

SNCC activist Charles McLaurin recalls Fannie Lou Hamer and Stokely Carmichael

On SNCC work with Fannie Lou Hamer and Medgar Evers

Charles McLaurin, Delta State University, July 11, 2019

The following are taken from my notes at Delta State University on July 11, 2019, during a weeklong workshop on environment, race, blues, and history called The Most Southern Place on Earth. They likely provide inaccuracies in wording, tone, and information.

I. Fannie Lou Hamer

I was the one who took Fannie Lou Hamer to vote.

I wasn't a Freedom Rider only because I was already in Jackson, Mississippi, working to mobilize the African American community to register vote with Ella Baker, a tiny little school teacher with a big presence with SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). We had a big challenge. How were we supposed to stimulate movement in the grassroots when African Americans were oppressed, suppressed, and depressed?



This is how I got there. I went to Jackson State College over the summer because that's where all the good looking teachers were going to be. One day I went to the state fair over there in Jackson. The state fair had been advertising all the time and in every place, and I wanted to go there. So I went, and when I tried to buy a ticket, the lady in the booth said, This ain't your fair. Ya'll had your fair last week. This is not your fair, n—, get away from here. So I left the booth and I went away and did some thinking. And after doing some thinking, I went back to the lady in the booth. She said, I told you to get your Black ass away from here, and if you don't, I'll call the police. So I went away and did some thinking, and then I went back to that booth, and she called the police. The police came and took me to jail. That was how, the next day, I met Medgar Evers, the field secretary for the NAACP (National Association for Colored People). Evers bonded me out. The guard came into my cell and said, Boy, there's a n— there to bust you out of jail. When I saw him, he was a handsome, well-dressed man. When I met Medgar it was 1961 and I was 20 years old. I said, Medgar, how are we going to stop Mr. Charlie from lynching us? He

said, Get your men with you, and bring them to my office. That's how I got involved, and that's how my friends got involved and went to jail with me.

So the effort to end segregation wasn't working, and the NAACP couldn't afford to keep busting people out of jail. John Lewis, who's now a congressman, was then the head of SNCC. Amzie Moore tells Bob Moses and Ella Baker, get SNCC to come down to Jackson and take over the fight against segregation and the right to vote.

Medgar Evers drew a circle around the Delta. He explained to us young people how the Mississippi congress was apportioned, and how long the application to register to vote was, and how people wanting to vote had to take complicated reading and writing tests about the Mississippi constitution, and how, after all of that, the county clerks still had the final say-so. Almost no Blacks were making it to the voter rolls. Plantation owners didn't want their workers voting, and didn't want them talking about voting. Plantation owners needed things to be the way they were. After Reconstruction, poll taxes, grandfather clauses, and reading and writing tests helped them keep Blacks from voting. SNCC could help people navigate, but they didn't know what to do with all of these obstacles.

I came to the Delta in 1962. Back then, SNCC was operating out of Amzie Moore's house. Both Moore and Evers were World War II vets; and like many who fought for their country—fought for their country against Nazis and ethnic control—coming home to a lack of citizenship was very upsetting. They came home to a lack of citizenship, but they also came home with operational organizational abilities.

Greenwood, Mississippi, was the main target in 1962 for the voter registration project. It was our responsibility to mobilize people around registering and voting. To register, you had to take that journey to the courthouse.



Ruleville in Sunflower County was my project. The mayor of the town arrested us the day after we arrived. The mayor walked over to our car and told us to come with him, and we said, For what? And he pulled out a gun and said, For this. Something else, when the mayor showed up on the street, all the Blacks everywhere around us disappeared. What we found working in the Delta was fear, fear everywhere. We were not conscious of why they were so fearful here. But most everybody was working on a plantation. They were sharecropping, and getting nothing. School teachers were getting fired for being associated with SNCC. The postmaster was opening people's mail. One kid got dragged by a tractor. People were getting burned alive and their body parts passed out as souvenirs. Plantation

owners had all the power, even in towns that were 80% Black. This was how I met Fannie Lou Hamer.

Fannie Lou Hamer came to a SNCC and SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) citizenship meeting, and volunteered to go to Indianola to register to vote.

On August 1st, 1962, we were on a bus, 18 people. That day, I still didn't know Mrs. Hamer. We went to the courthouse, we registered, and we were leaving town. The Indianola police came and arrested the driver for the bus being too yellow. It was illegal back then to use yellow buses for anything but taking children to school. But that same driver would take that same bus, every summer, to get people to work a farm in Florida, every summer. And now the bus is too yellow? So now there are 17 people on the bus, sitting in the heat, and no driver. Whites drove by in trucks, swearing at us. Fannie Lou Hamer had a good voice, a beautiful voice, and in all that heat and swearing, she sang songs that made us feel good.

When we got back to Ruleville, we were followed by the trucks, and they followed people to see where they lived. The next day, Mrs. Hamer's bossman came to her and told her to withdraw her application to vote or get kicked out of my plantation. She said to him, I didn't register for *you*; I did it for myself. But he made her choose, so she talked to her family and decided to leave that night. It meant leaving her husband, leaving her two daughters, and they had to stay and keep working so she wouldn't owe the plantation owner. She went to stay with relatives. It was my job to find her and get her to Tougaloo College in Jackson.



In that car, I was the oldest at 20 years old, but Mrs. Hamer was 44. She had a 6th grade education, but she was home schooled by her parents. She learned from newspapers from the bossman's house, radio, from the Bible. And she had such a voice, too. She could take those Bible stories and make people feel good. She'd say, If God is for you, the very gates of Hell can't stand against you. We worked with a lot of old people who grew up on plantations where the only entertainment they had was church. So we grabbed up that woman for SNCC right away. Fannie Lou Hamer was now a SNCC organizer.

But from 1962-1965, we had a lot of trouble registering people to vote. We were trying to grab anyone over the age of 21 and tell them to just make an X if they couldn't write. Somehow, we had to get out the message to the rest of the nation that 40% of the Mississippi population was being suppressed, oppressed, and depressed.

During the summer between the harvesting season, the feds cut off food aid, and Blacks living on plantations needed that aid between seasons, because they weren't getting paid. But this was actually a boost: now people on plantations started coming to the SNCC offices themselves. By then, we were deep in the communities.

We started the Freedom Summer, where young college kids would come down and help us with the registration, Freedom Schools and Freedom Farms. 90,000 people participated. 95% of the Freedom Summer kids were white. We put rich white kids in the homes of Black people without running water. That helped get an eye on us. The death of three civil rights workers brought us national, international attention, too. But there were a lot of racists with a lot of power, like Sam Eastman and J. Edgar Hoover.

So we decided forget the courthouse. We were going to elect and run and campaign on our own; no more fooling around with a system purposefully designed to deny us. We were going to run our own registration. We were going to make our own application to register. We ran Aaron Henry for governor, Ed King for Lieutenant Governor, and Fannie Lou Hamer for congress. We ran candidates for three out of the five Mississippi congressional districts.



At the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City that year, we planned to challenge the seats of the Mississippi delegation by denying them their credentials. We knew it wouldn't work, though, unless we could raise up a floor fight during the convention. We had 8 bid state delegations backing us, including the biggest, California.

Understand. Mississippi was a closed society. Word wasn't getting out that we were being held hostage. But Hamer on the convention floor had the mic, and she was getting the word out.

President Lyndon Johnson was running for re-election, though.

Getting to the convention floor, we needed at least one, legally qualified person. So, I brought Fannie Lou Hamer to get her legally qualified to run for Congress. I was reluctant about her, because I had it in my head that you had to have some education and titles before you could do something like that, and here was this sharecropper woman with nothing but a sixth grade education.

But we drove to Jackson to the Secretary of State's office. Mrs. Hamer says to the white lady at the desk, I want to run for Congress. There were 30 to 40 white women in there, all looking. These n—s want to run for Congress! The white lady gave us a pile of papers this big and told us to fill them out and come back. So, we filled them all out, all of them, and we came back to her. Then the white lady told us that the candidate needs to post a \$500 check. So we called our people and found a way to get it and went out there and got the check and brought it back to the office. Then the white lady said, And there's one more step. This needs to be signed by the campaign manager. So we left, but we couldn't find anyone to be the campaign manager. It was getting late. The white lady told us we had to file by 5:00, and this was the last day. I didn't know what we were going to do. Finally, Mrs. Hamer said, Mac: go in there and sign those papers and let's go home. I said, I don't know nothing about being campaign manager! She said, Mac, I

don't know nothing about running for Congress, so let's come on! She became the Vice Chair of the Freedom Democratic Party.

So there she was on the floor, giving her testimony, telling the whole world about us, but President Johnson was running for re-election and tried to preempt her testimony; he tried to keep her off the air. The stations cut her off and the nation didn't see all what she had to say. He was trying to hang on to what he considered his Southern base, the Dixiecrats. We were in there. We were feeling like we could win. We were looking forward to the floor fight. But Johnson preempted the testimony and one by one, cut off our allies. He fanoogled them, told them, if you do this, you won't get this, and if you do this, you'll get that. But we were still in there, stirring things up. So they decided not to have a roll call vote. That year, Johnson was voted in not by roll call, which we made dangerous for him, but by acclamation.

We did get the Democratic Party to say that—in the future—the party would not seat delegations that were not representative of their states, and women had to be allowed. That changed the political landscape forever. For one thing, once the Democratic Party was forced to be representative, the South started going Republican.

On her deathbed, though I didn't believe it then, in 1977, in Mound Bayou, Fannie Lou Hamer said to me, Mac, I've lived on a plantation all of my life. My grandparents were slaves on a plantation. My parents were sharecroppers on a plantation. I was a sharecropper on a plantation. I don't want to be buried on a plantation. Mac. Promise me. Okay, Mrs. Hamer, all right.

We raised \$120,000 to make a tall statue in Ruleville, reaching up to the sky, so that when people walk through the gates of that memorial garden, they'd say, Wow. There's Fannie Lou Hamer. And they're looking up.

II. Stokely Carmichael



James Meredith, who was forcibly stopped by Mississippi's governor three times from being the first Black man to enroll at Old Miss until Jack Kennedy personally interceded with the governor to let Meredith enroll at the law school, was going to march from Memphis to Jackson in 1968 when he was shot down by a white man. In the hospital, Stokely Carmichael and others went to his bedside to ask permission to complete the march.

By then, I was on Mr. Carmichael's staff. Mrs. Hamer asked me to go get Reverend Martin Luther King to come through the Delta, through Greenwood—one of our

test grounds for democracy. Mr. Carmichael, myself, and two other guys were sent ahead of the march to go and find a place for the marchers to spend the night in Greenwood. We got permission for a site before we got there. But once there, Mr. Carmichael sent us to find an alternative place on campus somewhere else just in case, but we were denied. By the time we got back, though, Mr. Carmichael was in jail. He had gotten permission for that first site, but white power came and shut him down. When he put the tents up anyway, they arrested him. The marchers were already on their way!



So, there was a park in the Black community, open on all sides. We decided we couldn't afford to tell the troopers anything, because they'd shut us down. We didn't tell the leaders of the march and we didn't tell the troopers nothing. Instead, we went from house to house, saying, Stokely's speaking at seven in the park. But Stokely's in jail! We didn't tell them that. We just said come on. And when the marchers came through Greenwood, and to the

park, we had the people all lined up, waiting. There was a big, big crowd.

The priests got Mr. Carmichael out of jail, and when he was, he was mad as hell. He got to the park and said, We need Black power!

The media took that phrase and scared everyone about his words—white people, Black people.

But we really did need power. And he said it, straight up.

III. Advice to Activists

There's a theme running through Black history and the Black community. And that theme is education. You've got to organize, and you've got to organize for specific things. Get you five people who think like you and organize around one thing. Then bring in five people each, and when you're all together, talk about what you want to do.

At each stage, we educated people. We printed primers with instructions on exactly what to say and what we were about.

Mobilize, then educate. Then stimulate, motivate, and get out of the way.