

“Is This America?”

THE STORY OF Fannie Lou Hamer

On the 40th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act, *JS* recalls a woman who risked her life to fight injustice.

by Suzanne McCabe



Fannie Lou Hamer, on a visit with a Southern family to discuss voting rights.

CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

- Fannie Lou Hamer**, a sharecropper's daughter and voting-rights activist
- Mrs. Ella Townsend**, Fannie Lou's mother
- Mr. Jim Townsend**, Fannie Lou's father
- Jim**, Fannie Lou's brother
- Perry "Pap" Hamer**, Fannie Lou's husband
- Bob Moses**, a civil rights leader
- Mr. Marlow**, a plantation owner
- Police Officers 1 & 2**
- President Lyndon B. Johnson**
- Election Clerk**
- *Sharecroppers 1 & 2**
- *Narrators A-E**

*Red indicates major role. Characters were real persons except those marked with a *.*

About This Play

Fannie Lou Hamer was born in 1917 in Mississippi. Her parents were sharecroppers. The youngest of 20 children, Fannie Lou grew up in a wooden shack without electricity and running water. She lived most of her life in Ruleville, in the heart of the Mississippi Delta.

This was the land of "King Cotton," lush river valleys, and winding dirt roads. On local plantations, sharecroppers worked long, punishing hours in all weather to raise the region's most important crop. The cruel system of sharecropping grew out of Reconstruction. People without land, mostly black Americans, farmed plots on plantations and paid rent with the crops they raised. Plantation owners charged heavily for supplies and other "expenses," often cheating sharecroppers out of the money they had earned.

Unfair laws also kept blacks from exercising their freedoms, including the right to vote. Only blacks were required to take tests before registering to vote—tests designed for them to fail. This meant that they had no power to challenge the system. People who spoke out against it did so at great peril.

SCENE ONE

Narrator A: It is 1925. The Townsend family picks cotton on a plantation owned by whites. Eight-year-old Fannie Lou is working in the fields with her brother Jim.

Mrs. Townsend: Children, supper's on!

Fannie Lou: Bread and onions again?

Mr. Townsend: But you love onions.

Fannie Lou: Now I'm sick of 'em!

Jim: Me, too.

Fannie Lou: The white girl up the road eats steak every night. Why aren't we white, Mama?

Mrs. Townsend: Don't ever talk like that again, Fannie Lou.

Fannie Lou: But black people work all the time, and they get nowhere.

Mrs. Townsend: Respect yourself as a black girl, honey. Then other people will respect you.

SCENE TWO

Narrator B: Since shoes are too expensive, Mrs. Townsend ties sacks on her children's feet when they work in the fields.

Fannie Lou: This ground is frozen.

My feet are so cold, the skin on them has cracked open.

Mrs. Townsend: Singing will help us through our troubles.

[Singing:] I'm going to land on the shore, Where I'll rest for evermore.

Narrator B: Fannie Lou learns many songs from her mother. Singing always helps raise her spirits.

Mrs. Townsend: In a few weeks the harvest will be done. Then you children can go back to school.

Jim: Hooray! I've picked so much cotton, my hands are bleeding.

Narrator B: Children of sharecroppers

attend school about four months out of the year. The rest of the time, they work in the fields.

Fannie Lou: There's only one black child in my history book—and he's made out to be stupid. I wish they'd teach us about our own people.

Jim: And give us a reason to be proud.

Narrator B: One year, Fannie Lou's father manages to save a little money.

Mr. Townsend: Now we can buy some mules.

Fannie Lou: Let's call them Ella, Bird, and Henry.

Narrator B: Mr. Townsend rents land off the plantation for the family to farm. This means that they will be able to keep more of the crops they grow. He buys a wagon and tools.

Mr. Townsend: We're doing pretty well. The crops look good.

Mrs. Townsend: But I'm scared. White folks don't want us to do well.

Narrator B: One night, a white man slips into the yard and mixes a gallon of poison into the mules' food. The next morning...

Fannie Lou: Papa, do something!

Jim: It's no use. Ella, Bird, and Henry are dead.

Narrator B: Mr. Townsend cannot afford to buy more mules.

Fannie Lou: Now we'll never get anywhere.

Narrator B: Fannie Lou, then in the sixth grade, has to quit school to help support her family.

SCENE THREE

Narrator C: When Fannie Lou grows up, she marries Perry "Pap" Hamer, a sharecropper. They adopt two girls.

Fannie Lou: We been workin' our whole lives, Pap, and still we're dirt poor. There must be a way to change this.

Narrator C: In 1962, civil rights leaders come to Ruleville. Fannie Lou attends one of their meetings.

“We didn't come all this way for just two seats.”



Fannie Lou Hamer at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Hamer's testimony at the Democratic National Convention in 1964 was televised nationally.



“Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hook because our lives are threatened daily?”

Bob Moses: If you want change, you must **register** [officially sign up] to vote.

Sharecropper 1: I'd like to, but I'm afraid I'll lose my job.

Sharecropper 2: I tried to register, but I failed the test. Then they set fire to my house.

Fannie Lou: I'm not afraid. I'll go down to register.

Narrator C: Fannie Lou and 17 others ride a bus to the county courthouse in nearby Indianola.

Election Clerk: In order to vote, you need to know what a *de facto* law is.

Fannie Lou: I know as much about a *de facto* law, mister, as a horse knows about Christmas Day.

Narrator C: *De facto* law means a rule that is enforced by custom but is not in the law books. Fannie Lou and the others flunk the **literacy** [ability to read] test.

Fannie Lou: Even if I'd known the answers, they woulda found things I didn't know. Just so I'd fail.

Narrator C: On the way home, Fannie Lou and the others are stopped

by police officers. The bus driver is charged with driving a bus that is “too yellow.” In order to be released, the group must pay a fine. A defiant Fannie Lou begins to sing.

Fannie Lou (singing): *Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round, oh no— I'm gonna keep on walking . . .*

Narrator C: That night, when Fannie Lou returns home, Pap is worried.

Pap Hamer: Did the girls tell you that Mr. Marlow came by?

Narrator C: The Hamers live on Marlow's plantation.

Fannie Lou: Yeah. What'd he want?

Pap: To talk with you. He was angry.

Fannie Lou: Well, I'm gonna fix supper and forget about Mr. Marlow.

Narrator C: Just then, Marlow walks into the shack, a gun in his hand.

Marlow: We can't have you registerin', Fannie Lou. We're not ready for it.

Fannie Lou (calmly): I didn't go down there to register for you, Mr. Marlow. I went down to register for myself.

Marlow: Then get off my property.

Narrator C: Marlow storms out.

Pap: Pack your clothes, Fannie Lou,

and I'll take you someplace safe. Girls, stay here. I'll be back soon.

SCENE FOUR

Narrator D: Fannie Lou doesn't stay away from Ruleville for long. In December 1962, after studying the Constitution, she successfully registers to vote. Despite health problems, she also volunteers to become a voting rights **activist** [reformer]. For this, local officials harass her. She receives a \$9,000 water bill even though her house has no running water.

Moses: Will you go to a training conference with some of our other leaders, Fannie Lou?

Fannie Lou: I'll go wherever you need me.

Narrator D: On the way home from the conference, the group stops at a



Time Line: Freedom March

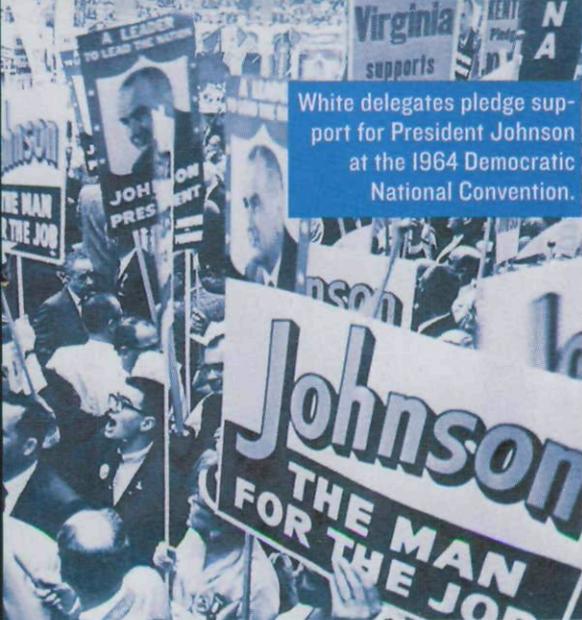
As late as the 1960s, African-Americans in the South faced violence when they registered to vote, enrolled in white schools, and entered white restaurants. Here are some milestones of the civil rights movement.

1955. In Montgomery, Alabama, African-Americans boycott buses that force them to sit in the back.

1960. Students stage sit-ins at all-white lunch counters in Greensboro, North Carolina.

1962. James Meredith becomes the first black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi.

TOP: JOHN DOMINIS/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: JOHN G. MOERES/CORBIS



White delegates pledge support for President Johnson at the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

bus station in Winona, Mississippi. Police officers arrest and jail them.

Police Officer 1: Where are you from?

Fannie Lou: Ruleville.

Narrator D: The officer kicks Fannie Lou and pushes her onto the floor.

Police Officer 1: You're the one who's been helping folks to vote.

Narrator D: He hands a leather strap to a black prisoner.

Police Officer 2 (to the prisoner): Make her wish she were dead—or you know what we'll do to you.

Narrator D: The prisoner whips Fannie Lou until the skin on her back is bruised and swollen.

Fannie Lou (singing): *This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.*

Narrator D: Fannie Lou sings in her cell, but she is badly hurt. Her kidneys are permanently damaged, her blood pressure is high, and she has a fever.

Police Officer 2: That'll teach you to get uppity.

Narrator D: After three days, the

group is released. The U.S. Justice Department later brings criminal charges against Winona officials. But at the trial, an all-white jury finds them not guilty.

SCENE FIVE

Narrator E: In the spring of 1964, Fannie Lou joins the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP).

Moses: We tried to work with the state Democratic Party.

Fannie Lou: It's no use. They hold their meetings in secret so we can't attend.

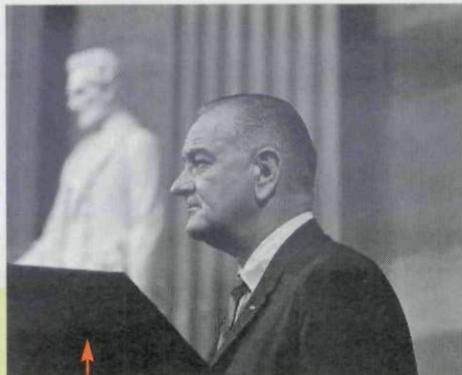
Moses: In August, we'll go to New Jersey. We'll send our own delegates to the Democratic convention [meeting] in Atlantic City.

Narrator E: Lyndon B. Johnson became President in November 1963, after John F. Kennedy's assassination. In 1964, Johnson is running for election to a full term as President.

Fannie Lou: What a long bus ride! Let's hope somebody here will listen to us.

Narrator E: Democratic officials will not allow the 68 MFDP delegates to be seated on the convention floor. President Johnson doesn't want to anger white voters in the South.

Moses: Fannie Lou, you have to



1964. Three "freedom fighters" are killed in Mississippi for registering black voters.

1965. The Voting Rights Act is passed with support from President Johnson.

1968. The Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination in housing.

speak directly to the American people. Tell them why we came here.

Narrator E: Fannie Lou appears before convention leaders and TV cameras.

Fannie Lou: If the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hook because our lives are threatened daily?

Narrator E: To draw attention away from Fannie Lou's speech, the President calls a press conference. But her speech is broadcast on TV that evening. Many people phone the White House and the convention to express support for the MFDP.

President Johnson: All right, we'll seat two of your delegates.

Fannie Lou: We didn't come all this way for just two seats.

Narrator E: In the end, the MFDP accepts Johnson's compromise.

AFTERWORD

President Johnson won the 1964 election and, in 1965, signed the Voting Rights Act. This set of laws eliminated many barriers that kept blacks from the polls.

Fannie Lou Hamer continued to fight injustice. She ran for office several times and helped impoverished blacks until her death in 1977. **JS**

Your Turn

WORD MATCH

- | | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| __ 1. activist | A. by custom |
| __ 2. register | B. ability to read |
| __ 3. de facto | C. meeting |
| __ 4. literacy | D. reformer |
| __ 5. convention | E. sign up |

THINK ABOUT IT

Why did Fannie Lou Hamer risk her life to bring about change?