

transcribed

3/17/64

Fannie Lou Hamer Interview -- Winona, Mississippi

June 3, 1963 - no date available

It was the most horrifying experience I've ever had in my life. You see, I was on the bus. Annelle and the others was off... part of the other was off the bus. And then I saw the policemen carrying them to the car. And I know it wasn't going to be too long before we was on our way to Greenwood. I just stepped off and asked them what did they want us to do and she motioned for me to go on, that we would have to go down to the station. So by this time a man told me to wait and I stopped and he come round to the side of the car. It was two men in it and he told me to come round to the side there and get in.

Q. This was one of the officers?

A. That's right. He kicked me. So I got in the car and he drove me on around, just me, and you know, it was him and another person. So we went on around to the place where he had carried Miss Ponder and the others and after we had gotten there, and wasn't too long before I heard screaming and I was in a cell then with one other girl, Euvester Simpson, that's right. She had been on the bus. She was one of them, too. We were put in a room together. So they was asking. A,terward I heard the hollerin and going on and I saw this girl pass, you know, by the window where I could see her. I didn't really know what was goin happen. So after awhile, then they had Miss Ponder. And you know, all that screamin and all of that will always follow me. I never will forget it. And they whipped her and after awhile she passed by where we was in the cell and her mouth was bleedin and her hair was standin up on her head and you know it was horrifyin. So then after they decided to stop, well, this man asked me where was I from...the state highway asked me. He asked me where was I from and I told him I was from Ruleville. So he said, "I gonna check and see," and I figured, well, it wasn't gonna be nothing that happened to me because I told him, I said, after all, I was born, I think I was, in this county -- Montgomery County. So he said, "And you stay in Ruleville now?" and I said, "Yes sir". So he said, "Well, I gonna check; I'm gonna see where you're from". So I know by me bein one of the persons that work with this voter registration when he checked, well, that was really gonna put me on the spot for Ruleville. So wehn he walked back there he said, "Yes, you live in Ruleville," and he say, "You the big...." And I never heard that many names called a person in my life. He used all kinds of curse words. So one of the officers called me back and then he told them, he said, "Let's take her in here". So they carried me in a room and it was two Negro boys in this room. So the state highway patrol gave them a long blackjack, it was wide, and he told one of the boys, he said, "Take this,"

and he (the Negro) 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." So then the boy told me, he said, "Get over there". I said, "Where?" He said, "On that cot". I said, "You mean you would do this to your own race?" And then this state patrolman told him, he said, "You heard what I told you." The boy said, "All right, get over there and stretch out." So then I had to get over there on the bed flat on my stomach and that man beat me...that man beat me till he give out. And by me screamin it made one of the other ones...the plain clothesman...he didn't have on nothin like a uniform... he got so hot and worked off of it he just run there and started hittin me on the back of my head. Well, my hands... I was tryin to guard some of the licks you see, and my hands... they just beat my hands till they turned blue. And after he had finished and my clothes, well, quite naturally beatin me like that...well my clothes come up and I tried to pull em down. You know it was just pitiful. And then one of the other white fellas just take my clothes and snatched em up. And this Negro when he had just beat me till I know he was give out, Well, then this state patrolman told the other Negro to take me so he take over from there and they just beat till....and anywhere you could see me you could see I'm not lyin because I just can't sit down. I been sleepin on my face because I was just as hard as a bone. It was just hard...when they turned me loose, I was hard as a bone.

Q. Then you want back to the cell?

A. Yes. They carried me back to the cell.

Q. Were you able to walk when you got off the bed.

A. I was drug. It look like somethin or other happened to me, it looked like I musta passed out. But I did cause he said, "Hell, you can walk". Oh, it was all kinds of language used.

Q. Now, how many white men were in the room at the time this happened? Mrs. Hamer?

A. There was the jailer, the state highway patrol, another man with a blue uniform...he was a police but he was off duty that day, and then it was this man had on the dark trousers and white shirt, and this sheriff that carried me over there, and the two Negroes and me.

Q. Now, was this the only time they beat you?

A. Yes. But it was enough to last cause it still is lasting.

Q. Did they take you back to the same cell?

A. They take me back to the same cell.

Q. Now, do you know whether they took anybody else in and beat them?

A. Over in the night I heard screamin...I heard screamin. I said, "Oh, Lord, somebody else gettin it, too." So its was all later that we heard that Lawrence Guyot was there. You know, all the way we could do was just once in awhile, you know, just maybe see somebody passin. We just didn't know nothin. We was there and we begged for cold water and the only thing that was kinda nice there -- the jailer's wife and the jailer's daughter. We could tell when the jailer and the other men were out: they would bring us cold water, they would bring us ice. And I told em, I said, "You all are nice. You must be Christian people." The jailer's wife told me she tried to live a Christian life and I told her I would like for her to read two scriptures in the Bible. And I told her to read the 26th chapter of Proverbs and the 26th verse and she takin it down on the paper. And then I told her to read the 17th chapter of Acts and the 26th verse and she's takin that down. She never did come back after then. I think...I don't know what happened. But I told the jailer when he carried us to the trial. Anelle was able to walk but I wasn't able to walk. You see, a long time ago I had polio and it just had me where I couldn't hardly make it. So this man carried me down was the same man that pulled my dress up but, see, he didn't know. He didn't know that I had sense enough to know him. You see, he was bare-headed that Sunday and then that Tuesday-- when they had to carry us to that trial -- he had on a cap and I asked him, I said, "Do you people ever think or wonder how you'll feel when the time comes you'll have to meet God?" He said, "Who you talkin bout?" I said, "People treated us like we was treated in jail". He said, "Well, hell, don't say me cause I was off duty". But it was the same man. So I talked so nice and acted so dumb so I could get their names and they wouldn't be aware of what was happenin.

Q. Now, when was the first time that the FBI talked to you?

A. The first time they tried to talk to me was yesterday. That was a little before we got out of jail. But you know, I had been through so much I just told him, "You know, after all that sho otin when last year after those FBIs looked they didn't get nothin straightened out from Ruleville, I don't know, it just look like I don't trust them. They wanted to know what I was gonna say. I said, "Well, I can tell you one thing: I want to get out of here now! Because this is just a death cell". He said, "Well, he would like to talk". I said, "Well, I just can't do it." You see, I didn't know whether if I said what had happened to me then

he could tell the jailer, and I just couldn't do it...I just couldn't. If we could have just seen anybody. I said, "Well, I reckon now God is the only refuge that we have," because there wasn't nobody there from the justice department...nobody there to say nothin, just the "egrees out by themselves. I just wonder how long we have to keep sheddin blood and be beatin'. You know, that's pitiful...women like that. Everybody can have guards but the "egrees. Now we were just women there loose in that jailhouse bein beat like criminals and hadn't done nothin.

Q. Now, you did not see any of the things that happened to Guyot?

A. No, I didn't see nothin but Guyot's back yesterday. I talked with him. You know, they had him out in the little hall and I begged them to let my door stay open, you know, not the cell part but the big door. I was in the cell but I could walk as far as the door and I asked him to please leave that door open so we could just get a breathe, just a breathe of fresh air every once in a while. So that's how I got to see Guyot.

Q. Did he look like he was in pretty bad shape?

A. Yes, he did. Guyot look 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. Once I glanced at him they was carryin him. I don't know where they was carryin him to. But he crossed and was just lookin through a crack at him, through the bars you know, but he had his hands behind him. That was a death place down there. I don't see how in the world...I don't see how under the sun that a people could do human beins like they're doin them. It's just a death trap.

Q. Are you goin to Washington to talk to the Justice Department?

A. I just don't know exactly. I was supposed to go to N.Y., too. But, you know, there's somethin goin to have to be done. There really is. What we get isn't give to us. My tax money go just like anybody else's. But we don't have no protection. At the same time, if it was your wife and you thought one small lick had been hit there would have been a thousand and 50 soldiers there to protect that woman. But me....and I just don't know how long we can keep goin this way. And after I got out of jail, half dead, to find out that Medgar Evers had been shot down in his own yard....Somethin got to break. And they keep on sayin, "Wait", and we been waitin all our lives and still gettin killed, still gettin hung, still gettin beat to death. Now we tired waitin! !