

Fannie Lou Hamer
&
The Democratic Party

By Marsha Rose Joyner

History does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do."

- James Baldwin

Since history is written by the "winners" and they are usually male, very little is written about **All** of the women and the important part they have played in our struggle. Everyone knows about Rosa Parks and Mrs. Coretta Scott King. In Baltimore there was Juanita Mitchell and Lilly Mae Jackson.

Inasmuch as every January and February the media fills us with the stories of Martin Luther King, Jr. as if he was the lone star in the movement.

It was the Black women who made the most sacrifices in the bus boycott. The women who worked in the basements of the churches to move this movement along; the women who walked picket lines in the rain, mud and snow; the women who rode the freedom rides; the women who did logistics for every event; the women who did voter registration, worked in the summer of '64; women who were secretaries, receptionists who had to deal with the foul mouth whites on the phone, who did the dirty work that was not recalled, the women who are written out of the history books.

Gloria Xifaras Clark wrote, "Women? Of course, there are thousands of us. That is what makes a movement. Most of us shall remain nameless. *"By their fruits ye shall know them."* Women in the movement did everything, like we do in real life to this day. Some cooked, some organized the MFDP, some cleaned, some went to jail, some marched, some were beaten, some died, some celebrated, some cried, some laughed, some danced, some sang, some prayed, some drove, some walked, some made love, some didn't, some voted, some didn't, some brought up children, some were children, some were strong, some were frail, some talked, some were silent, some were workers, some were not, some led, some followed, some taught, we all learned, we all stood up to injustice."

Throughout our history there have been women, the backbone of our race. It is to the workers in the vineyard who give so much and get so little that we must pay homage. Today I'm going to write about one woman, Fannie Lou Hamer, my hero.

"She had a rock-hard integrity and commitment to the people she had come from and she just never left them. She was unbreakable." Bob Weil, SNCC

Born in Sunflower County along the Mississippi Delta October 6, 1917, before any woman in America could vote, Fannie Lou Hamer became the inspiration to millions in the poverty stricken towns of Mississippi, the Civil Rights struggle and the women's political movement, changing the face of the Democratic Party.

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's challenge to the Democratic Party in Atlantic City had wide impact. It ultimately opened the party to Black participation and encouraged a different breed of white politician to seek office. The MFDP, of which Mrs. Hamer was a co-chair, would not accept two seats in 1964, but it opened the way for many more seats: seats, for not only African-Americans but for women, Latinos, Native-Americans, Asian-Americans and all marginalized people who wanted to participate in the Democratic Party's convention. It opened the doors to full political participation.

Fannie Lou Hamer was known as the lady who was "sick and tired of being sick and tired". She was the granddaughter of slaves. Her family was sharecroppers - a position not that different from slavery. Hamer had 19 brothers and sisters. She was the youngest of the children. The family worked as sharecroppers on the plantation belonging to E.W. Brandon. By the time Hamer was 13, she was able to pick 200 to 300 pounds of cotton daily. In spite of having suffered from polio when she was six years old.

But it was not until August 23, 1962 when Reverend James Bevel, a local organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) delivered a sermon to persuade listeners to register to vote, that Fannie Lou became inspired. Although Hamer knew the consequences of fighting for her rights, she became the first volunteer.

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." The beauty of the Mississippi Delta belied the underlying evil.

She was surprised to learn that African-Americans actually had a constitutional right to vote. When the SNCC members asked for volunteers to go to the courthouse to register to vote, Hamer was the first to raise her hand. This was a dangerous decision. She later reflected, "The only thing they could do to me was to kill me, and it seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time ever since I could remember."

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. When Hamer and others went to the courthouse, they were jailed.

Mrs. Hamer said, "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."

He 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, "I didn't try to register for you. I tried to register for myself."

I had to leave that same night.

She also began to receive constant death threats and was even shot at. Still, Hamer would not be discouraged.

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 by Black inmates on orders of the jailer. 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 spite of all that Fannie Lou Hamer had endured, she, like most of the women of the movement was not invited to the 1963 "March on Washington".

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.'*"

During the summer of 1964, Hamer was elected as the vice-chair of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Also known as the "Freedom Democrats," the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was organized to counter the anti-civil rights and all-white political delegation at the Democratic National Convention.

It seems that all of my life I have been infected with the Participatory Democracy bug. In segregated schools and being a daughter of the Afro-American Newspapers, I was taught the United States was my government and I had a right to participate in the direction and operation of political systems. So I did/do.

Therefore, to protest Senator Douglass from Illinois for a project that had nothing to do with the MFDP. I drove from Highlands, Air Force Base, N. J. to the Democratic Convention on the boardwalk in Atlantic City. Being ninety nine months pregnant, with a toddler in the stroller my husband objected to my daring exploit saying "do not even call me if you have this baby down there." Armed with baby and protest signs, I was off.

Not having a clue of what to expect and the sudden realization that I would never locate the other Air Force Wives who were also driving from various parts of New Jersey loaded down with children and with protest signs, I arrived on the Boardwalk to immense crowds. Walking among the picketers, on-lookers, the hordes of police and media everywhere; even my own mother (Elizabeth Murphy Oliver) from the Afro-American Newspapers was a part of the media frenzy and I was lost.

The energy of the Freedom Democrats brought national attention to the challenges African-American voters faced in Mississippi. In an effort to force the democratic party to recognize the MFDP as the legitimate representatives of the Black and white citizens of Mississippi, the representatives traveled to New Jersey to confront the Party head-on. Led by Joe Rauh, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Robert "Bob" Moses and Fannie Lou Hamer, among others, the MFDP presented a compelling argument before the Party and before the world. Hamer's testimony before the committee was seen around the world even though President Johnson tried to block it with a press conference. Although the MFDP did not achieve their overall goal, they did prove to the world that black people were an organizing political active force. As Mrs. Hamer and the MFDP attempted to enter the Convention Center the police were



corralling everyone. Because I'm Black with a protest sign the police assumed that I was a part of the MFDP. You know, we all look alike.

Hamer addressed the Convention's Credentials Committee and told them of the problems she faced while trying to vote by saying "All of this is on account we want to

Fannie Lou Hamer, a leader of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, speaks before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, August 22, 1964. (AP Photo/stf)

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?"

Feeling threatened by the MFDP's presence at the convention, President Lyndon Johnson tried to keep the attention away from Hamer by calling all television networks with an emergency press conference. However, many television networks publicized the speech on news programs throughout the United States. As a result, the Freedom Democrats received national support. In response to the publicity, Johnson proposed that the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party be given two non-voting seats at the national convention.

Urged by Martin Luther King, Jr. and other male Civil Rights leaders to accept the compromise, Hamer turned down the offer, saying, "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."

"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 and we all want to sit."

Although the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party rejected compromises from the Democratic Party and were not able to sit on the delegation floor, all was not lost. A clause was adopted in the rules committee of the Democratic National Party that required equality of representation from all state delegations beginning with the 1968 election.

Mrs. Hamer did not worry about the past nor was she afraid of the future; she was supremely concentrated in the present. . She just knew, because she knew, material things, everything that she could see, touch, hear or taste was the same and came from the same source, her relationship with her God was unshakable.

She questioned outside authority (The President of the United States); questioned what people took for granted (Blacks could not vote); questioned what people held to be true (brutal white supremacy); she broke through social conditioning (hopeless life in Mississippi).

Are there enough adjectives to describe her, to give justice to so noble a spirit, to honor her generosity and gratitude? I do not want to make her a saint for she was very real. She had faults and

made mistakes. How do you say she inspired a movement, breathed life into a decaying system . . . changed the political parties forever; Democratic Party forever.

Hamer was and is an inspirational figure to many involved in the struggle for civil rights. She died on March 14, 1977, at the age of 59.

“Victories of the Civil Rights Movement were those of huge numbers of ordinary people doing extraordinary things.” Charlie Thomas