

Name _____ Date _____

Fannie Lou Hamer

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. b'

Notes

Fannie Lou Townsend was born on October 6, 1917, in Montgomery County, Mississippi. She was the 20th and youngest child of Lou Ella and Jim Townsend. Lou Ella and Jim were sharecroppers, farmers who use someone else's land and have to pay part of each crop to the landowner. Fannie Lou started working in the fields at a young age. Her family struggled financially, and she dropped out of school at age 12 so she could work full-time. In 1944, Fannie Lou married Perry Hamer. The Hamers worked as sharecroppers, too. Because Fannie Lou knew how to read and write, she earned the relatively well respected job of timekeeper on the plantation.

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2. b'

Notes

In the summer of 1962, Fannie Lou Hamer attended a voting rights meeting led by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Passed in 1870, the 15th Amendment stated that the government could not deny someone the right to vote based on their race. Nonetheless, at the age of 45, Hamer had never heard that Black people could register to vote. The next day, Hamer and 17 other people took a bus to Indianola, the county seat, to register. Officials prevented most of the group from even trying to register. Only Hamer and one other person were allowed to fill out the application. But they had to take a literacy test, a purposely difficult exam intended to block Black people from voting. They both failed the test and were sent home.

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On the drive back, police stopped the bus, claiming it was the wrong color, and issued the driver a fine. The passengers all chipped in to pay the \$100. While they waited, Hamer began to sing to keep their spirits up. Singing spirituals became a hallmark of Hamer's activism.

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3. b'

Notes

When Hamer returned to the plantation where she worked, her boss fired and evicted her for trying to register to vote. But SNCC field secretary Bob Moses had noticed her bravery in standing up to election officials. He thought she would make a great community organizer and hired her. In her new role at SNCC, Hamer spoke at conferences, helped communities register to vote, and distributed donated food and clothes to people in poverty. She also worked for desegregation in the South, which was largely controlled by racist Jim Crow laws. As she grew more visible in the civil rights movement, Hamer became a target of racist attacks. People sent her threatening messages, and someone threw a bomb at her house.

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On June 9, 1963, Hamer and a group of fellow activists were arrested for trying to eat at a Whites-only lunch counter. For this act of protest, the police sent them to jail, where they were brutally beaten. As a result, Hamer lost sight in one eye and suffered permanent kidney damage. She and the other activists were released a few days later, feeling even more motivated to effect change.

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4. b'

Notes

After her release from jail, Hamer co-founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The MFDP was a challenge to the existing Democratic Party, which supported segregation. In early 1964, Hamer ran for Congress as the MFDP candidate. Although she lost by a landslide to the incumbent Congressman, Jamie Whitten, the election put the MFDP on the map. That summer, the party co-organized a huge voter registration drive called Freedom Summer. Hundreds of college students, many of them White Northerners, went door to door to register Black voters. Some SNCC organizers were wary of having so many outsiders join the movement. But Hamer believed it was important to have a diverse group of people supporting their cause. She argued that if the MFDP was trying to break down the barrier of segregation in society, they shouldn't segregate themselves.

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In August 1964, the MFDP sent a group of delegates to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Hamer was elected vice chair of the delegation, which included 64 Black members and four White members. The Democratic Party had chosen an all-White Mississippi delegation. The MFDP hoped to persuade the Credentials Committee that because Black people did not have equal opportunities to vote in Mississippi, the Democratic delegates had not been legally elected. Hamer and others argued that the MFDP delegates should be seated instead. Hamer delivered a powerful testimony in front of the Credentials Committee. She spoke about her eviction from the plantation where she had worked as a sharecropper, just for trying to register to vote. She recalled the brutal beatings she had received in jail and the violence she encountered from her White neighbors.

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President Lyndon B. Johnson was counting on the support of Southern Democrats in his bid for reelection. He believed that seating the MFDP would lose him those votes. He held a last-minute press conference so that television networks would not cover Hamer's speech. But Hamer's testimony was so compelling that many news programs did broadcast it, and many Americans watched. However, the Credentials Committee bowed to pressure from Johnson and did not grant the MFDP's request to be seated. The Democrats offered two seats to the MFDP, but the MFDP rejected the offer.

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After the Democratic National Convention, Hamer continued her activism. She traveled the country, speaking about civil rights, desegregation, and the importance of voting. She founded the National Women's Political Caucus and helped introduce Head Start programs for low-income children. She also started the Freedom Farm Cooperative, which gave Black people economic opportunities they had been denied through sharecropping. In 1972, the Democratic party seated an interracial delegation from Mississippi at the National Convention.

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Hamer died in 1977 from heart disease and cancer. Several civil rights leaders, including Stokely Carmichael of SNCC and Ella Baker of the SCLC, spoke at her funeral. Hamer's legacy of courage, truthful testimony, and community organizing live on today.

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