About 20 feet back from a narrow dirt road just off the state highway that runs through Ruleville, Miss., is a small, three-room, white frame house with a screened porch. A large cotton field grows in the back yard and two smaller ones grow out back. Butter bean and okra plants are filling out in the gardens on the loss 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 four counties in the northwestern quarter of the state—the Delta—that make up the Second Congressional District. Since 1901, 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 Whitten: Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer. Mrs. Hamer is a Negro and only 4,619 Negroes (or 4.4 per cent of voting-age Negroes) were registered to vote in the Second Congressional District in 1962, but in 1967, 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, 50 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, she explains. Her deep, powerful voice takes the air and echoes on the porch or inside, talking to friends, relatives and neighbors who drop by on their way to the bus stop when she is not out campaigning. Whatever she is talking about remains an impassioned plea for a change in the system that excludes Delta Negroes. "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-six baskets of cotton a day. "When we were 14 we decided to rent some land. We bought two mules and a cultivator. We were doing pretty well. Even started to fix up the house real nice and bought a car. Then our staircase rotted. We bought a white man's boat but did it. He started up a gallon of Paris green with the feed. When we got out they said one male was already dead. Other two male hogs and the cow had them. We all swelled up, it was too late to save. That poisonin' eat us right back down flat. We never did go up again. That poor woman man did it just because we were gittin' someplace. White people never had to see Negroes get no 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 another 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', hab'bit. 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."

"Last, I dropped out of school. I cut corn stalks to help the family. My parents were getting up in age—they weren't young when I was born. I was the youngest and my mother had a bad eye. She was cleaned up the owner's yard for a quarter when somethin' fell up and hit her in the eye."

"So many times for dinner we would have greens with no seasonin', fall, and flour graps. My mother would mix flour with a little grease and try to make graps 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 pa sel, but how much more patience can we have?"

Fannie Lou and Perry Hamer have two daughters, 10 and 16, 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 age of 15 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 ninth 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 banded 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 "revised" Corn. He had heard that I had tried to register. That night he called 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 'Pop'—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. This year, though others are working there already, they haven't taken him back.
In June of 1940, Mrs. Hamer was returning from a workshop in Charleston, S.C. She was arrested in Winona, in Montgomery County, 30 miles east of Sunflower County. She will also file as an independent candidate in the general election. If Mrs. Hamer loses, the Freedom Democratic Party will proceed to challenge Whitten's election.

In addition to Mrs. Hamer, three other Mississippi Negroes are running for national office in the elections. In Mississippi, Governor Paul B. Johnson will challenge Robert B. Williams in the Democratic primary race for governor. Senator John E. McClellan of Arkansas is campaigning for the Senate seat now held by William G. Blakley.

This extensive program provides a basis for Negroes organizing themselves on a large scale, with the potential for a strong democratic base for the Freedom Democratic Party. The party, range of alliances, could be a dominant force in southern politics, which will show that the problem in Mississippi is not Negro apathy, but discrimination and fear of physical and economic reprisals for attempting to vote.

The Freedom Democratic candidates will also give Missippians, who are not Negroes, a way to vote for candidates who do not support the program of economic exploitation and discrimination, and a chance to vote for the National Democratic Party. The party is more radical than the Mississippi slate of unpledged voters.

"We been waitin’ all our lives," Mrs. Hamer exhales, "and still gettin’ the same old stuff. We been waitin’ for 30 years to gettin’ beat to death. Now we’re tired of it!"