

## **Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977)**

### **Testimony Before the Credentials Committee, Democratic National Convention**

**Atlantic City, New Jersey - August 22, 1964**

Fannie Lou Hamer's life took a dramatic turn the day she showed up for a mass meeting to learn about voting. It was August 1962 and Hamer, who was forty-four years old, wasn't even sure what a "mass meeting" was. "I was just curious to go, so I did," she said.<sup>1</sup> The meeting was organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Hamer was told something she'd never heard before: black people had the right to vote.

One of twenty children born to a family of sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta, Hamer grew up picking cotton and cutting corn and attended school through the sixth grade. She married a fellow sharecropper and the two scratched out a living doing hard, menial work on a plantation near Ruleville, Mississippi.

According to biographer Sina Dubovoy, when Hamer heard SNCC's presentation, she asked herself, "What did she really have? Not even security." A lynching in a nearby town in 1904 had terrorized blacks then, and the ever-present KKK still kept them quiet. As Dubovoy notes, "The Mississippi Delta was the world's most oppressive place to live if you were black."<sup>2</sup> Hamer decided on the spot to register to vote. On August 31, 1962, she boarded a bus to Indianola with seventeen others to try to register to vote. The next day she was kicked off the plantation where she had lived and worked for eighteen years. Her husband lost his job, too.

Hamer immediately went to work as a field organizer for SNCC. Returning home from a training workshop in June 1963, Hamer's bus was intercepted by policemen. She and two others were taken to jail in Winona, Mississippi, and mercilessly beaten. Hamer suffered permanent damage to her kidneys. After recovering from her injuries, she traveled across the U.S. telling her story. With her genuine, plainspoken style, Hamer raised more money for SNCC than any other member.

In 1964, with the support of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), Hamer ran for Congress. The incumbent was a white man who had been elected to office twelve times. In an interview with the Nation, Hamer said, "I'm showing the people that a Negro can run for office." The reporter observed: "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 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.'"<sup>3</sup>



SNCC had formed the MFDP to expand black voter registration and challenge the legitimacy of the state's all-white Democratic Party. MFDP members arrived at the 1964 Democratic National Convention intent on unseating the official Mississippi delegation or, failing that, getting seated with them. On August 22, 1964, Hamer appeared before the convention's credentials committee and told her story about trying to register to vote in Mississippi. Threatened by the MFDP's presence at the convention, President Lyndon Johnson quickly preempted Hamer's televised testimony with an impromptu press conference. But later that night, Hamer's story was broadcast on all the major networks.

Support came pouring in for the MFDP from across the nation.<sup>4</sup> But the MFDP's bid to win a seat at the Atlantic City convention still failed. At the Democratic National Convention in Chicago four years later the MFDP succeeded. On that occasion, Dubovoy recounts, "Hamer received a thunderous standing ovation when she became the first African American to take her rightful seat as an official delegate at a national-party convention since the Reconstruction period after the Civil War, and the first woman ever from Mississippi."<sup>5</sup>

### [Listen to the speech](#)

Mr. Chairman, and to the Credentials Committee, my name is Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, and I live at 626 East Lafayette Street, Ruleville, Mississippi, Sunflower County, the home of Senator James O. Eastland, and Senator Stennis.

It was the 31st of August in 1962 that eighteen of us traveled twenty-six miles to the county courthouse in Indianola to try to register to become first-class citizens.

We was met in Indianola by policemen, Highway Patrolmen, and they only allowed two of us in to take the literacy test at the time. After we had taken this test and started back to Ruleville, we was held up by the City Police and the State Highway Patrolmen and carried back to Indianola where the bus driver was charged that day with driving a bus the wrong color.

After we paid the fine among us, we continued on to Ruleville, and Reverend Jeff Sunny carried me four miles in the rural area where I had worked as a timekeeper and sharecropper for eighteen years. I was met there by my children, who told me that the plantation owner was angry because I had gone down to try to register.

After they told me, my husband came, and said the plantation owner was raising Cain because I had tried to register. Before he quit talking the plantation owner came and said, "Fannie Lou, do you know - did Pap tell you what I said?"

And I said, "Yes, sir."



He said, "Well I mean that." He said, "If you don't go down and withdraw your registration, you will have to leave." Said, "Then if you go down and withdraw," said, "you still might have to go because we are not ready for that in Mississippi."

And I addressed him and told him and said, "I didn't try to register for you. I tried to register for myself."

I had to leave that same night.

On the 10th of September 1962, sixteen bullets was fired into the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Tucker for me. That same night two girls were shot in Ruleville, Mississippi. Also Mr. Joe McDonald's house was shot in.

And June the 9th, 1963, I had attended a voter registration workshop; was returning back to Mississippi. Ten of us was traveling by the Continental Trailway bus. When we got to Winona, Mississippi, which is Montgomery County, four of the people got off to use the washroom, and two of the people - to use the restaurant - two of the people wanted to use the washroom.

The four people that had gone in to use the restaurant was ordered out. During this time I was on the bus. But when I looked through the window and saw they had rushed out I got off of the bus to see what had happened. And one of the ladies said, "It was a State Highway Patrolman and a Chief of Police ordered us out."

I got back on the bus and one of the persons had used the washroom got back on the bus, too.

As soon as I was seated on the bus, I saw when they began to get the five people in a highway patrolman's car. I stepped off of the bus to see what was happening and somebody screamed from the car that the five workers was in and said, "Get that one there." When I went to get in the car, when the man told me I was under arrest, he kicked me.

I was carried to the county jail and put in the booking room. They left some of the people in the booking room and began to place us in cells. I was placed in a cell with a young woman called Miss Ivesta Simpson. After I was placed in the cell I began to hear sounds of licks and screams, I could hear the sounds of licks and horrible screams. And I could hear somebody say, "Can you say, 'yes, sir,' nigger? Can you say 'yes, sir'?"

And they would say other horrible names.

She would say, "Yes, I can say 'yes, sir.'"

"So, well, say it."

She said, "I don't know you well enough."



They beat her, I don't know how long. And after a while she began to pray, and asked God to have mercy on those people.

And it wasn't too long before three white men came to my cell. One of these men was a State Highway Patrolman and he asked me where I was from. I told him Ruleville and he said, "We are going to check this."

They left my cell and it wasn't too long before they came back. He said, "You are from Ruleville all right," and he used a curse word. And he said, "We are going to make you wish you was dead."

I was carried out of that cell into another cell where they had two Negro prisoners. The State Highway Patrolmen ordered the first Negro to take the blackjack.

The first Negro prisoner ordered me, by orders from the State Highway Patrolman, for me to lay down on a bunk bed on my face.

I laid on my face and the first Negro began to beat. I was beat by the first Negro until he was exhausted. I was holding my hands behind me at that time on my left side, because I suffered from polio when I was six years old.

After the first Negro had beat until he was exhausted, the State Highway Patrolman ordered the second Negro to take the blackjack.

The second Negro began to beat and I began to work my feet, and the State Highway Patrolman ordered the first Negro who had beat me to sit on my feet - to keep me from working my feet. I began to scream and one white man got up and began to beat me in my head and tell me to hush.

One white man - my dress had worked up high - he walked over and pulled my dress - I pulled my dress down and he pulled my dress back up.

I was in jail when Medgar Evers was murdered.

All of this is on account of we want to register, to become first-class citizens. And 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?

Thank you.

1. Sina Dubovoy, *Civil Rights Leaders: American Profiles* (New York: Facts on File Books, 1997), 101.
2. *Ibid.*, 101-12.

3. Jerry DeMuth, "Tired of Being Sick and Tired," *Nation*, 1 June 1964. Reprinted in *Reporting Civil Rights: Part II: American Journalism 1963-1973* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 99-106.
4. Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 124-25.
5. Dubovoy, *Civil Rights Leaders*, 108.