had experienced sex with a white woman that triggered the instinctive, murderous rage.

² William Bradford Huie, "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," (*LOOK* magazine, January 24, 1956), pp. 46 - 49