

Fannie Lou Hamer

When Fannie Lou Hamer testified before the credentials committee of the 1964 Democratic National Convention, she told the world about the torture and abuse she experienced in her attempt to register to vote. Martin Luther King wrote that her “testimony educated a nation and brought the political powers to their knees in repentance, for the convention voted never again to seat a delegation that was racially segregated” (King, “Something Happening in Mississippi”).

Born to sharecroppers in Montgomery County, Mississippi, in 1917, Fannie Lou was the youngest of 20 children. She grew up on a Sunflower County plantation and in the mid-1940s she married Perry Hamer, a tractor driver on a nearby plantation. For the next 18 years, she worked as a sharecropper and a timekeeper for the plantation owner.

In 1962, [Robert Moses](#) and other members of the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee \(SNCC\)](#) came to Sunflower County to register black voters. Inspired by what she learned from SNCC workers, Hamer attempted to register to vote. When her landlord and employer learned of her attempt, he fired Hamer and forced her to leave her home. For her determination to register, Hamer suffered repeated threats. In 1962, on her way to [Septima Clark's](#) citizenship school in Charleston, North Carolina, Hamer was so severely beaten in the Winona, Mississippi, jail that she suffered kidney damage and was made partially blind. In 1963, Hamer, then in her forties, became the oldest SNCC employee and worked as a field secretary for the organization. By the time she cast her first vote in 1964, she was already very active in politics. “I cast my first vote for myself, because I was running for Congress,” she recalled (Hamer, “An Oral History”).

In 1964, Hamer helped organize the [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party \(MFDP\)](#), an alternative to the state's white-controlled Democratic Party. When the MFDP challenged the all-white Mississippi delegation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Hamer gave an impassioned account of the violence she and other civil rights activists had suffered while attempting to register. Although news networks started a live broadcast of her testimony, President [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) scheduled a live address at the same time, forcing networks to break away from her speech. Hamer closed her testimony, which was later broadcast in full on the evening news, by stating: “If the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America” (Lee, 89). Speaking after Hamer and the other MFDP delegates, King told the committee, you “cannot imagine the anguish and suffering they have undergone to get to this point,” and urged the committee to recognize the MFDP (King, 22 August 1964).

Both King and Hamer participated in negotiations with vice presidential nominee Hubert Humphrey in the days following Hamer's testimony. In a compromise backed by Johnson, the MFDP delegates were offered two at-large seats and a promise that the 1968 conventions would bar any state delegation that discriminated against blacks. While King supported the committee's compromise, Hamer was adamant that her entire delegation should be seated, telling the group: “We didn't come all this way for no two seats!” (Carson, 126). Although MFDP failed to unseat the regular Mississippi delegation and

only won two at-large seats, their efforts had a lasting impact on the democratic process.

Hamer, like King, was motivated by faith. Although she was only semi-literate, she had committed countless verses of the bible to memory. Reflecting on the [Nobel Peace Prize](#) he was awarded a few months after the MFDP challenge, King thanked the “great people,” like the “Fannie Lou Hamers” whose “discipline, wise restraint, and majestic courage has led them down a nonviolent course in seeking to establish a reign of justice and a rule of love across this nation of ours” (King, “A Mighty Army of Love”).

Hamer continued her career in political organizing and civil rights work as a delegate to the 1968 Democratic National Convention, where she berated authorities for failing to provide justice for King’s [assassination](#). In 1969, Hamer helped found the Freedom Farms Corporation, a nonprofit farming cooperative organized to alleviate hunger among poor blacks and whites in Mississippi. She remained active in civic affairs in Mississippi throughout her life and continued to speak and give interviews about the civil rights movement until her death in 1977.

SOURCES

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