

FANNIE LOU HAMER

1917-1977



"I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Born October 6, 1917, in Montgomery County, Mississippi, Fannie Lou Hamer was the granddaughter of a slave and the youngest of 20 children. Her parents were sharecroppers. Sharecropping, or "halfing," as it is sometimes called, is a system of farming whereby workers are allowed to live on a plantation in return for working the land. When the crop is harvested, they split the profits in half with the plantation owner. Sometimes the owner pays for the seed and fertilizer, but usually the sharecropper pays those expenses out of his half. It's a hard way to make a living and sharecroppers generally are born poor, live poor, and die poor.

At age six, Fannie Lou began helping her parents in the cotton fields. By the time she was twelve, she was forced to drop out of school and work full time to help support her family. Once grown, she married another sharecropper named Perry "Pap" Hamer.

On August 31, 1962, Mrs. Hamer decided she had had enough of sharecropping. Leaving her house in Ruleville, MS she and 17 others took a bus to the courthouse in Indianola, the county seat, to register to vote. On their return home, police stopped their bus. They were told that their bus was the wrong color. Fannie Lou and the others were arrested and jailed.

After being released from jail, the plantation owner paid the Hamer's a visit and told Fannie Lou that if she insisted on voting, she would have to get off his land - even though she had been there for eighteen years. She left the plantation that same day. Ten days later, night riders fired 16 bullets into the home of the family with whom she had gone to stay.

Mrs. Hamer began working on welfare and voter registration programs for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

On June 3, 1963, Fannie Lou Hamer and other civil rights workers arrived in Winona, MS by bus. They were ordered off the bus and taken to Montgomery County Jail. The story continues "...Then three white men came into my room. One was a state highway policeman (he had the marking on his sleeve)... They said they were going to make me wish I was dead. They made me lay down on my face and they ordered two Negro prisoners to beat me with a blackjack. That was unbearable. The first prisoner beat me until he was exhausted, then the second Negro began to beat me. I had polio when I was about six years old. I was limp. I was holding my hands behind me to protect my weak side. I began to work my feet. My dress pulled up and I tried to smooth it down. One of the policemen walked over and raised my dress as high as he could. They beat me until my body was hard, 'til I couldn't bend my fingers or get up when they told me to. That's how I got this blood clot in my eye - the sight's nearly gone now. My kidney was injured from the blows they gave me on the back."

Mrs. Hamer was left in the cell, bleeding and battered, listening to the screams of Ann Powder, a fellow civil rights worker, who was also undergoing a severe beating in another cell. She overheard white policemen talking about throwing their bodies into the Big Black River where they would never be found.

In 1964, presidential elections were being held. In an effort to focus greater national attention on voting discrimination, civil rights groups created the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). This new party sent a delegation, which included Fannie Lou Hamer, to Atlantic City, where the Democratic Party was holding its presidential convention. Its purpose was to challenge the all-white Mississippi delegation on the grounds that it didn't fairly represent all the people of Mississippi, since most black people hadn't been allowed to vote.

Fannie Lou Hamer spoke to the Credentials Committee of the convention about the injustices that allowed an all-white delegation to be seated from the state of Mississippi. Although her live testimony was pre-empted by a presidential press conference, the national networks aired her testimony, in its entirety, later in the evening. Now all of America heard of the struggle in Mississippi's delta.

A compromise was reached that gave voting and speaking rights to two delegates from the MFDP and seated the others as honored guests. The Democrats agreed that in the future no delegation would be seated from a state where anyone was illegally denied the vote. A year later, President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act.

Prior to her death in 1977, Fannie Lou Hamer was inducted into Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, as an honorary member.