Fannie Lou Hamer

Fannie Lou Hamer (/ˈheɪmər/; née **Townsend**; October 6, 1917 – March 14, 1977) was an American voting and women's rights activist, community organizer, and a leader in the civil rights movement. She was the co-founder and vice-chair of the Freedom Democratic Party, which she represented at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. Hamer also organized Mississippi's Freedom Summer along with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). She was also a co-founder of the National Women's Political Caucus, an organization created to recruit, train, and support women of all races who wish to seek election to government office.[1]

Hamer began civil rights activism in 1962, continuing until her health declined nine years later. She was known for her use of spiritual hymnals and quotes and her resilience in leading the civil rights movement for black women in Mississippi. She was extorted, threatened, harassed, shot at, and assaulted by white supremacists and police while trying to register for and exercise her right to vote. She later helped and encouraged thousands of African-Americans in Mississippi to become registered voters, and helped hundreds of disenfranchised people in her area through her work in programs like the Freedom Farm Cooperative. She unsuccessfully ran for the U.S. Senate in 1964 and the Mississippi State Senate in 1971. In 1970 she led legal action against the government of Sunflower County, Mississippi, for continued illegal segregation.

Hamer died on March 14, 1977, aged 59, in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Her memorial service was widely attended and her eulogy was delivered by U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Andrew Young.[2] She was posthumously inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1993.

Fannie Lou Hamer

Hamer in 1964

Born	Fannie Lou Townsend October 6, 1917 Montgomery County, Mississippi, U.S.
Died	March 14, 1977 (aged 59) Mound Bayou, Mississippi, U.S.
Burial place	Ruleville, Mississippi, U.S.
Organization	National Women's Political Caucus Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee National Council of Negro Women
Known for	Civil rights leader
Title	Vice chairwoman of Freedom Democratic Party; Co-founder of National Women's Political Caucus

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Movement	Civil rights movement Women's rights
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Early life, family, and education

Fannie Lou Townsend was born on October 6, 1917, in Montgomery County, Mississippi, the last of the 20 children of Ella and James Lee Townsend.[3] After some of their animal stock was mysteriously poisoned, Hamer suspected a local white supremacist had done it; she said of this incident: "our stock got poisoned. We knowed [*sic*] this white man had done it .... 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."[4] In 1919 the Townsends moved to Sunflower County, Mississippi to work as sharecroppers on W. D. Marlow's plantation.[5] From age six she picked cotton with her family. During the winters of 1924 through 1930 she attended the one-room school provided for the sharecroppers' children, open between picking seasons. She loved reading and excelled in spelling bees and reciting poetry, but at age 12 she had to leave school to help support her aging parents.[6][7][4] By age 13 she could pick 200–300 pounds (90 to 140 kg) of cotton daily, despite having a leg disfigured by polio.[8][9][10]

Fannie continued to develop her reading and interpretation skills in Bible study at her church;[6] in later years Lawrence Guyot admired her ability to connect "the biblical exhortations for liberation and [the struggle for civil rights] any time that she wanted to and move in and out to any frames of reference."[11] In 1944, after the plantation owner discovered that she was literate, she was selected as its time and record keeper.[12] The following year she married Perry "Pap" Hamer, a tractor driver on the Marlow plantation, and they remained there for the next 18 years.[5]

> 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.
>
> —- Fannie Lou Hamer[4]

The Hamers later raised two girls, whom they decided to adopt.[3] One of the girls died of internal hemorrhaging after she was denied admission to the local hospital on account of her mother's activism.[4][13]

Hamer became interested in the civil rights movement in the 1950s.[14] She heard leaders in the local movement speak at annual Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL) conferences, held in Mound Bayou, Mississippi.[14] The annual conferences discussed black voting rights and other civil rights issues black communities in the area faced.[12]

Civil rights activism

White supremacist attacks

In 1962, Hamer first learned about the constitutional right to vote from volunteers at the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee who had visited her in Mound Bayou. She began to take direct political action in the civil rights movement. On August 31, she traveled with other activists to Indianola, Mississippi, hoping to register to vote. The registration test, crafted to keep blacks from voting, asked her to explain de facto laws. "I knowed [*sic*] as much about a facto law as a horse knows about Christmas Day," she recalled. Rejected, she came home to find the "boss man raisin' Cain." She had better withdraw her registration, she was told, because "we're not ready for that in Mississippi."[15]

"I didn't try to register for you," Hamer told her boss. "I tried to register for myself."[15] She was immediately fired and kicked off the plantation. Her husband was required to stay on the land until the end of the harvest.[16][3][17] Hamer moved between homes over the next several days for protection. On September 10, while staying with friend Mary Tucker, Hamer was shot at 16 times in a drive-by shooting by white supremacists.[12][18][19] No one was injured in the event.[9] The next day Hamer and her family evacuated to nearby Tallahatchie County[4] for three months, fearing retaliation by the Ku Klux Klan for her attempt to vote.[20][14][21] On December 4, just after returning to her hometown, she went to the courthouse in Indianola to take the literacy test again, but failed and was turned away.[12] Hamer told the registrar that "You'll see me every 30 days till I pass".[4]

> I guess if I'd had any sense, I'd have been a little scared — but what was the point of being scared? The only thing they could do was kill me, and it kinda seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time since I could remember.
>
> — Fannie Lou Hamer[22]

Registering to vote

On January 10, 1963, Hamer took the literacy test a third time.[12] She was successful and was informed that she was now a registered voter in the State of Mississippi. However, when she attempted to vote that fall, she discovered her registration gave her no actual power to vote as the county required voters to have two poll tax receipts.[4] This requirement had emerged in some (mostly former confederate) states after the right to vote was first given to all races by the 1870 ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.[23][24] These laws along with the literacy tests and local government acts of coercion, were used against blacks and Native Americans.[25][26] Hamer later paid for and acquired the requisite poll tax receipts.[4]

Hamer had begun to become more involved in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee after these incidents.[4] She attended many Southern Christian Leadership Conferences (SCLC), which she at times taught classes for, and also various SNCC workshops. She traveled to gather signatures for petitions to attempt to be granted federal resources for impoverished black families across the south. She also became a field secretary for voter registration and welfare

> We been waitin' all our lives, and still gettin' killed, still gettin' hung, still gettin' beat to death. Now we're tired waitin'!
>
> —Fannie Lou Hamer[4]

programs for the SNCC. Many of these first actions to attempt to register more black voters in Mississippi met with the same problems Hamer had had in trying to register herself.[27]

Police brutality

After becoming a field secretary for the SNCC in 1963, Hamer decided to attend a pro-citizenship conference by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in Charleston, South Carolina.[3] Travelling by bus with co-activists, the party stopped for a break in Winona, Mississippi.[4] Some of the activists went inside a local cafe, but were refused service by the waitress. Shortly after, a Mississippi State highway patrolman took out his billy club and intimidated the activists into leaving. One of the group decided to take down the officer's license plate number; while doing so the patrolman and a police chief entered the cafe and arrested the party. Hamer left the bus and inquired if they could continue their journey back to Greenwood, Mississippi.[3] At that point the officers arrested her as well.[4][16] Once in county jail, Hamer's colleagues were beaten by the police in the booking room (including 15 year old June Johnson, for not saying "sir" in her replies to the officers).[28][29] Hamer was then taken to a cell where two inmates were ordered, by the state trooper, to beat her using a blackjack.[4] The police ensured she was held down during the almost fatal beating, and when she started to scream, beat her further. Hamer was groped repeatedly by officers during the assault. When she attempted to resist, she states an officer, "walked over, took my dress, pulled it up over my shoulders, leaving my body exposed to five men."[30] Another in her group was beaten until she was unable to talk; a third, a teenager, was beaten, stomped on, and stripped.[31] An activist from the SNCC came the next day to see if they could help, but was beaten until his eyes were shut when he did not address an officer in the expected deferential manner.[9][32]

Hamer was released on June 12, 1963. She needed more than a month to recuperate from the beatings and never fully recovered.[27] Though the incident had profound physical and psychological effects, including a blood clot over her left eye and permanent damage on one of her kidneys,[33] she returned to Mississippi to organize voter registration drives, including the 1963 Freedom Ballot, a mock election, and the "Freedom Summer" initiative the following year. She was known to the volunteers of Freedom Summer as a motherly figure who believed that the civil rights effort should be multi-racial in nature. In addition to her "Northern" guests, Hamer played host to Tuskegee University student activists Sammy Younge Jr. and Wendell Paris.[34] Younge and Paris grew to become profound activists and organizers under Hamer's tutelage.[34] (Younge was murdered in 1966 at a Standard Oil gas station in Macon County, Alabama, for using a "whites-only" restroom.)[35]

Freedom Democratic Party and Congressional run

In 1964, Hamer helped co-found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), in an effort to prevent the regional all-white Democratic party's attempts to stifle African-American voices, and to ensure there was a party for all people that did not stand for any form of exploitation and discrimination (especially towards minorities).[36][4] Following the founding of the MFDP, Hamer and other activists traveled to the 1964 Democratic National Convention to stand as the official delegation from the state of Mississippi.[36] Hamer's televised testimony was interrupted because of a scheduled speech that President Lyndon B. Johnson delivered to thirty governors in the East Room of the White House. However, most of the major news networks broadcast her testimony later that evening to the nation, giving Hamer and the MFDP much exposure.[37]

> All of this is on account 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 are threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings in America?
>
> — Fannie Lou Hamer[3]

Senator Hubert Humphrey tried to propose a compromise on behalf of the President that would give the Freedom Democratic Party two seats.[38] He stated this would lead to a reformed convention in 1968.[3] The MFDP rejected the compromise, with Hamer saying, "We didn't come all the way up here to compromise for no more than we'd gotten here. We didn't come all this way for no two seats when all of us is tired."[39][38] Afterwards, all of the white members from the Mississippi delegation walked out.[3]

In 1968 the MFDP was finally seated, after the Democratic Party adopted a clause which demanded equality of representation from their states' delegations.[40] In 1972, Hamer was elected as a national party delegate.[38]

Freedom Farm Cooperative and later activism

In 1964, Hamer unsuccessfully ran for a seat in the U.S. Senate.[3] She continued to work on other projects, including grassroots-level Head Start programs and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign. With the help of Julius Lester and Mary Varela, she published her autobiography in 1967.[41] She said she was "tired of all this beating" and "there's so much hate. Only God has kept the Negro sane".[4]

Hamer sought equality across all aspects of society.[42] In Hamer's view, African-Americans were not technically free if they were not afforded the same opportunities as whites, including those in the agricultural industry. Sharecropping was the most common form of post-slavery activity and income in the South.[43] The New Deal era expanded so that many blacks were physically and economically displaced due to the various projects appearing around the country. Hamer did not wish to have blacks be dependent on any group for any longer; so, she wanted to give them a voice through an agricultural movement.[44]

James Eastland, a white senator, was among the groups of people who sought to keep African-Americans disenfranchised and segregated from society.[45] His influence on the overarching agricultural industry often suppressed minority groups to keep whites as the only power force in America.[44] Hamer objected to this, and consequently pioneered the Freedom Farm Cooperative (FFC) in 1969, an attempt to redistribute economic power across groups and to solidify an economic standing amongst African-Americans.[42] In the same vein as the Freedom Farm Collective, Hamer partnered with the NCNW to establish an interracial and interregional support program called The Pig Project to provide protein for people who previously could not afford meat.[46]

Hamer made it her mission to make land more accessible to African-Americans.[42] To do this, she started a small "pig bank" with a starting donation from the National Council of Negro Women of five boars and fifty gilts.[47] Through the pig bank, a family could care for a pregnant female pig until it bore its offspring; subsequently, they would raise the piglets and use them for food and financial gain.[47][42] Within five years, thousands of pigs were available for breeding.[47] Hamer used the success of the bank to begin fundraising for the main farming corporation.[47][42] She was able to convince the then-editor of

the *Harvard Crimson*, James Fallows, to write an article that advocated for donations to the FFC.[44] Eventually, the FFC had raised around $8,000 which allowed Hamer to purchase 40 acres of land previously owned by a black farmer who could no longer afford to occupy the land.[48] This land became the Freedom Farm.[48] The farm had three main objectives.[42] These were to establish an agricultural organization that could supplement the nutritional needs of America's most disenfranchised people; to provide acceptable housing development; and to create an entrepreneurial business incubator that would provide resources for new companies and re-training for those with limited education but manual labor experience.[49]

Over time, the FFC offered various other services such as financial counseling, a scholarship fund and a housing agency.[47] The FFC aided in securing 35 Federal Housing Administration (FHA) subsidized houses for struggling black families.[48] Through her success, Hamer managed to acquire a new home, which served as inspiration for others to begin building themselves up.[42] The FFC ultimately disbanded in 1975 due to lack of funding.[49]

In 1971 Hamer co-founded the National Women's Political Caucus. She emphasized the power women could hold by acting as a voting majority in the country regardless of race or ethnicity, saying "A white mother is no different from a black mother. The only thing is they haven't had as many problems. But we cry the same tears."[3]

Later life and death

While having surgery in 1961 to remove a tumor, 44-year-old Hamer was also given a hysterectomy without consent by a white doctor; this was a frequent occurrence under Mississippi's compulsory sterilization plan to reduce the number of poor blacks in the state.[50][51][52] Hamer is credited with coining the phrase "Mississippi appendectomy" as a euphemism for the involuntary or uninformed sterilization of black women, common in the South in the 1960s.[53] She came out of an extended period in hospital for nervous exhaustion in January 1972, and was hospitalized again in January 1974 for a nervous breakdown. By June 1974, Hamer was said to be in extremely poor health.[3] Two years later she was diagnosed with and had surgery for breast cancer.[3]

Hamer died of complications of hypertension and breast cancer on March 14, 1977, aged 59, at Taborian Hospital, Mound Bayou, Mississippi.[54] She was buried in her hometown of Ruleville, Mississippi. Her tombstone is engraved with one of her famous quotes, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired."[55]

Her primary memorial service, held at a church, was completely full. An overflow service was held at Ruleville Central High School,[56] with over 1,500 people in attendance. Andrew Young, United States Ambassador to the United Nations, spoke at the RCHS service, saying "None of us would be where we are now had she not been there then".[57]

Honors and awards

Hamer received many awards both in her lifetime and posthumously. She received a Doctor of Law from Shaw University,[58] and honorary degrees from Columbia College Chicago in 1970[59] and Howard University in 1972.[60] She was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1993.[3]

Hamer also received the Paul Robeson Award from Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority,[61] the Mary Church Terrell Award and Honorary lifetime member from Delta Sigma Theta, the National Sojourner Truth Meritorious Service Award.[62] A remembrance for her life was given in the US House of

Representatives on the 100th anniversary of her birth, October 6, 2017, by Texas Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee.[14]

Tributes

In 1970 Ruleville Central High School held a "Fannie Lou Hamer Day". Six years later, the City of Ruleville itself celebrated a "Fannie Lou Hamer Day".[13][63] In 1977 Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson wrote "95 South (All of the Places We've Been)", in Hamer's honor. Ta-Nehisi Coates described a 1994 live solo version of the song as "a haunting and somber ode."[64]

A sign honoring Fannie Lou Hamer for her work in Ruleville, Mississippi.


Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial Garden in Ruleville, Mississippi

In 1994 the Ruleville post office was named the Fannie Lou Hamer Post Office by an act of Congress.[65] Additionally, The Fannie Lou Hamer National Institute on Citizenship and Democracy was founded in 1997 as a summer seminar and K–12 workshop program.[66] In 2014 it was merged with the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) Civil Rights Education Complex on the campus of Jackson State University, Jackson, to create the Fannie Lou Hamer Institute @ COFO: A Human and Civil Rights Interdisciplinary Education Center. The Hamer Institute @ COFO provides a research library and outreach programs.[66] There is also a Fannie Lou Hamer Public Library in Jackson.[67]

A 2012 collection of suites by trumpeter and composer Wadada Leo Smith, who grew up in segregated Mississippi, *Ten Freedom Summers* includes *"Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, 1964"* as one of its 19 suites.[68] A picture book about Hamer's life, *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer, Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement*, was written by Carole Boston Weatherford; it won a Coretta Scott King Award.[69] Hamer is also one of 28 civil rights icons depicted on the Buffalo, New York Freedom Wall.[70] And a quote from Hamer's speech at the 1964 Democratic National Convention is carved on one of the eleven granite columns at the Civil Rights Garden in Atlantic City, where the convention was held.[71]

Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School was formed in Bronx, New York, New York, with a focus on humanities and social justice.[72]

In 2017 the Fannie Lou Hamer Black Resource Center opened at the University of California at Berkeley.[73]

The third annual Women's March, held in Atlantic City, New Jersey on January 19, 2019, was dedicated to Hamer's life and legacy. Several hundred people attended, representing many organizations. Several students from Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School attended despite a state of emergency declared by New Jersey Governor Murphy due to an impending snowstorm.

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See also

- List of civil rights leaders
- African Americans in Mississippi

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External video

Booknotes interview with Kay Mills on *This Little Light of Mine*, February 28, 1993 (https://www.c-span.org/video/?38281-1/little-light-mine), C-SPAN

External links

- SNCC Digital Gateway: Fannie Lou Hamer (https://snccdigital.org/people/fannie-lou-hamer/), Documentary website created by the SNCC Legacy Project and Duke University, telling the story of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee & grassroots organizing from the inside-out

- National Women's Hall of Fame (http://www.greatwomen.org/women-of-the-hall/search-the-hall-results/details/2/71-Hamer) and National Women's History Museum entries (https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/fannie-lou-hamer)
- "Fannie Lou Hamer" (http://rsparlourtricks.blogspot.com/2005/10/fannie-lou-hamer.html), Ron Schuler's Parlour Tricks, October 6, 2005.
- Fannie Lou Hamer Collection (MUM00215) (https://web.archive.org/web/20091120064721/http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/general_library/files/archives/collections/guides/latesthtml/MUM00215.html) owned by the University of Mississippi, Archives and Special Collections.
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