



<http://gdc.gale.com/archivesunbound/>

FANNIE LOU HAMER: PAPERS OF A CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST, POLITICAL ACTIVIST, AND WOMAN



Fannie Lou Hamer was an voting rights activist and civil rights leader. She was instrumental in organizing Mississippi Freedom Summer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and later became the Vice-Chair of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, attending the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in that capacity. Her plain-spoken manner and fervent belief in the Biblical righteousness of her cause gained her a reputation as an electrifying speaker and constant activist of civil rights.

Date Range: 1966-1978

Content: 28,577 images

Source Library: Amistad Research Center

Detailed Description:

Fannie Lou Hamer was the daughter of sharecroppers and spent eighteen years of her adult life as a sharecropper and timekeeper on the Dee Marlow plantation in Sunflower County, Mississippi. She was fired in 1962 because of her attempt to register to vote. The following year she became a registered voter and also became the field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. She was instrumental in starting the Delta Ministry, and she was one of the founders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. She led a delegation to the Democratic National Convention in 1964.

During the 1950s, Hamer attended several annual conferences of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL) in the all-black town of Mound Bayou, Mississippi. The RCNL was led by Dr. T.R.M. Howard, a civil rights leader and wealthy black entrepreneur, and was a combination civil rights and self-help organization. The annual RCNL conferences featured entertainers, such as Mahalia Jackson, speakers, such as Thurgood Marshall and Rep. Charles Diggs of Michigan, and panels on voting rights and other civil rights issues. Without her knowledge or consent, she was sterilized in 1961 by a white doctor as a part of the state of Mississippi's plan to reduce the number of poor blacks in the state.

On August 23, 1962, Reverend James Bevel, an organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and an associate of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave a sermon in Ruleville, Mississippi and followed it with an appeal to those assembled to register to vote. Black people who registered to vote in the South faced serious hardships at that time due to institutionalized racism, including harassment, the loss of their jobs, physical beatings, and lynchings; nonetheless, Hamer was the first volunteer. She later said, "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."

On August 31, she traveled on a rented bus with other attendees of Bevel's sermon to Indianola, Mississippi to register. In what would become a signature trait of Hamer's activist career, she began singing Christian hymns, such as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *This Little Light of Mine*, to the group in order to bolster their resolve. The hymns also reflected Hamer's belief that the civil rights struggle was a deeply spiritual one.

Hamer's courage and leadership in Indianola came to the attention of SNCC organizer Bob Moses, who dispatched Charles McLaurin from the organization with instructions to find "the lady who sings the hymns". McLaurin found and recruited Hamer, and though she remained based in Mississippi, she began traveling around the South doing activist work for the organization.

On June 9, 1963, Hamer was on her way back from Charleston, South Carolina with other activists from a literacy workshop. Stopping in Winona, Mississippi, the group was arrested on a false charge and jailed. Once in jail, Hamer and her colleagues were beaten savagely by the police, almost to the point of death. Released on June 12, she needed more than a month to recover. Though the incident had profound physical and psychological effects, Hamer returned to Mississippi to organize voter registration drives, including the "Freedom Ballot Campaign", a mock election, in 1963, and the "Freedom Summer" initiative in 1964. She was known to the volunteers of Freedom Summer—most of whom were young, white, and from northern states—as a motherly figure who believed that the civil rights effort should be multi-racial in nature.

In the summer of 1964, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, or "Freedom Democrats" for short, was organized with the purpose of challenging Mississippi's all-white and anti-civil rights delegation to the Democratic National Convention of that year as not representative of all Mississippians. Hamer was elected Vice-Chair.

The Freedom Democrats' efforts drew national attention to the plight of African-Americans in Mississippi, and represented a challenge to President Lyndon B. Johnson, who was seeking the Democratic Party's nomination for reelection; their success would mean that other Southern delegations, who were already leaning toward Republican challenger Barry Goldwater, would publicly break from the convention's decision to nominate Johnson - meaning in turn that he would almost certainly lose those states' electoral votes in the election. Hamer, singing her signature hymns, drew a great deal of attention from the media, enraging Johnson, who referred to her in speaking to his advisors as "that illiterate woman".

Hamer was invited, along with the rest of the MFDP officers, to address the Convention's Credentials Committee. She recounted the problems she had encountered in registration, and the ordeal of the jail in Winona, and, near tears, concluded:

"All of this is on account we want to register [sic], 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?"

In Washington, D.C., President Johnson called an emergency press conference in an effort to divert press coverage away from Hamer's testimony; but many television networks ran the speech unedited on their late news programs. The Credentials Committee received thousands of calls and letters in support of the Freedom Democrats.

Johnson then dispatched several trusted Democratic Party operatives to attempt to negotiate with the Freedom Democrats, including Senator Hubert Humphrey (who was campaigning for the Vice-Presidential nomination), Walter Mondale, and Walter Reuther, as well as J. Edgar Hoover. They suggested a compromise which would give the MFDP two non-voting seats in exchange for other concessions, and secured the endorsement of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for the plan. But when Humphrey outlined the compromise, saying that his position on the ticket was at stake, Hamer, invoking her Christian beliefs, sharply rebuked him:

"Do you mean to tell me that your position is more important than four hundred thousand black people's lives? Senator Humphrey, I know lots of people in Mississippi who have lost their jobs trying to register to vote. I had to leave the plantation where I worked in Sunflower County, Mississippi. Now if you lose this job of Vice-President because you do what is right, because you help the MFDP, everything will be all right. God will take care of you. But if you take [the nomination] this way, why, you will never be able to do any good for civil rights, for poor people, for peace, or any of those things you talk about. Senator Humphrey, I'm going to pray to Jesus for you."

Future negotiations were conducted without Hamer, and the compromise was modified such that the Convention would select the two delegates to be seated, for fear the MFDP would appoint Hamer. In the end, the MFDP rejected the compromise, but had changed the debate to the point that the Democratic Party adopted a clause which demanded equality of representation from their states' delegations in 1968.

Hamer continued to work in Mississippi for the Freedom Democrats and for local civil rights causes. She ran for Congress in 1964 and 1965, and was then seated as a member of Mississippi's legitimate delegation to the Democratic National Convention of 1968, where she was an outspoken critic of the Vietnam War.

Hamer worked on other projects, including grassroots-level Head Start programs, the Freedom Farm Cooperative in Sunflower County, and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign. She was also inducted as an honorary member of Delta Sigma Theta sorority.

She became chairman of the board of the Fannie Lou Hamer Day Care Center founded in Ruleville, Mississippi, in 1970, by the National Council of Negro Women. She also served as a member of the board of the Sunflower County Day Care Center and Family Service Center, on the policy council of the National Women's Political Party of Mississippi, and on the board of trustees of the Martin Luther King Center for Social Change.

Although her formal education went only to the fifth grade, she received many academic and other honors. Tougaloo College, Shaw University, Columbia College, and Howard University gave her honorary degrees. She also received the National Sojourner Truth Meritorious Service Award, the Mary Church Terrell Award from Delta Sigma Theta, Inc., and the Paul Robeson Award from Alpha Kappa Alpha Fraternity.

The Fannie Lou Hamer papers contain more than three thousand pieces of correspondence plus financial records, programs, photographs, newspaper articles, invitations, and other printed items. The papers are arranged in the following series: Personal, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, Freedom Farms Corporation, Delta Ministry, Mississippians United to Elect Negro Candidates, Delta Opportunities Corporation, and Collected Materials.

Fannie Lou Hamer Papers, 1966-1978: <http://www.amistadresearchcenter.org/archon/?p=collections/controlcard&id=3>