

taken from The Book of
Emmett Till

Besides being a plantation manager Tom Holloway worked as a prison guard in Lambert at one of the outlying camps of the notorious Mississippi State Penitentiary, better known as Parchman Farm. The prisoners "were all black, they were all black men. And my daddy worked at Camp A, the first one. They had a sergeant and a first rider and a second rider. My daddy was the first rider." All the riders were white men, each with a whip, a shotgun, and a rifle, who oversaw the prisoners from horseback. The inmates in their black-and-white-striped uniforms addressed the drivers as "Cap'n."

Camp A had been part of the O'Keefe Plantation in Quitman County until the Mississippi Department of Corrections purchased the land in 1916. In their physical structure, the camps resembled a slavery-era plantation. Black convicts took the place of the enslaved, but otherwise the systems were identical—the same crops grown in the same way under the same discipline. In both instances the farming operation depended on a handful of poor white men to supervise the captive laborers.

The instrument of authority at Mississippi's prison camps was a leather strap, three feet long and six inches wide, nicknamed "Black Annie," hanging from each driver's belt. A former inmate remarked, "They beat hell out of you for any reason or no reason. It's the greatest pleasure of their lives."

...breaking a shovel. "The driver seemed to be everywhere, 'directing, guiding, encouraging, or whacking across the shoulders with the whip.'" More formal punishment was a whipping in the evening, in front of all the men, with the victim spread-eagle on the floor. "They whupped us with big, wide strops. They didn't whup no clothes. They whupped your naked butt. And they had two men to hold you [or] as many as they need." Routine offenses like fighting, stealing, and showing "disrespect" to a driver earned five to fifteen lashes; attempts to escape brought the punishment of whipping without limit—whippings that were sometimes fatal. "They'd kill um like that."

During the 1930s and well into the 1950s the lash enjoyed widespread public support among whites in Mississippi. Editors, church groups, public officials, sheriffs, and prison authorities all seemed to support whipping as "the perfect instrument of discipline in a prison populated by the wayward children of former slaves," writes the historian David Oshinsky. These prison camps were "a powerful link to the past—a place of racial discipline where blacks in striped clothing worked the cotton fields for the enrichment of others. And it would remain this way for another half-century, until the civil rights movement methodically swept it away."

On your own paper, answer in complete sentences AFTER you read the story:

① What was the job of the "driver"?

② Describe how "black Annie" was used.

③ In what ways do you think the support of "the lash" as

a form of punishment, will affect African Americans self image overtime?