

Fannie Lou Hamer

Fannie Lou Hamer was born on October 6, 1917 in Montgomery County, Mississippi to Jim and Ella Townsend.

Jim and Lou Ella Townsend

Had 20 children (Fannie Lou was the 20th)

She worked on a farm as a sharecropper for 18 years and her parents, too, were sharecroppers.

When Fannie Lou was in her 20s, she married Perry Hamer and they tried, unsuccessfully, to have children. Fannie suffered from a tumor and went into a hospital to receive treatment. There she was given a full hysterectomy, without her knowledge and without her consent. She was furious and this was one of the things that set her on a path of freedom fighting as many African-American women had gotten the same treatment in her area; so much so that there was a term for that unwanted hysterectomy — a “Mississippi Appendectomy.”

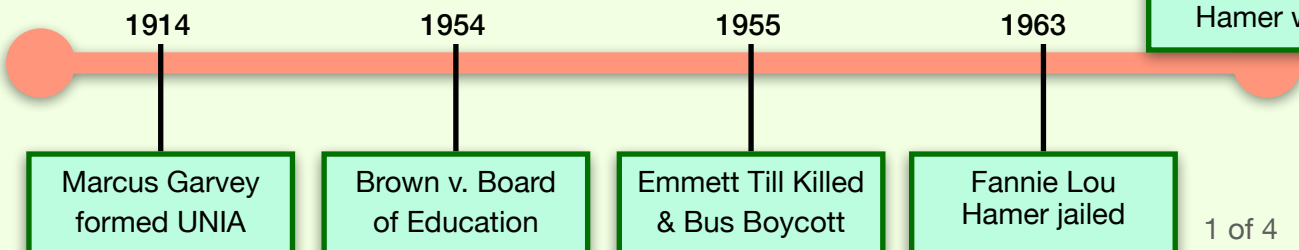
On August 31, 1962 Fannie Lou Hamer was one of eighteen people who went to Indianola in Mississippi to register to vote. When they got there they were detained and only two of them were allowed to take a literacy test in order to determine if they could vote. This was 1962! The group then left Indianola and started back toward Ruleville...but were stopped by city police and state highway patrolmen. They were taken back to Indianola and the bus driver was charged with driving a bus that was the wrong color. They had to pull together the money to pay the fine, then they went on their way.

When she got back to Ruleville, her children ran to meet her (she and her husband adopted children). They told her that the plantation owner, where she worked, was mad at her. Then her husband came to meet her and told her the same thing. The owner of the plantation, next came up and asked Fannie did she hear about what he had said.



She started working at age six, and picked 200-300 lbs. of cotton per week by age 13.

Medgar Evers was assassinated, while Hamer was jailed



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She said, "Yes."

He then said, "I mean it. You will have to go down and take back your registration, or you will have to leave here. And even if you do go to take it back, you still might have to leave here because we are not ready for that in Mississippi."

She told him, "I didn't go down there to register for you, I went down there to register for myself."

She had to leave that same night.

About two weeks later a home in which it was believed she was staying was fired upon with about 16 shots, two girls were shot in Ruleville, MS and another home was fired upon.

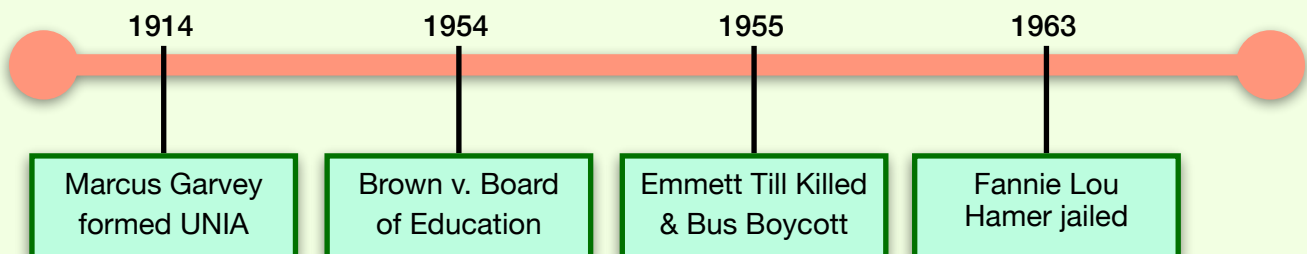
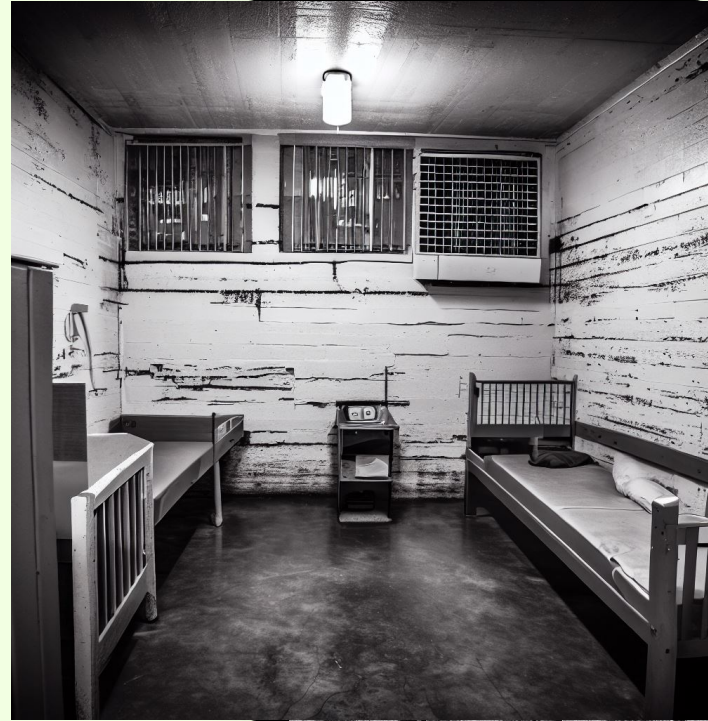
The violence was real, but that did not stop Fannie Lou Hamer from actively registering people to vote.

On June 9, 1963 she attended a voter registration workshop in Charleston, SC and was on her way back to Mississippi with the group, when they stopped in Montgomery County, MS. Four of the people got off of the bus to use the washroom and to go into a restaurant.

Four people were rushed out of the restaurant. Hamer got off of the bus to see what was going on, when one of the men there yelled, "Get that one there."

She and several others were arrested and she was kicked as she got into the police car.

They were taken to the booking room in the county jail and then transferred to cells.



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Fannie Lou Hamer was in a room with Ms. Ivesta Simpson, when Ms. Simpson was taken to another cell. Fannie could later hear Ms. Simpson screaming and the sound of licks being laid on her body.

She could hear a man say, "Can you say, 'Yes, sir,' nigger?" "Can you say it?"

Ms. Simpson would reply, "Yes, I can say, 'Yes, sir.'"

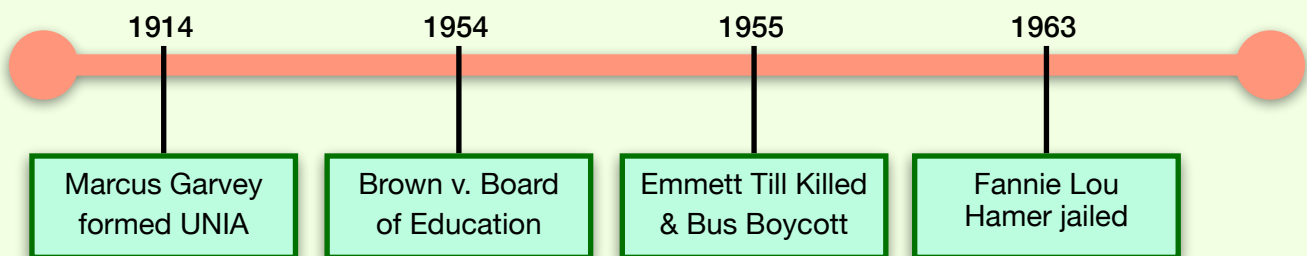
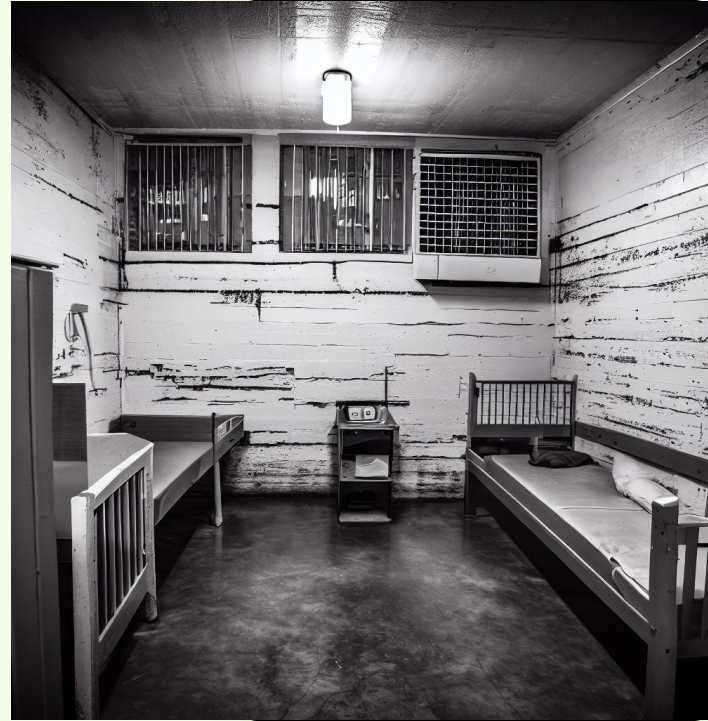
"Then say it," the man would yell.

She courageously replied, "I don't know you well enough."

Fannie was then taken into her own cell, where two African American prisoners were waiting for her. The patrolman ordered one of the prisoners to get the blackjack and he told Fannie to lay down, face-first, on the bunk bed that was in the room. The first man began to beat her as she tried to protect herself by taking her hands and covering the left side of her body (because she suffered from polio as a child).

The first man beat her until he was exhausted and the second man was ordered to take up the blackjack. He began to beat her as she worked her feet to defend herself, but the first man was ordered to sit on her to hold her down.

A white man then approached her, who was in the room, and began to hit her in her head and told her to stop screaming. It was days before members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and her husband could get her medical attention.



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Fannie Lou Hamer told her story at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, to the convention’s credentials committee. Fannie had helped to organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party because the traditional delegation from Mississippi was all-white and did not allow others to participate. She hoped to be seated among the delegates at the convention. Her testimony brought to the attention of the country the riveting situation of human and political rights in Mississippi at that time.

Her words, from the closing parts of her testimony, speak to us today...as she retold all that she had been through.

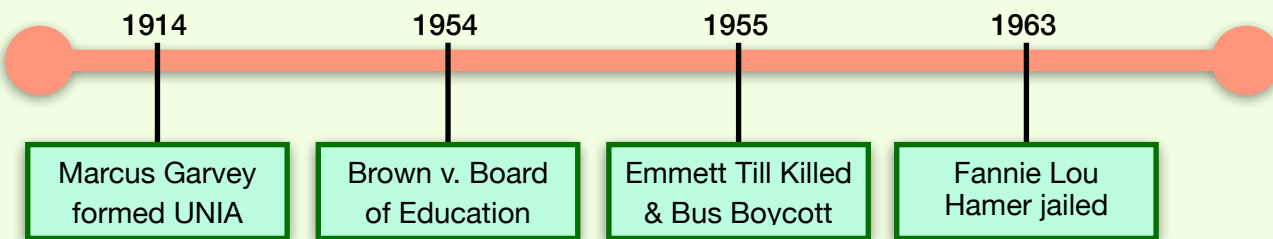
“All of this is on account of we want to register, to become first-class citizens. And if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now,

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 hooks because our lives are threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?”



“Your freedom is shackled and chained to mine, and until I am free, you are not free either.”



References: Smith, Danita. "Fannie Lou Hamer: "Is This America?"". Black and Education, 6-2-2017. Accessed online July 5, 2023, <https://blackandeducation.org/stories/2017/6/2/fannie-lou-hamer-is-this-america>

Image: Fannie Lou Hamer MS Freedom Democratic Party Delegate at the Democratic National Convention, Aug 1964 -U.S. News and World Report, photographer: Leffler, Warren K. Other images are AI and Adobe images.