



A Death Ruled “Justifiable”: The Killing of John Wesley Wilder

In July 1965, police officer Edward Nugent encountered John Wesley Wilder, a Black man, outside a cafe in Ruston, Louisiana. Nugent shot Wilder five times, resulting in his death. Local authorities deemed it a justifiable homicide, and subsequent investigations in 1965 did not bring justice or closure to Wilder’s family. In 2008, legislation introduced by Congressman John Lewis, gave hope to families seeking justice for racially motivated homicides prior to 1970. Nugent, the shooter, is still alive, and new evidence has emerged. Reporter Ben Greenberg investigates whether justice is still possible for John Wesley Wilder and his family. Reported by Ben Greenberg.

This episode was produced in partnership with the nonprofit newsroom Type Investigations and with support from the Fund for Investigative Journalism.

Pamela Kirkland: This episode discusses the death of a Black man at the hands of a white police officer. If this subject is uncomfortable for you, please listen with a friend, listen when you feel ready or skip to the next episode in our series. As always, take care of you.

This episode was produced in partnership with the nonprofit newsroom Type Investigations and with support from the Fund for Investigative Journalism. Ben Greenberg reported this episode.

Ben Greenberg: It was a little after 2:00 AM on a Saturday in Ruston, Louisiana in July of 1965. Police officer Edward Alton Nugent came driving down Jones Street as John Wesley Wilder was staggering out of a cafe where he’d been drinking. Nugent was white. Wilder was Black. What happened next is still disputed today, but Nugent shot Wilder five times.

Local authorities quickly ruled the death a justifiable homicide in self-defense. An FBI investigation and an attempted civil suit by Wilder’s family in 1965 did not bring justice for them or closure. For the next four decades, the Wilders privately carried their loss. But in 2008, groundbreaking legislation [introduced by U.S. Representative John Lewis](#) offered new hope to scores of families like the Wilders. The Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act directed the Department of Justice and the FBI to investigate unpunished [racially-motivated homicides from before 1970](#).

After three years of an investigation that appeared minimal, [the Wilder case was closed again in 2011](#). But Nugent is still alive, and new evidence has recently come to light. Is justice still possible for John Wesley Wilder, and what would it look like?

John Wilder’s older brother, Emzie, is 92 years old. He lives in Shreveport, roughly 70 miles west of Ruston.

Emzie Wilder: That was my brother. Oh, he would just... I mean, we was real, real close.

Greenberg: Shedonna Wilder-Martin is Emzie's eldest of two children. She was five when her uncle was killed.

Shedonna Wilder-Martin: I remember one photo that comes to mind. I was a child the last time I saw it, but it was of my dad and his brother, Uncle John. Well, they used to call him Wes. Uncle Wes. Standing together. It's a black and white photo. My uncle, because he was a bit taller than my dad, so I remember he had his arm around my dad. And they were just in a jovial position, it seemed. They were smiling, happy. You could tell that they were close.

Greenberg: Emzie has carried his loss mostly in silence for 58 years. In August of 2020, while hospitalized with COVID, he was also diagnosed with dementia. His memories have faded some, but John remains with him.

Emzie Wilder: Sometimes, I think that he comes to see me. I really do. Sometimes, I think he comes to see me, my brother Wes. I mean, I may be doing something. You know what? He come and look like he just come and help me.

Greenberg: And he still feels outrage over his brother's death at the hands of Edward Alton Nugent.

Emzie Wilder: He done wrong. So if he apologized, I couldn't accept it.

Greenberg: Shedonna never knew how her Uncle Wes died until I contacted her last summer in search of Emzie for a story on the killing of his brother.

Wilder-Martin: What I was told was that my uncle was in an altercation, in a fight. And my understanding was like a street brawl. Got into an altercation and he was killed. So I'd never heard anything about it being a police officer. I never heard anything about it being a white police officer. And my assumption was he got into it with another man of color and he fell to his demise. So it wasn't like it was racially involved, because I didn't even know about the police officer until I met you.

Emzie Wilder: The night he got shot, I was living over on Abbott Street.

Greenberg: In July of 1965, Emzie Wilder was working in Shreveport and staying at a boarding house when he got the call about John.

Emzie Wilder: I was renting over there and when she called me and told me that my brother had got shot, well, I went in the room and stole this woman's pistol. I stole a pistol out of her house and carried it with me.

Greenberg: As Emzie got more of the facts about what happened, he decided against revenge.

Emzie Wilder: I've been through so much about that, but I know the Lord took that gun from me because I was going to kill him, and then I know I would've been the one that had to pay for his killing, see? I might've been still doing time behind that.

Greenberg: [According to a newspaper article](#) published in the *Ruston Daily Leader* two days after the slaying, Edward Nugent was driving in his patrol car through Washington

Heights, a Black neighborhood on Ruston's south side at around 2:25 AM. Nugent reportedly heard shouting and obscene language from a group of Black people outside a cafe. As he slowed down to find out what was going on, he saw someone throw something at his patrol car. Nugent stopped the car, radioed Officer Lewis Cole for backup and then continued toward the cafe.

This version of events is according to a statement provided to the newspaper by Ruston Mayor John Perritt, who was white. The statement incorporated a detailed police description of the incident. The article is largely a direct transcription of this statement. What follows next is my paraphrase of that account. I'll deliver it straight without qualifiers like "allegedly" and "reportedly" that I would normally use in my reporting, especially for a case like this where the authorities did not disclose their evidence and sourcing.

As Nugent drove down the street, Wilder stood outside and asked him what in the hell he was doing there. Nugent came to a stop. Wilder approached the patrol car on the driver's side. Nugent asked Wilder to identify himself, but he adamantly refused. Another man, Billy Williams, came over to intervene, and Nugent told them they were both under arrest. Nugent searched Wilder Williams and found only a small pen knife in one of Wilder's pants pockets.

At this point, Nugent ordered Wilder and Williams to get into the police car. Wilder refused, and Nugent attempted to guide him towards the car. Wilder suddenly whirled around and faced Nugent. Nugent then struck Wilder in the jaw with a blackjack, a type of baton.

A crowd of approximately 150 bystanders gathered at the scene and were throwing bottles and cans at Nugent and swearing and jeering at him. Nugent retrieved a shotgun from his car, made a second call to Officer Cole for backup and stood with his weapon to protect himself from the crowd while he waited for Cole. Someone from the crowd threw an automobile tie rod and fitting at Nugent and hit him on his neck and collarbone.

Cole pulled up in another police car and watched the crowd while Nugent again told Wilder to get into the police car. Wilder refused and instead grabbed the barrel of Nugent's shotgun. Nugent swung the gun around, striking Wilder in the jaw with the butt. Fearing that Wilder would succeed in taking the shotgun by force, Nugent handed it to Officer Cole.

Nugent took up his blackjack with one hand and placed his other hand on Wilder's elbow to move him toward the police car. Wilder punched Nugent with his right fist and got the blackjack away from him. Wilder attempted to hit Nugent with the blackjack, but Nugent deflected it.

Nugent drew his pistol from his holster and fired at Wilder. Wilder was clutching Nugent and continuing to attack him and becoming even more aggressive. Nugent fired again. Wilder kept attacking. Nugent fired three rapid shots. Wilder fell with the fifth shot.

Mayor Perritt concluded his statement on a remorseful note while also defending Nugent's actions saying, quote, "All of us in Ruston, whether officials or plain citizens, deeply regret the occurrence of this incident. The color of Wilder's skin had nothing to do with Nugent's actions. He sincerely believed that Wilder was

trying to kill him. And although the matter is very regrettable, he did only what any good officer would've done under the same circumstances."

Shedonna Wilder Martin doesn't remember much about the killing, but there is a scene that plays over in her mind.

Wilder-Martin:

What was I, five, I think, when he was murdered? What comes to mind to me repeatedly is an image of his house on a particular night. And my cousin and I, his daughter Jeannene, who's also now deceased, she must've been about three, I think, and we were in the house. And I remember people going in and out.

Something devastating had occurred with people busying in and out of the house. I remember a police officer coming in, and I want to say I remember a blue light outside the house. The front door was open, I guess because people kept coming in and out. I don't remember who, but I just remember a lot of people walking in and out the house. And I can't tell you what the conversations... I don't remember.

Greenberg:

The shooting occurred in the early morning hours of a Saturday at around 2:25. By Monday, a coroner's jury had convened and ruled it a justifiable homicide in self-defense. According to police, as reported in the *Ruston Daily Leader*, "Nugent had retreated at least 10 feet from the time Wilder took the slapper until the fifth shot was fired, during all of which time Wilder was in physical contact with Nugent and was pressing his attack on Nugent. After firing each of the first and second shots, Nugent hesitated, thinking each shot, whether or not it hit Wilder, would cause Wilder to stop his onslaught."

Local coroner Dr. Robert Carter stated that Nugent shot Wilder in self-defense while Wilder's hand was on his neck. Several newspapers reported the presence of FBI agents investigating in Ruston in the days after the killing. The results of the reported 1965 FBI investigation are unknown, but the Wilders did not let it end there.

According to news reports from the time, Black people from Ruston and the neighboring all-Black town of Grambling held a series of mass meetings that same Monday after the killing and the next day. On that Tuesday morning, a committee representing the two towns held a lengthy meeting with Ruston's Mayor John Perritt. Also that week, Emzie Wilder released a statement through the public information director at the historically-Black Grambling College. Emzie said numerous eyewitnesses saw the shooting, but none to his knowledge were asked to give testimony in the coroner's inquest. And it was implausible that his brother would attack Nugent.

Emzie declared, "With the help of law-abiding Negro citizens from Ruston and Grambling who will not rest until the truth has been told and justice has been meted out, all aid and assistance from every legal source possible will be sought to make sure that Negroes are not shot down in the streets in the future by the police who are supposed to protect them. The officer who killed my brother has no place on the Ruston police force, and every effort will be made to remove and prosecute him. In the event Ruston does not do something, my family and I will have to seek help from the NAACP, CORE and others anxious to move in to make sure that my brother did not die in vain."

For the next four decades, little was known outside of Ruston about what else happened in the case. There was no public record of civil rights groups getting

involved, no trace of Emzie Wilder's fight for justice for his brother. But in 2008, the late U.S. Representative John Lewis gave families like the Wilders a glimmer of hope for belated justice.

His legislation, the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act, was signed into law by President George W. Bush. The act instructed the Department of Justice and the FBI to (1) expeditiously investigate unsolved civil rights murders and (2) provide all the resources necessary to ensure timely and thorough investigations. The legislation [authorized \\$13.5 million annually](#) to advance the Cold Case Initiative.

Cynthia Deitle: It was an effort on our part to go back and right history, so to go back and take a fresh look at civil rights era racially motivated homicides that had occurred prior to 1970.

Greenberg: This is Cynthia Deitle.

Deitle: I am currently the director and associate general counsel for the Civil Rights Team at Meta, formerly known as Facebook. I spent 22 years in the FBI working almost exclusively within the civil rights program. I was a case agent in New York City for about 10 years, and then I was promoted to the FBI headquarters and the civil rights unit, where I spent a number of years. I was fortunate enough to rise to the level of chief of the civil rights unit from 2008 to 2011.

By around 2007 or '08, I would say, we had a little over a hundred cases on our list. And so what we did was we assigned those cases to agents in the field office that had that geographic responsibility. And myself and attorneys with the Department of Justice then supervised all those investigations for the next several years.

Greenberg: The Wilder case was one of about a hundred involving about 120 victims opened under the Till Act in 2008. The Justice Department closed it in 2011. Since then, the list of victims has grown to 161. To date, [the cases of at least 133 victims](#) have been closed without any prosecutions.

Karlos K. Hill: I am Associate Professor at the University of Oklahoma in the Clara Luper Department of African, African American Studies. If we're going to center a story on victims, survivors and descendants, racial violence, we should also seek justice for those individuals. Whether it be in a form of memorials, whether it be in the form of reparations or all of the above, we should seek justice for those individuals.

Greenberg: This is Karlos K. Hill. Hill has published books on the history of lynching, the Tulsa Race Massacre and the murder of Emmett Till. He participates in Tulsa's work on reparations, memorialization and healing.

Hill: The word reparations most specifically means to repair. In the conversation of historic racial violence, I think we have to talk about repair, but we also more specifically have to talk about healing. We have to talk about communities healing.

Greenberg: When the Justice Department closes a case that it does not bring to trial, a department attorney writes a Notice to Close File memo which summarizes the investigative steps taken and provides the legal rationale for closing the case. Here are some of the actions taken by the FBI.

FBI agents located a *Ruston Daily Leader* article about the killing published on July 19th, 1965; obtained Wilder's death certificate, which lists his cause of death as gunshot wound through the heart and that he was shot by a police officer; scheduled an interview with Edward Nugent, who reportedly didn't appear. His attorney instead provided a summary of Nugent's account to the FBI. Learned from Nugent's attorney that Nugent claimed he was interviewed in 1965 by FBI Special Agent Earl Cox and was allegedly exonerated; searched for FBI records on the case from 1965 but did not find any; attempted unsuccessfully to locate the former Ruston police Officer Lewis Cole; contacted present-day local officials including Ruston Police, the parish coroner and the district attorney, who all reported they did not have records on the killing. The Justice Department's official conclusion was that, quote, "There is insufficient evidence to contradict the subject's account that he fired in self-defense."

David Cunningham: The Till Act calls for a serious reinvestigation and reckoning, in fact, with the ways in which these sorts of civil rights era acts of violence were, or most times were not, policed, considered, investigated and prosecuted when appropriate.

Greenberg: This is David Cunningham.

Cunningham: I am professor and chair of the Department of Sociology at Washington University in St. Louis.

Greenberg: Cunningham researches the organization and enforcement of segregation under Jim Crow and the enduring legacies of racist violence. He says the Justice Department's summary findings in the Notice to Close File memo are not in keeping with the intent of the Till Act.

Cunningham: I don't think there's a single sentence in the FBI's determination that reflects upon the nature of the original evidence and how it should be considered in light of what we know about that era.

Greenberg: One thing we know about that era is that coroners were not forensic experts.

Cunningham: Coroners are not positions that are appointed based on expertise, but are rather elected officials. And when we think about coroners, they're really doing that work in ways that are aligned with what are seen as the prevailing interests of a community. And so when we think about the Jim Crow South and we think about a place like Ruston, Louisiana, in the 1960s, the prevailing interests of the community in this political sense tends to align with the interests of the white community, of course, and around the disenfranchisement and segregation of members of the Black community.

Greenberg: And those coroner's findings are part of a larger system, says Cunningham.

Cunningham: The idea that you would have a newspaper account that purportedly is describing the event but draws on an official account released, or official statement at least, released by the mayor, but it really creates a curated version where we see the coroner, the police department, the mayor and the newspaper are entirely aligned there and doing the same sort of work, which again is filtering out counter narratives here that would bring in details that we would not hear from the police directly.

Greenberg: To Shedonna, this is apparent when looking at the details of the story in the *Ruston Daily Leader*.

Wilder-Martin: When he said that after my uncle asked him what was he doing, he walked up to the police car. Black man is not going to brazenly walk up to a police car at two in the morning in the South. No.

Greenberg: Judging from the Justice Department's summary of it, the FBI investigation appears to have been mainly a paper review of white Ruston's version of the killing, coupled with limited outreach to local officials and a few former police officers. Here are some essential steps it appears the FBI did not take.

Interviewing John Wilder's youngest sister. The FBI knew of her because she's mentioned in the Southern Poverty Law Center's file on the case, which they gave to me as well as to the FBI. The file even includes the sister's phone number.

Interviewing Emzie Wilder. Some newspapers from 1965 quoted Emzie saying that he heard a different version of what happened from Black witnesses. But the memo doesn't mention any outreach to him to learn who those witnesses were and what they told him.

Canvassing Ruston's Washington Heights neighborhood. The Ruston Police alleged in the *Ruston Daily Leader* that 150 Black bystanders were present during the shooting. Emzie Wilder alleged to other newspapers that there were reportedly only 10 to 15 bystanders. So with somewhere between 10 and 15 eyewitnesses, the memo doesn't mention efforts by the FBI to find out if any of them are still alive.

Outreach to Ruston's Black community. The Justice Department only mentions FBI outreach to white local officials and former police officers. There is no mention of outreach to any part of Ruston's Black community.

Wilder-Martin: So I don't understand why they didn't try to gain insight from the other side. They just took the one side, and I don't understand. I'd like to find out though.

Greenberg: Deitle cautions that the Notice to Close File is not a comprehensive record of investigation.

Deitle: Agents did a tremendous amount of work in these cases. The Notice to Close is never going to, it will never detail all the efforts that were taken. But for these cases, they were investigated. So whether I say that they were reinvestigated or reopened or under review, we investigated these cases on the list.

Greenberg: But Deitle could not confirm that agents spoke to Emzie Wilder.

Deitle: I really hope that we did talk to him back in 2008, 2009. I really hope that he was spoken to. If he wasn't, that's our fault. That's the FBI's fault. My fault.

Greenberg: The FBI has declined to comment on detailed questions that I sent regarding its investigation of the Wilder case, including whether agents sought out John Wilder's siblings or members of Ruston's Black community.

I wanted to understand what really happened in Ruston that July night in 1965. Researching from Boston, I didn't have a way to look for bystanders. But there was

a simple way to try to find out more about Emzie Wilder: I googled "Emzie" and "John Wesley Wilder." I only got a couple of results, but one of them was a listing of the legal files of Rabinowitz, Boudin, Standard, Krinsky & Lieberman held at an archive at NYU. In 1965, the New York City firm was just Rabinowitz and Boudin and was known for civil rights, civil liberties and labor litigation and for representing the likes of Paul Robeson, Julian Bond, Alger Hiss and many others. A quick find in page search for Emzie landed on an entry for a folder labeled "Wilder, Emzie re: shooting death of John Wesley Wilder by Ruston, Louisiana Police."

An archivist at the NYU Library confirmed they had the folder. And a few days later, 20 digitized pages of documents on the case arrived in my inbox. There were several pages of correspondence between lawyers from a New Orleans law firm and civil liberties lawyers from New York City; some 1965 news clippings about the killing—and sworn affidavits from six witnesses to the shooting.

Emzie Wilder: I got in touch with a guy, a NAACP member, and he, he carried me to New Orleans. And that's where we started, from there.

Greenberg: In New Orleans, Emzie met with lawyers from Smith, Waltzer, Jones & Peebles, which had served a year earlier on the legal support group for civil rights activists during Freedom Summer in Mississippi. The firm wanted to assist Emzie, but they had more civil rights cases than they could handle. So they enlisted help from Rabinowitz and Boudin in New York City. The document showed that from September through November, Emzie and a Black notary public named Leonard Roebuck gathered the affidavits to support a civil lawsuit presumably against the town of Ruston and/or specific officials. The witness statements tell an entirely different story than the one town officials told.

The witnesses are unanimous in saying that Wilder did not grab the barrel of Nugent's shotgun and did not punch Nugent as he alleged. Nor did any of them say they saw Wilder grab the blackjack, and they all said there was no physical contact that could've been interpreted by Nugent to be an attack from Wilder. One of the witnesses is still alive and confirmed their identity to me, but they would not agree to be interviewed. But another witness who did not give an affidavit in 1965 has come forward. 16 years old at the time, he says that he was there on Jones Street when Al Nugent shot Wes Wilder.

Bill Smith: My name is Bill Smith. I'm from Ruston and I live in Ruston. We are right in front of what used to be Tellis' barbershop and the Brown's taxi stand. And I was right here, leaning against this building. It was in front of Brown's taxi side, is where I was actually leaning. I was running around collecting me some nickels, dimes and quarters from these patrons. My mother's barbershop was right couple steps down the street and upstairs, so it was nothing strange for me to be hanging around out here.

Greenberg: We are standing across the street from what once was Averno Smith's cafe, where John Wilder was out drinking before he was killed. The building still stands on the corner of Jones and Vaughn in apparent disuse. It is a single-story rectangular hall, cinder block walls painted white, a padlocked red door on the narrow end of the building facing Jones Street. On each side of the red door is a large, boarded-up window. A hand-painted, white sign over the larger of the two windows on the left reads, "WARNING: NO LOITERING, NO DRUGS, NO

ALCOHOL ALLOWED." Black people in Ruston used to come here for burgers, hot dogs and chicken; to drink and dance; play pinball and shoot pool.

Smith: And the first police car came from east on Vaughn. Parked right up in front of the church.

Greenberg: The southern end of Jones Street comes to a T at West Vaughn Avenue. The historic New Hope Baptist Church, which is over 150 years old, sits on the south side of Vaughn overlooking Jones Street.

Smith: The next one came from Vaughn and parked right in front of the church. The third one came down Jones and stopped right in front of the barbershop. Before I knew anything, they got guns drawn, and Wes Wilder is coming out of that door of the building across the street. And he staggers as he comes toward the street. And staggered just like a drunk man, like he was, you know. And this officer was the one I saw shoot. Wes ended up leaning on the pole that's in the ground over there. The officer that came down Jones Street, he parked right in front of the place, and I was almost in direct line of him and shooting across the street. And after Wes leaned on the pole and fell, I took off around this corner and ran home to tell my mama that the police had shot Wes Wilder.

I never did find out what happened in the cafe that would cause the police to come. I ain't never heard nobody tell me that.

Greenberg: This is what happened according to the sworn statements of the six Black eyewitnesses.

John Wilder's cousin Billy Williams, who was there that night, is reportedly deceased. But he was one of the eyewitnesses, so his side of the story has survived.

Williams said that he and Wilder were walking from the cafe to Wilder's car "just talking as usual." Edward Nugent drove by and asked Wilder, "What did you say to me?" Wilder answered and said, "I didn't say anything." The officer repeated, "What did you say to me?" Wilder said, "I didn't say anything." Nugent stopped and got out of his car and asked Wilder and Williams to get into the squad car.

Pervis Clemmons was riding in a car with some friends heading south on Jones Street behind Nugent when he stopped. Nugent's car blocked the street, so they sat and waited, figuring Nugent would unblock it before long. Clemmons said Nugent asked Wilder and Williams their names, and they asked why. Nugent asked Wilder what was wrong with him, had he been drinking, and Wilder said "Yes, and I'm on my way home."

Jessie Combs was on foot coming around the curve from the washateria, right as Nugent was driving down Jones Street and approaching Wilder and Williams from the opposite direction. Combs said Nugent told Wilder that he was under arrest. Wilder asked, "For What?" and said that he had not done anything. According to Combs, Nugent then said, "N word, you are under arrest." Combs was the only witness among the six who reported hearing Nugent use the N word.

Williams said Nugent asked them their names, and the two cousins both stayed silent. Nugent ordered the two of them to stand with their hands up and let him

search them. Nugent only found a small knife on Wilder. Nugent asked their names again and this time they told him.

Their memories differed on whether it occurred before or after the search, but Williams, Clemmons and Combs all said that around this time, Nugent hit Wilder. Williams and another witness said that Nugent hit Wilder in the face with the blackjack. Combs asked Nugent if he could speak. He tried to vouch for Wilder, saying he was a good boy and he would go home if Nugent would give him a chance. According to Combs, Nugent said, "What's your name, N word?" Combs told him, and Nugent said to get back and stay out of it. Combs walked back to the cafe and was inside during the shooting itself. Williams and Clemmons both reported that after Nugent hit Wilder, someone from the crowd threw something that hit Nugent. Neither witness noted what the object was, and did not say whether it hurt Nugent.

Around this time, Nugent called another officer for backup, and Williams and Clemmons said Nugent took a shotgun out of his car. "Nugent came back to us with his shotgun," Williams said. "The officer swung toward the crowd, pointing his gun, and then aimed the gun back on me." Williams asked Nugent not to shoot. Nugent told the crowd to get back and, according to Williams, hit Wilder and then struck him again with the blackjack. Clemmons said that Nugent hit Wilder with the blackjack and then hit him on the head with the shotgun. Two other witnesses, Sammy Lee Drayton and Annie D. Jackson, both said Nugent struck Wilder with a gun.

Ruston police officer Lewis Cole arrived. Four of the witnesses, including Williams, said that Nugent threw his shotgun to the other officer. Williams heard Nugent say he didn't have to ask Wilder to get into the car anymore. Then Nugent shot Wilder five times.

Pervis Clemmons broke it down like this. Wilder appeared dizzy after Nugent hit him in the head with his gun. He stepped towards Nugent with his hands upward. Nugent fired a shot and then three other shots. Wilder caught hold of the post of a No Parking sign and tried to hold himself up. Nugent fired a final shot, and Wilder fell to the ground.

Two of the witnesses recalled that one of the officers ordered everybody back from John Wilder's body. "The officers did not call for an ambulance," Clemmons said. John Wilder's body laid there, he added, until another Black person, L.C. Robinson, called one.

Williams said that Nugent ordered him to remain at the scene. Nugent handcuffed Williams and put him into the police car. Williams heard the police chief, O. O. Osbon, ask Nugent what he had Williams for. Nugent replied, "Nothing." Williams said Nugent told him, "You just caused that boy to get killed there." Williams asked Nugent "why did he say that." "You shut up," Nugent said.

Pervis Clemmons went to the hospital, where he found one of John Wilder's three sisters asking about the incident. He said that Nugent was misrepresenting the events of the shooting to her. "I tried to correct the statement to the chief of police," Clemmons said, but no one seemed interested in pursuing it.

It was an act of courage for Emzie to gather the affidavits and pursue a lawsuit that pushed back against the official narrative of the killing. It must have been all

the more devastating in December of 1965 when John's widow, Farris Stringfellow Wilder, said she wouldn't go forward as the plaintiff in the lawsuit.

Emzie Wilder: Farris. She, after I done all that, she didn't, she didn't, she didn't agree with that. So I had to let that alone. Out of some time, I throw it away. I, I, I did all that for nothing. I didn't get nothing out of it.

ARCHIVAL, YouTube video.

Interviewer: *You were 1961?*

Edward Al Nugent: *1961 to 1981. That was my police career*

Interviewer: *In Shreveport or Ruston?*

Nugent: *Ruston.*

Interviewer: *Well, tell me your name.*

Nugent: *Nugent. Al Nugent.*

Greenberg: That's Edward "Al" Nugent recorded in a YouTube video in 2015. It's the same voice I've heard on his answering machine the eight or more times I've called him. Nugent hasn't picked up any of my calls, so I've gotten to know his outgoing answering machine message.

ARCHIVAL, Al Nugent answering machine.

Nugent: *This is Al. I'm sure that there's a good reason that I didn't answer your call. If you care to leave me a message, I'll get back to you as soon as possible. By the way, I hope that you have a great day today and even a better one tomorrow.*

Greenberg: I've been leaving messages after the beep since November 2022.

ARCHIVAL, Ben Greenberg phone message.

Hello, this is Ben Greenberg, and I'm calling for Mr. Nugent. I'm a journalist from Boston.

On one of my most recent visits to Ruston in April, I started including the reason for my call.

ARCHIVAL, Ben Greenberg phone message.

Hello, Mr. Nugent. This is Ben Greenberg, just giving you another try. I'm a journalist from Boston, and I would like to speak to you about John Wesley Wilder.

Nugent didn't return that call, either, so I drove by his house at the dead end of a two-block street on the north side of town near the Louisiana Tech campus. The brown and tan brick ranch house is set far back from the street. I parked up on the shoulder, got out and walked 20 or 30 yards down Nugent's long driveway. I rang the bell, waited a few minutes, rang the bell again, waited some more.

At the end of May, I sent Nugent a letter by FedEx and email, detailing what I would be reporting in this podcast, and called him twice to follow up. He has not responded to the letter or phone calls.

Cynthia Deitle says it sounds to her like I have enough evidence to prompt the Justice Department to reopen the case.

Deitle: You have, you have someone that you have found, and assuming the FBI has never interviewed that person before, that's a, that's a person that is saying, I was there. I have a credible account of what happened. And the FBI should pursue that in my view.

Just because the case was closed doesn't mean it can't be reopened. If there's more evidence that can be brought forth to reopening investigation, I would hope that in this case, the FBI would reach out and see what more can be done. I don't know, a violation of federal law is still viable at this time because of the statute of limitations. But it seems that I think what the FBI and the Department of Justice would be doing would be to assist state or local investigators in Louisiana to see if a murder or manslaughter charge could be pursued at this time.

Greenberg: The eyewitness Bill Smith was there ready to be found by the FBI in 2008. And 15 years ago, more people were alive who could have immensely increased the FBI's odds of building a case that could be referred to the district attorney for Louisiana's third judicial district.

There was Jack Peebles, one of the New Orleans attorneys who was directly involved in the case. He died in 2015 at age 80. Leonard Roebuck, who notarized the affidavits and assisted Emzie Wilder in gathering them, died in 2016 at age 92. Farris Stringfellow Wilder, John Wilder's widow, died in 2015 at age 90. Their daughter, Jeannene Wilder, died in 2014 at age 52. Sammy Lee Drayton, who gave a sworn statement in 1965, died in 2015 at age 75. There were reportedly also a number of other NAACP members from the time who were alive. And with all the bystanders from the Black neighborhood who were at or near the scene of the shooting, there are more than likely additional witnesses who are still alive in 2008 who are no longer alive today.

Though Emzie Wilder is still alive at 92 years old, he was diagnosed with dementia in 2020 when he was hospitalized with COVID. He remembers a lot about the events in 1965, but his memories are fading. But in 2008, Emzie Wilder, Jack Peebles and Leonard Roebuck together might've reconstructed the entire case they'd built in 1965.

The Justice Department has declined to comment on detailed questions regarding the new evidence in the Wilder case except to say that it has reopened other Till Act cases in the past. The department spokesperson declined to say which ones or how many. District Attorney John Belton, who could potentially prosecute the case if it were reopened, answered some preliminary questions about the Wilder case in a phone call but has not responded to written follow-up questions. The current Ruston police chief, Steve Rogers, said that he has "nothing to comment at this time" after I sent him detailed questions about the case.

Emzie Wilder, Jack Peebles and Leonard Roebuck were at the heart of the Black community's fight for justice for John Wesley Wilder and his family. The story that

they could've told has implications beyond what the FBI might have done with just a little more effort 15 years ago. Wilder, Peebles and Roebuck were keepers of a story of resistance that still has the potential today to transform the meaning of John Wilder's death.

[Karlos K. Hill](#) says that remembering that story could be the key that unlocks a community reparations process.

Karlos K. Hill: When we say reparations, I think setting the record straight, right, in a way that honors the lives of those victims, survivors and descendants is, is, is a really, really crucial element in any reparations program.

Greenberg: But when Black Ruston could no longer fight the dominant narrative of how Edward Nugent killed John Wilder, the story became only a painful memory.

Hill: So this is a painful, traumatic memory that cast John Wilder as someone who is wantonly criminal. And the officer Edward Nugent is cast as just doing his job, and his last resort was to take the life of John Wilder. As the newspaper reports, the *Ruston Daily Leader* reported, gave Officer Nugent no other choice but to shoot him five times and kill him.

And so the weight of that lie being the official story and the ways in which there is truly no story of the community and/or others being able to affect change or justice. This becomes a painful memory, a traumatic memory that the family does not bring up at family reunions, does not want to bring up, because why? What is that story going to do in the present? And so that's when the story, I think, becomes buried.

Greenberg: And this is what Bill Smith saw happen for the wider Black community in Ruston.

Smith: When Wes got killed, I don't know, I think it did a lot to the whole community, you know, because nobody was really talking or knowing why it happened. I guess the case is only as strong as the witnesses. And when witnesses are not approached by investigators and what have you, then a lot of things get lost between there and the actual crime.

It's not good. You know, people, a lot of people have tried hard to put that behind them, and I think the one thing you will hear more than anything is, yeah, I heard about that. But I've tried to put that behind me and go on and build a life for myself or my kids, you know, and therefore you never really get to the bottom of what happened.

Hill: When the past ceased to be usable, we become silent around it. And especially when we're talking about histories of terrorism, right, and police brutality. We always searching for ways to make the past usable in service of something. And when people feel like it can be only in service of their trauma, we don't talk about it. When it can tell a story of resistance, we can tell a story of empowerment through the violence, through the trauma, those become usable pasts.

Greenberg: Hill sees correcting the record as a starting point for reparations in Ruston.

Hill: We really need to restore the memory and the honor of John Wilder. Like setting the record straight is so critical here, right, because if the headline, like the headline for the story right now is "Death Ruled Justifiable." That headline needs

to be changed to "unjustly killed." Like that needs to be the headline today. Unjustly killed.

And if that becomes the new headline, I think then the community could be mobilized in ways that they cannot be mobilized right now, if that's the narrative. And again, who is John Wilder? John Wilder, who was unjustly killed? That's, that's going to resonate differently in an era of Black Lives Matter, in an era where we know police have done wrong and are currently doing... That's going to register very differently.

Greenberg: The Justice Department and FBI have said from the start that setting the record straight is as much the point as prosecutions. Back in 2012, an FBI spokesperson put it to me like this. Quote, "The goal of the Cold Case Initiative is about much more than justice through the courtroom. It is also about telling the truth to victim families and hopefully bringing about some closure. Where prosecution is not possible, the families of these victims deserve to know what happened to their loved one."

Smith: Al Nugent was the police officer I saw fire the gun that killed Wes Wilder. John Wesley Wilder.

I think that there should be some reckoning, you know, if there's enough evidence that can be produced to show that this was not just in the line of duty, but this was an overbearing thing from the police officer. And it should be dealt with accordingly.

Greenberg: But Smith also wants accountability for those who kept the justice system from serving John Wilder's family and community.

Smith: The system is only as good as we make the system. So if somebody produces evidence that's not contained in something in 1965 or something in 1965 that never got to the courts or to the investigators or anything, then I think some things should happen to those people. You know, they contributed to it.

Greenberg: Emzie is no longer interested in criminal proceedings or in a settlement, but it has been comforting to him to talk about it and for the truth to come out.

Emzie Wilder: I really appreciate you coming back, I mean, you know, and reminding of it. So, I mean, I feel better over it, you know, I just do, after somebody knows what happened.

Greenberg: Shedonna is ambivalent about pursuing charges against Nugent, but she wants Nugent to come clean about what really happened.

Wilder-Martin: I would like to hear from him the actual truth, if he has any ounce of decency. I would like to hear him just say the truth. What actually happened? Are you remorseful at all? I don't think that would matter if he said that or not. I just want to hear him say the truth.

Pamela Kirkland: This podcast is meant to be enjoyed in an order that makes the most sense for our listeners. Choose your reparations journey and keep the conversation going. For more information, all episodes and transcripts, visit stillpayingthepricepod.com.

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