

Fannie Lou Hamer

1917-1977

Edited by Debra Michals, Ph.D. | 2017



Fannie Lou Townsend Hamer rose from humble beginnings in the Mississippi Delta to become one of the most important, passionate, and powerful voices of the civil and voting rights movements and a leader in the efforts for greater economic opportunities for African Americans.

Hamer was born on October 6, 1917 in Montgomery County, Mississippi, the twentieth and last child of sharecroppers Lou Ella and James Townsend. She grew up in poverty, and at age six Hamer joined her family picking cotton. By age 12, she left school to work. In 1944, she married Perry Hamer and the couple toiled on the Mississippi plantation owned by B.D. Marlowe until 1962. Because Hamer was the only worker who could read and write, she also served as plantation timekeeper.

In 1961, Hamer received a hysterectomy by a white doctor without her consent while undergoing surgery to remove a uterine tumor. Such forced sterilization of Black women, as a way to reduce the

Black population, was so widespread it was dubbed a “Mississippi appendectomy.” Unable to have children of their own, the Hamers adopted two daughters.

That summer, Hamer attended a meeting led by civil rights activists James Forman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and James Bevel of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Hamer was incensed by efforts to deny Blacks the right to vote. She became a SNCC organizer and on August 31, 1962 led 17 volunteers to register to vote at the Indianola, Mississippi Courthouse. Denied the right to vote due to an unfair literacy test, the group was harassed on their way home, when police stopped their bus and fined them \$100 for the trumped-up charge that the bus was too yellow. That night, Marlow fired Hamer for her attempt to vote; her husband was required to stay until the harvest. Marlow confiscated much of their property. The Hamers moved to Ruleville, Mississippi in Sunflower County with very little.

In June 1963, after successfully completing a voter registration program in Charleston, South Carolina, Hamer and several other Black women were arrested for sitting in a “whites-only” bus station restaurant in Winona, Mississippi. At the Winona jailhouse, she and several of the women were brutally beaten, leaving Hamer with lifelong injuries from a blood clot in her eye, kidney damage, and leg damage.

In 1964, Hamer’s national reputation soared as she co-founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), which challenged the local Democratic Party’s efforts to block Black participation. Hamer and other MFDP members went to the Democratic National Convention that year, arguing to be recognized as the official delegation. When Hamer spoke before the Credentials Committee, calling for mandatory integrated state delegations, President Lyndon Johnson held a televised press conference so she would not get any television airtime. But her speech, with its poignant descriptions of racial prejudice in the South, was televised later. By 1968, Hamer’s vision for racial parity in delegations had become a

reality and Hamer was a member of Mississippi's first integrated delegation.

In 1964 Hamer helped organize Freedom Summer, which brought hundreds of college students, Black and white, to help with African American voter registration in the segregated South. In 1964, she announced her candidacy for the Mississippi House of Representatives but was barred from the ballot. A year later, Hamer, Victoria Gray, and Annie Devine became the first Black women to stand in the U.S. Congress when they unsuccessfully protested the Mississippi House election of 1964. She also traveled extensively, giving powerful speeches on behalf of civil rights. In 1971, Hamer helped to found the National Women's Political Caucus.

Frustrated by the political process, Hamer turned to economics as a strategy for greater racial equality. In 1968, she began a "pig bank" to provide free pigs for Black farmers to breed, raise, and slaughter. A year later she launched the Freedom Farm Cooperative (FFC), buying up land that Blacks could own and farm collectively. With the assistance of donors (including famed singer Harry Belafonte), she purchased 640 acres and launched a coop store, boutique, and sewing enterprise. She single-handedly ensured that 200 units of low-income housing were built—many still exist in Ruleville today. The FFC lasted until the mid-1970s; at its heyday, it was among the largest employers in Sunflower County. Extensive travel and fundraising took Hamer away from the day-to-day operations, as did her failing health, and the FFC hobbled along until folding. Not long after, in 1977, Hamer died of breast cancer at age 59.

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