

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 poisonin' 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', hahvin', 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.

According to Mississippi law the names of all persons who take the registration test must be in the local paper for two weeks. This subjects Negroes, especially Delta Negroes, to all sorts of retaliatory actions. "Most Negroes in the Delta are sharecroppers. It's not like in the hills where Negroes own land. But everything happened before my name had been in the paper," Mrs. Hamer adds.

She didn't pass the test the first time, so she returned on December 4, and took it again. "You'll see me every 30 days till I pass," she told the registrar. On January 10, she returned and found out that she had passed. "But I still wasn't allowed to vote last fall because I didn't have two poll-tax receipts. We still have to pay poll tax for state elections. I have two receipts now."

After being forced to leave the plantation, Mrs. Hamer stayed with various friends and relatives. On September 10, night riders fired sixteen times into the home of one of these persons, Mrs. Turner. Mrs. Hamer was away at the time. In December, 1962, the Hamers moved into their present home which they rent from a Negro woman.

Mrs. Hamer had by then begun active work in the civil rights movement. She gathered names for a petition to obtain federal commodities for needy Negro families and attended various Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) workshops throughout the South. Since then she has been active as a SNCC field secretary in voter registration and welfare programs and has taught classes for SCLC. At present, most of her time is spent campaigning.

In June of last year, Mrs. Hamer was returning from a workshop in Charleston, S.C. She was arrested in Winona, in Montgomery County, 60 miles east of Indianola, the county in which she was born. Along with others, she was taken from the bus to the jail.

They carried me into a room and there was two Negro boys in this room. The state highway patrolman gave them a long, wide blackjack and he told one of the boys, "Take this," and the Negro, he said, "This what you want me to use?" The state patrolman said, "That's right, and if you don't use it on her you know what I'll use on you."

I had to get over on a bed flat on my stomach and that man beat me . . . that man beat me till he give out. And by me screamin', it made a plain-clothes man — he didn't have on nothin' like a uniform — he got so hot and worked up he just run there and started hittin' me on the back of my head. And I was tryin' to guard some of the licks with my hands and they just beat my hands till they turned blue. This Negro just beat me till I know he was give out. Then this state patrolman told the other Negro to take me so he take over from there and he just keep beatin' me.

The police carried Mrs. Hamer to her cell when they were through beating her. They also beat Annelle Ponder, a SCLC worker who was returning on the bus with her, and Lawrence Guyot, a SNCC field secretary who had traveled from the Greenwood SNCC office to investigate the arrests.

They whipped Annelle Ponder and I heard her screamin'. After a while she passed by where I was in the cell and her mouth was bleedin' and her hair was standin' up on her head and you know it was horrifyin'.

Over in the night I even heard screamin'. I said, "Oh, Lord, somebody else gettin' it, too." It was later that we heard that Lawrence Guyot was there. I got to see him. I could walk as far as the cell door and I asked them to please leave that door open so I could get a breath of fresh air every once in a while. That's how I got to see Guyot. He looked as if he was in pretty bad shape. And it was on my nerves, too, because that was the first time I had seen him and not smilin'.

After I got out of jail, half dead, I found out that Medgar Evers had been shot down in his own yard.

Mrs. Hamer paused for a moment, saddened by the recollection. I glanced around the dim room. Faded wallpaper covered the walls and a vase, some framed photos, and a large doll were placed neatly on a chest and on a small table. Three stuffed clowns and a small doll lay on the worn spread on the double bed in the corner. Both the small doll and the larger one had white complexions, a reminder of the world outside.

We're tired of all this beatin', we're tired of takin' this. It's been a hundred years and we're still being beaten and shot at, crosses are still being burned, because we want to vote. But I'm goin' to stay in Mississippi and if they shoot me down, I'll be buried here.

But I don't want equal rights with the white man; if I did, I'd be a thief and a murderer. But the white man is the scariest person on earth. Out in the daylight he don't do nothin'. But at night he'll toss a bomb or pay someone to kill. The white man's afraid he'll be treated like he's been treatin' Negroes, but I couldn't carry that much hate. It wouldn't solve any problem for me to hate whites just because they hate me. Oh, there's so much hate. Only God has kept the Negro sane.

As part of her voter-registration work, Mrs. Hamer has been teaching citizenship classes, working to overcome the bad schooling Delta Negroes have received, when they receive any at all. "We just have nice school buildings," she says. In Sunflower County there are three buildings for 11,000 Negroes of high school age, six buildings for 4,000 white high school students. In 1960-61, the county spent \$150 per white pupil, \$60 per Negro pupil. When applying to register, persons as part of the test must interpret the state constitution but, Mrs. Hamer says, "Mississippi don't teach it in school."

The Negro schools close in May, so that the children can help with the planting and chopping; they open again in July and August, only to close in September and October so that the children can pick cotton. Some stay out of school completely to work in the fields. Mississippi has no compulsory school-attendance law; it was abolished after the 1954 Supreme Court school-desegregation decision. Many Negro children do not attend school simply because they have no clothes to wear.

Mrs. Hamer has helped distribute clothing sent down from the North. "We owe a lot to people in the North," she admits. "A lot of people are wearing nice clothes for the first time. A lot of kids couldn't go to school otherwise."

One time when a shipment arrived for distribution, the Ruleville mayor took it upon himself to announce that a lot of clothes were being given out. More than 400 Negroes showed up and stood in line to receive clothes. Mrs. Hamer,

combining human compassion and politicking, told them that the mayor had had nothing to do with the clothing distribution and that if they went and registered they wouldn't have to stand in line as they were doing. Many went down and took the registration test.

"A couple weeks ago when more clothes arrived," she relates, "the mayor said that people could go and get clothing, and that if they didn't get any they should just go and take them. I went and talked to the mayor. I told him not to boss us around. 'We don't try to boss you around,' I told him."

Obviously, Fannie Lou Hamer will not be easily stopped. "We mean to use every means to try and win. If I lose we have this freedom registration and freedom vote to see how many would have voted if there wasn't all this red tape and discrimination." If Mrs. Hamer is defeated by Jamie Whitten in the primary, she will also file as an independent in the general election.

Last fall, SNCC voter-registration workers attempted to register in freedom-registration books all those not officially registered. These Negroes then voted in an unofficial Freedom Vote campaign, choosing between Democrat Paul Johnson, now Governor, Republican Rubel Phillips, and independent Aaron Henry, state NAACP chairman. Henry received 70,000 votes.

The same thing will be done this summer, and if Mrs. Hamer loses, the Freedom Vote total will be used to challenge Whitten's election.

Backing up the discrimination charges are nine suits the federal government has pending in seven Second Congressional District counties, including a suit in Sunflower County where, in 1960, only 1.2 per cent of voting-age Negroes were registered.

A Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party is also being formed which will hold meetings on every level within the state, from precinct on up, finally choosing a delegation to the National Democratic Convention that will challenge the seating of the regular all-white Mississippi delegation.

In addition to Mrs. Hamer, three other Mississippi Negroes are running for national office in the 1964 elections. James Monroe Houston will challenge Robert Bell Williams in the Third Congressional District, the Rev. John E. Cameron faces William Meyers Colmer in the Fifth, and Mrs. Victoria Jackson Gray is campaigning for the Senate seat now held by John Stennis.

This extensive program provides a basis for Negroes organizing throughout the state, and gives a strong democratic base for the Freedom Democratic Party. The wide range of Negro participation will show that the problem in Mississippi is not Negro apathy, but discrimination and fear of physical and economic reprisals for attempting to register.

The Freedom Democratic candidates will also give Mississippians, white as well as Negro, a chance to vote for candidates who do not stand for political, social and economic exploitation and discrimination, and a chance to vote for the National Democratic ticket rather than the Mississippi slate of unpledged electors.

"We been waitin' all our lives," Mrs. Hamer exclaims, "and still gettin' killed, still gettin' hung, still gettin' beat to death. Now we're tired waitin'!"

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