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Way of life in Mississippi

MRS. FANNIE LOU HAMER of Ruleville, Miss., seems to have vowed to follow the policy of the song with which she moves audiences to foot-stamping, clapping and fervor—"Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere. Go tell it on the mountain, to let my people go."

At conferences and meetings and in press interviews she tells her story. Will she suffer reprisals for telling the story of the Negro's life in the Delta of Mississippi? "I've been in hell for 46 years; it doesn't make any difference," Mrs. Hamer says in reply.

Then she recounts the troubles she has met since Aug. 13, 1962, when she traveled from Ruleville to the county seat at Indianola to register to vote as one step toward changing the hell she lives in.

That night when she returned to the plantation where she had worked for 18 years as a sharecropper and timekeeper she was met by the plantation owner. "He told me I would have to go back to Indianola and withdraw my registration or leave the plantation," she says. "I told him I wasn't trying to register for him; I was registering for myself. I left the place that night."

As life in Mississippi goes, the plantation owner informed Mrs. Hamer's husband, Perry, that if he would remain on the plantation to harvest the bean crop, he would be allowed to take their personal possessions with him when he left, Hamer acquiesced.

MRS. HAMER went to the home of friends in Ruleville. On Sept. 10, 16 bullets were fired at the home where she was staying. That was the night that two girls were injured by shots fired into the home of another Negro voter registration worker.

Mrs. Hamer began to work for the Council of Federated Organizations, coordinating body of civil rights groups working on voter registration in the state. She is a field secretary of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. Her husband works in a cotton gin during the cotton season.

The Hamers' living conditions are typical of those of the Delta Negro. They rent a small house which has no running water; they supplement their food supply by growing peanuts, beans and okra. They supplement their clothing through the donations from the civil rights organizations' food and clothing drive. Mrs. Hamer says: "The first long coat I ever had in my life came from the clothing drive. It's rather hard to find clothes for me because I wear a size 22½." "But," she quickly added, "the clothing drive is most important for the children. There are children out of school because they have no clothes."

Major and minor harassments are part of Mrs. Hamer's daily life. She told how, one night just before Christmas when her husband got up to go to the bathroom, there was a knock at the door. "My husband said, 'Come in,' and in walked S. W. Milam, the night police, and Dink Flemings, the Sundown Kid, a deputy. They asked him: 'What are you doing up this time of night?' You know S. W. Milam is the brother of J. W. Milam, the man who killed Emmet Till, and he's our night police."

ON JUNE 3 when Mrs. Hamer and other registration workers were returning from a voter registration workshop in Charleston, S.C., they got off a bus at a rest stop in Winona, Miss. They were all arrested. At the jail Mrs. Hamer said, "They gave a Negro prisoner a club and made me lie face down on a bunk. He beat me until he was exhausted. They gave the club to another prisoner and told the first to sit on my feet while the other beat me some more. They beat me until I was hard as metal." (At this point, Mrs. Hamer interrupted her tale to ask: "How long do they think we can take these things nonviolently?")

"I could hear the screams of Miss Annette Ponder, [another registration worker arrested]; they beat us all. The next day when Lawrence Guyot [another SNCC worker] came to get us out they arrested him and beat him. His shirt was all bloody. When the FBI finally came to take pictures, they had me hold my hands up; they took pictures of the front, but didn't take any of my back where I was beaten."

(Last December a federal jury found the law enforcement officers not guilty in a U.S. Justice Department suit charging use of law enforcement power to deprive a citizen of constitutional rights.)

"You see," Mrs. Hamer said of segregationists, "they are afraid. They're afraid that why we want our rights is so we can be and act just as they do. But I couldn't act like that. I don't want to lie and cheat; I just want to vote and live decent."

MRS. HAMMER's family has lived in Sunflower County (the home of Sen. James Eastland) for three generations. She does not intend to leave; she is not afraid to stay. "I tell them the truth," she said. "I told the policeman who had arrested me: 'And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth . . . Acts 17-26.' He was mad; he just shook. I don't have to raise my hand to hit back; I hit them with the truth, and it hurts them."

Mrs. Hamer often intersperses her speech with Biblical quotations. As often as the opportunity arises she reminds powers-that-be in Ruleville that Jesus once said: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised."

She is courageous and frank. She speaks of freedom and struggle at mass meetings when the Ruleville mayor and/or police are present with the same vigor as in their absence. She once remarked to an FBI agent: "If I get to Heaven and I see you, there I will tell St. Peter to send me on back to Mississippi."

—Joanne Grant
(Mrs. Hamer has urged that food and clothing be sent to her c/o I. Johnson, 820 Quiver St., Ruleville, Miss.)