

*Walk with Me: A Biography of Fannie Lou Hamer*  
by Kate Clifford Larson

“She had grown up believing that if she attended church, prayed, and comported herself as a ‘true Christian,’ God would...set right the injustice and misery that shaped her life and the lives of her family and community. She, and they, waited. Nevertheless, the discrimination, hatred, oppression, and abuse continued.” (p. 60)

Fannie Lou Hamer was born in October 1917 on the Mississippi Delta, the youngest of twenty children. Her parents, Ella and Jim Townsend, were tenant farmers, one step up from sharecropping. After attending school through the sixth grade, Fannie left to begin full-time labor in the cotton fields and to help care for her mother, who was losing her eyesight. Hamer was an eager student and an avid reader.

Author Kate Clifford Larson sets the story of Fannie’s life in the larger context of Jim Crow era Mississippi and early 20<sup>th</sup> c. southern Black culture. Moonshine and delta blues fueled juke joint gatherings, gave communities opportunities for fellowship and relaxation after back-breaking field work and the myriad indignities of segregation and discrimination. The KKK, White Citizens’ Council, and taxpayer funded Sovereignty Commission surveilled, threatened, and terrorized the Black community, with the support of local law enforcement, local and state political leaders, and compromised federal agents.

In the midst of this ironclad and all encompassing oppression, however, Black residents of Mississippi created their own organizations to fight for their rights to become first-class citizens. Local chapters of the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) worked to educate Black residents about citizenship and their constitutional rights, teach non-violent resistance strategies, and empower residents with the literacy skills they needed to pass Mississippi’s voter literacy test.

Voter registration and desegregation were primary goals.

In 1961, now married to Pap Hamer, Fannie sought medical treatment for uterine fibroids. Instead of merely removing the fibroids, the surgeon performed a complete hysterectomy without her consent. Combined with the recent death of her mother, this experience became a turning point in Hamer's life. She was "tired of the hard work and low pay. Tired of the lies, the disrespect, the deadly violence that stalked Black men, women, and children...Tired of having no voice." (p. 50) Not long after these traumatic events, Fannie traveled to Indianola, the county seat of Sunflower County, to register to vote.

Along with seventeen other courageous Black residents, Hamer was forced to stand in line for hours in the hot sun while the county clerk allowed only two people at a time to complete the application and literacy test. Riding on the school bus on the way back to Ruleville, they were pulled over and the bus driver arrested. While the travelers waited, watching the sun set, truckloads of Whites drove past, spewing hatred and threats. Fannie began to sing gospel and spiritual songs to comfort and reassure her fellow citizens. When they finally reached Ruleville, Hamer learned that her employer/landlord had been made aware of her effort to register. He came to the Hamer house and angrily informed Fannie that she must withdraw her registration or lose her job and home. Hamer informed him that she had attempted to register for herself, not for him. Friends in Ruleville housed and helped to support Fannie as she planned her next steps.

Hamer began working with the SNCC chapter in her community, finding inspiration in the young people who traveled to Mississippi for the Freedom Ride campaign. She became a respected leader in the group, for her dedication to enfranchising Black citizens, her strong speaking and singing skills, and for organizing food and clothing donations from the North during the winter months in Sunflower County when poverty ground hard on the residents.

In June 1963, Fannie and several civil rights activists from Mississippi traveled by bus to South Carolina for two weeks of Citizenship Training sponsored by SNCC. On their way home, some of the activists attempted to integrate a bus terminal in Winona, MS. The Interstate Commerce Commission had banned segregated bus facilities in 1961, but many southern states ignored the law. Local law enforcement arrived and arrested six of the activists. They were taken to jail where they were brutally beaten and assaulted. Hamer and other activists carried the emotional and physical scars for the rest of their lives.

After this traumatic event, Fannie and the other activists courageously recounted the abuse they suffered for the FBI and for NAACP leaders. They took some time to heal and rest. Then Hamer joined the work in Mississippi to found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, holding mock elections to demonstrate Black Mississippians' ability and desire to be full citizens. She also challenged white candidates for state legislative offices, all while continuously traveling in Mississippi and in the nation to promote voter registration for Black Americans.

The MDFD traveled to the DNC meeting in Atlantic City, NJ in 1964 to challenge the seating of the regular, all-white Democratic Party electors from Mississippi. Hamer testified powerfully before the Credentials Committee on national television, although President Lyndon Johnson called a press conference to divert televised attention away from her testimony. After political threats were issued against the sympathetic members of the committee, the MDFD challenge was defeated. Nonetheless, a victory was achieved when national news broadcasts that evening included Hamer's full testimony. The MDFD would return and raise a similar challenge to the regular Mississippi Democratic electors' seating at the 1968 DNC, this time successfully.

Fannie continued her work to lift up Black and low-income Americans to full citizenship for the rest of her life, despite the conflict between NAACP, SNCC, and SCLC which left less of

a locally led support network for this work. Hamer worked with some of the new Great Society programs introduced by the Johnson administration to make sure Black residents of Mississippi were fed, housed, educated, and encouraged to register to vote. These efforts continued amidst growing family responsibilities for two small grandchildren after her adopted daughter Dorothy passed away in 1967.

Fannie Lou Hamer died of breast cancer on March 14, 1977. At her memorial service, newly appointed U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Andrew Young spoke of Fannie:

Little did we realize that here amongst us was one of God's chosen, who would change the lives of us all...The seeds of social change in American were sown here by the sweat and blood...of Fannie Lou Hamer...thank you for soul strengthening our lives, so that we might live so that God can use us anytime and anywhere. This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine. (p. 231)