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T.R.M. Howard, an unlikely civil rights hero

Fifty-four years ago today, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Chicago boy visiting family in Mississippi, was abducted, mutilated and slain after he allegedly whistled at a white woman. Several days later, his horribly disfigured body was fished out of the Tallahatchie River. Many such tragedies had previously happened to black Americans and then been ignored. The Till case was different because of the efforts of a flamboyant and wealthy black planter and surgeon, T.R.M. Howard.

Howard's place in history has been woefully slighted. Without him, we might never have heard of Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Medgar Evers or Operation PUSH. Howard was the crucial link connecting the Till slaying and the rise of the modern civil rights movement.

But he was an unlikely civil rights hero. A prosperous businessman who spared no expense on his wardrobe, sped around in expensive Cadillacs, gambled on horses, ran a successful hospital that provided affordable healthcare, hunted big game in Africa and owned a 1,000-acre plantation, Howard promoted an agenda of entrepreneurship and self-help.

Before his quest for justice in the 1955 slaying of Till, Howard led massive rallies and successful boycotts for equal rights in rural Mississippi. Evers, who went on to become a celebrated civil rights activist and martyr, got his introduction to both business and activism when Howard hired him as a salesman for the Magnolia Mutual Life Insurance Co., one of Howard's many business ventures. Howard encouraged Evers to get involved with the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, a civil rights group Howard founded in 1951. (Howard would go on to play a similar mentoring role to the young Hamer.)

For The Record

Los Angeles Times Wednesday, September 09, 2009 Home Edition
Main News Part A Page 25 Editorial pages Desk 1 inches; 36
words Type of Material: Correction

Civil rights leader: An Aug. 28 Op-Ed article about civil rights pioneer T.R.M. Howard misspelled the name of a radio evangelist who ran for U.S. Senate in 1932. His name was Robert Shuler, not Robert Schuller.

Till's killing moved Howard to even greater efforts. Vowing that there would be "hell to pay in Mississippi," Howard gave over his home as a "command center" for black journalists and witnesses, including Mamie Till-Mobley (Emmett's mother). He doggedly pushed the theory that more people had been involved in the crime than the two white half-brothers, J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant. Sadly, as Howard had predicted in September 1955, an all-white jury ignored the overwhelming evidence and acquitted Milam and Bryant. Howard remarked bitterly that a white man was less likely to suffer a penalty for such a crime than for "killing deer out of

season."

But the acquittal was just the beginning of Howard's fight. In the months after the trial, he gave speeches across the country to crowds of thousands, demanding a federal investigation. Mississippi's white press, which had once lauded Howard's self-help activities, was outraged. The Jackson Daily News castigated Howard as "Public Enemy No. 1." So scathing was Howard's criticism of the FBI's failure to protect blacks that J. Edgar Hoover took the rare step of denouncing Howard in an open letter.

One of the least publicized stops on Howard's speaking tour was to an overflow crowd Nov. 27 at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala. The official host was a largely unknown 26-year-old pastor named Martin Luther King Jr. Rosa Parks was in the audience. Four days later, when she refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus, Howard's speech was still headline news in the local black press. Parks reported that she was thinking of Emmett Till, a focal point of Howard's address, when she made her decision to act.

Though Howard spent much of his life in Kentucky, Mississippi and Illinois, his political formation came in Southern California, where he attended the College of Medical Evangelists (now Loma Linda University) in the early 1930s. While there, Howard wrote a celebrated weekly column called "Our Fight" for the California Eagle, worked on the political campaigns of radio preacher Robert Schuller and socialist author Upton Sinclair, and met his wife, the Riverside socialite Helen Nela Boyd.

Why isn't this larger-than-life figure better known? Howard, a classically American "man on the make," is hard to pigeonhole. His secular orientation and pro-business ideas made him an anomaly in a civil rights movement dominated by church leaders and left-liberal activists. Politically, his activities offer something to please and offend everybody: A staunch Republican and ally of President Eisenhower, Howard was also a committed feminist whose clinics offered safe abortions in the years before *Roe vs. Wade*.

But those who knew T.R.M. Howard (who died in 1976 at age 68) still speak about his energy, charisma and commitment. "The man was dynamic," recalled Mamie Till-Mobley. "I just thought he was the greatest in the world."