

FANNIE LOU HAMER

Written by: Julian Hipkins, III | Theodore Roosevelt High School | Washington, D.C.

BASIC BIOGRAPHY

Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977) was born Fannie Lou Townsend on October 6, 1917, in Montgomery County, Mississippi. She later moved to Sunflower County where she began sharecropping at the age of six. She married Perry Hamer in 1944 and moved to a plantation in Ruleville, Mississippi. Due to her eighth grade education, she was asked by the plantation owner to serve as the timekeeper, which she did for 18 years. Hamer traveled, unsuccessfully, to Indianola to attempt to vote in 1962. Upon returning to the plantation, she lost her job, forcing her family to find somewhere else to live and work. In 1963, Hamer was named field secretary of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). That fall, while traveling back from a training session, she was arrested and brutally beaten in jail. Through her tireless efforts, Hamer was appointed vice-chair of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The following year, the 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed. This pivotal legislation would not have been possible were it not for the efforts of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

KEY EVENTS

1964 Democratic National Convention, Voting Rights Act (1965)

KEY PEOPLE

Ella Baker, Bob Moses, Lyndon B. Johnson

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

African Americans, despite Constitutional amendments were often barred from voting by literacy tests and violence. African Americans needed the vote because they were denied basic rights in the courts, employment, and schools. Since they were not allowed to vote, elected politicians did not cater to the needs of African Americans or poor whites. This lack of political representation and voter intimidation led to the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The mission of the MFDP was to gain political power and have a voice in local and national decisions that affected the daily lives of black people. Fannie Lou Hamer was elected its chairperson in 1964. The group traveled to the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in August. During the Credentials Committee hearing, Hamer stated “If the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now I question America...Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?”



Warren K. Leffler, Fannie Lou Hamer, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegate, at the Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 22, 1964, Library of Congress (LC-U9- 12470B-17), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003688126/>

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

- Make and distribute one copy of the article, “ ‘Tired of Being Sick and Tired,’ ” for each student.
- Ask students to read the article and engage in the “Sentence, Phrase, Word” thinking routine:
 - » Record a sentence that was meaningful to you and helped you gain a deeper understanding of the text.
 - » Record a phrase that moved, engaged, or provoked you.
 - » Record a word that captured your attention or struck you as powerful.

Teacher Tip: Learn more about this reading strategy here: <http://www.rcsthinkfromthemiddle.com/sentence-phrase-word.html>.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

- Divide students into groups of three or four students each.
- Ask students to create an artistic representation that simulates the reading. Students may choose to create a piece of art (drawing, cut outs, collage), write a song, or perform a dramatic piece.

FUN FACT

El-Hajj Malik El Shabazz (Malcolm X) introduced Fannie Lou Hamer at the Williams Institutional CME Church in Harlem, New York on December 20, 1964. Even though Fannie Lou Hamer was part of SNCC, which is often associated with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., she was motivated to hear multiple perspectives to solving the problem of racial injustice in the United States. You can find audio of Malcolm X's speech in the audio book *Malcolm X Speaks*, edited by George Breiman. Read Fannie Lou Hamer's speech here: <http://www.crmvet.org/docs/flh64.htm>.

LOCAL CONNECTION

You can visit the Fannie Lou Hamer Civil Rights Museum in Belzoni, Mississippi. To learn more, go to: <https://www.thefannielouhamercivilrightsmuseum.com/>.

LEARN MORE

PRIMARY SOURCES

Civil Rights Movement Veterans (CRMVet)
Tougaloo College
<http://www.crmvet.org/>

Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive
Historical Manuscripts and Photographs Digital Collection,
University of Southern Mississippi
<http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/manu>

Freedom Summer Digital Collection
Wisconsin Historical Society
<http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15932coll2>

SECONDARY SOURCES

Fannie Lou Hamer
SNCC Digital Gateway
<https://snccdigital.org/people/fannie-lou-hamer/>

Julian Hipkins III and Deborah Menkart, "Is This America?: 50 Years Ago Sharecroppers Challenged Mississippi Apartheid, LBJ, and the Nation," August 17, 2014
Zinn Education Project
<https://zinnedproject.org/2014/08/sharecroppers-challenged-mississippi-apartheid-lbj-and-the-nation/>

Kay Mills, "Fannie Lou Hamer: Civil Rights Activist," April 2007
Mississippi HistoryNow
<http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/51/fannie-lou-hamer-civil-rights-activist>

THE NATION

June 1, 1964

'Tired of Being Sick and Tired' . . . Jerry DeMuth

About 20 feet back from a narrow dirt road just off the state highway that cuts through Ruleville, Miss., is a small, three-room, white frame house with a screened porch. A large pecan tree grows in the front yard and two smaller ones grow out back. Butter bean and okra plants are filling out in the gardens on the lots on either side of the house. Lafayette Street is as quiet as the rest of Ruleville, a town of less than 2,000 located in Sunflower County, 30 miles from the Mississippi River. Sunflower County, home of Senator Eastland and 68 per cent Negro, is one of twenty-four counties in the northwestern quarter of the state—the Delta—that make up the Second Congressional District. Since 1941, this district has been represented in Congress by Jamie Whitten, chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, who is now seeking his thirteenth term.

From the house on the dirt road there now comes a person to challenge Jamie Whitten: Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer. Mrs. Hamer is a Negro and only 6,616 Negroes (or 4.14 per cent of voting-age Negroes) were registered to vote in the Second Congressional District in 1960. But in 1962, when Whitten was elected for the twelfth time, only 31,345 persons cast votes, although in 1960 there were more than 300,000 persons of voting age in the district, 59 per cent of them Negro. Mrs. Hamer's bid is sponsored by the Council of Federated Organizations, a Mississippi coalition of local and national civil rights organizations.

Until Mississippi stops its discriminatory voting practices, Mrs. Hamer's chance of election is slight, but she is waking up the citizens of her district. "I'm showing people that a Negro can run for office," she explains. Her deep, powerful voice shakes the air as she sits on the porch or inside, talking to friends, relatives and neighbors who drop by on the one day each week when she is not out campaigning. Whatever she is talking about soon becomes an impassioned plea for a change in the system that exploits the Delta Negroes. "All my life I've been sick and tired," she shakes her head. "Now I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Mrs. Hamer was born October 6, 1917, in Montgomery County, the twentieth child in a family of six girls and fourteen boys. When she was 2 her family moved to Sunflower County, 60 miles to the west.

The family would pick fifty-sixty bales of cotton a year, so my father decided to rent some land. He bought some mules and a cultivator. We were doin' pretty well. He even started to fix up the house real nice and had bought a car. Then our stock got poisoned. We knowed this white man had done it. He stirred up a gallon of Paris green with the feed. When we got out there, one mule was already dead. T'other two mules and the cow had their stomachs all swelled up. It was too late to save 'em. That poison knocked us right back down flat. We never did get back up again. That white man did it just because we were gettin' somewhere. White people never like to see Negroes get a little success. All of this stuff is no secret in the state of Mississippi.

Mrs. Hamer pulled her feet under the worn, straight-backed chair she was sitting in. The linoleum under her feet was worn through to an-



Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer

other layer of linoleum. Floor boards showed in spots. She folded her large hands on her lap and shifted her weight in the chair. She's a large and heavy woman, but large and heavy with a power to back up her determination.

We went back to sharecroppin', hahlin', it's called. You split the cotton half and half with the plantation owner. But the seed, fertilizer, cost of hired hands, everything is paid out of the cropper's half.

Later, I dropped out of school. I cut corn stalks to help the family. My parents were gettin' up in age — they weren't young when I was born. I was the twentieth child — and my mother had a bad eye. She was cleanin' up the owner's yard for a quarter when somethin' flew up and hit her in the eye.

So many times for dinner we would have greens with no seasonin', . . . and flour gravy. My mother would mix flour with a little grease and try to make gravy out of it. Sometimes she'd cook a little meal and we'd have bread.

No one can honestly say Negroes are satisfied. We've only been patient, but how much more patience can we have?

Fannie Lou and Perry Hamer have two daughters, 10 and 19, both of whom they adopted. The Hamers adopted the older girl when she was born to give her a home, her mother being unmarried. "I've always been concerned with any human being," Mrs. Hamer explains. The younger girl was given to her at the age of 5 months. She had been burned badly when a tub of boiling water spilled, and her large, impoverished family was not able to care for her. "We had a little money so we took care of her and raised her. She was sickly too when I got her, suffered from malnutrition. Then she got run over by a car and her leg was

broken. So she's only in fourth grade now."

The older girl left school after the tenth grade to begin working. Several months ago when she tried to get a job, the employer commented, "You certainly talk like Fannie Lou." When the girl replied, "She raised me," she was denied the job. She has a job now, but Mrs. Hamer explains, "They don't know she's my child."

The intimidation that Mrs. Hamer's older girl faces is what Mrs. Hamer has faced since August 31, 1962. On that day she and seventeen others went down to the county courthouse in Indianola to try to register to vote. From the moment they arrived, police wandered around their bus, keeping an eye on the eighteen. "I wonder what they'll do," the bus driver said to Mrs. Hamer. Halfway back to Ruleville, the police stopped the bus and ordered it back to Indianola. There they were all arrested. The bus was painted the wrong color, the police told them.

After being bonded out, Mrs. Hamer returned to the plantation where the Hamers had lived for eighteen years.

My oldest girl met me and told me that Mr. Marlowe, the plantation owner, was mad and raisin' Cain. He had heard that I had tried to register. That night he called on us and said, "We're not ready for that in Mississippi now. If you don't withdraw, I'll let you go." I left that night but "Pap" — that's what I call my husband — had to stay on till work on the plantation was through.

In the spring of last year, Mr. Hamer got a job at a Ruleville cotton gin. But this year, though others are working there already, they haven't taken him back.

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