Welcome to a Deep Dive I'm Reggie.

In this episode a tribute to the civil rights activist Fanny Lou Hamer in her own words.

I love Fannie Lou Hamer. If you don't know who she is you're in for a treat and if you do know her prepare to be inspired.

Thanks for joining me for: Fannie Lou Hamer says VOTE

Even now, in reaction to their loss, Georgia's conservative majority is working to enact policies that make it more difficult for poor black and brown voters to vote. In fact, across the south conservative legislators have been making it as difficult as possible to vote for poor black and brown voters as long as voting has been possible.

There some extraordinary black women working in Hamer's tradition today, I'll tell you about one of them, in particular, a little later but first Fanny Lou Hamer.

Born Fannie Lou Townsend better known as Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer is one of those people for me. Fannie Lou Townsend was born the last of 20 children. Six girls and 14 boys October 6, 1917, in Montgomery County, Mississippi. She left school at 12 years old to help support the family work on the sharecropping farm.

At the age of six, she joined the family picking cotton on the plantation where the family lived. In fact, sharecropping plantation life was the only life Fannie Lou Hamer knew.

In 1944 she met Perry Pap Hamer on the plantation where her family lived. She married Perry Hamer in 1945. They lived and worked on the D.W. Marlowe plantation near Sunflower County, Mississippi for the next 18 years.

I heard someone refer to sharecropping, as neo-slavery right down to the overseers who watched and "managed" the work. Black families worked off the land owned by white men sharing in the proceeds from the planting and cultivation of the crops. Of course, by payday, there was very little payday as each worker was charged for every item they used on the farm. There were even grocery stories that the plantations which meant that nearly every purchase was added to your tab. Comin and going until families often worked in the hole owning more money than they'd ever be able to re-pay. This is the world the Hamer knew for 40 some odd years, but Her world would change in the 1960s.

To back up a little in the 1950s, Hamer attended several annual conferences of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL), a civil rights and self-help organization that ignited her passion for activism.

Like many people, the 1960s was a time of heartbreak and illumination for the Fannie Lou Hamer. In 1961, Hamer was taken into surgery to remove a uterine tumor but instead, received a hysterectomy without her consent. This effort to control the black population through controlling poor black women's reproduction was routine. Tubal ligation and unauthorized hysterectomies were so common they were referred to as a "Mississippi appendectomy." Hamer and her husband subsequently adopted two girls.

Other than hunger pangs this would be the first of many physical assaults Hamer would endure as the cost to be paid for being poor, black, female, and importantly politically active in Mississippi.

In 1962, Hamer attended a public meeting held by SNCC, the Student's Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

SNCC clip 02

Reading a later interview Hamer says she knew something about blacks voting in overheard conversation between her father and other men but the act of voting seemed to have so little to do with her day-to-day life that she didn't pay any attention to the idea.

According to biographer Sina Dubovoy,

After the SNCC presentation, Hamer asked herself, "What do I have? Not even security." "The epidemic of lynching across the south terrorized blacks and the presences of the Klux Klux Klan kept many black folks quiet. As Dubovoy notes, "The Mississippi Delta was the world's most oppressive place to live if you were black."

On Aug. 31, 1962, Hamer and 17 other people took a bus to Indianola, the county seat of Sunflower County Mississippi, to in Hamer's words, "register to become first-class citizens."

When they arrived only Hamer and one other person were allowed in the clerk's office to register. Before they could register they were required to take a literacy test. They also had to report who they worked for and where they lived, information the Ku Klux Klan often used to find and intimidate black folks attempting to register to vote.

As part of the literacy test, the clerk asked Hamer to interpret a section of the state's constitution dealing with "de facto" laws. Practices that exist in reality, even though they're not officially recognized by laws. Most literacy tests were comprised of 30 questions and you had 10 minutes to answer them.

Hamer later said, "I knowed as much about a facto law as a horse knows about Christmas Day." She failed the literacy test telling the clerk she'd be back.

On the way home the bus they were traveling was stopped by police on its return and the passengers were harassed because the bus was too yellow. Well, it was a school bus after all. The driver and the passengers were fined and let go.

By the time she got back home Dean Marlowe, the plantation owner had been informed by the registrar that Hamer had attempted to register.

Here's Hamer explains the events

Clip Marlowe Plantation

In one fled-swoop she lost her job and her housing. Her husband and their daughters stayed for a while because Mr. Hamer was contractually obligated to work through the harvest season. As was the practice, much of their property was confiscated by the plantation owner and what was left was destroyed.

When the family could be together again they moved to Sunflower County in Mississippi.

Hamer said, "They kicked me off the plantation, they set me free. It's the best thing that could happen. Now, I can work for my people.
The right to vote in the United States for women and men of color has always been a persistent moving target. The 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870 prohibited states from denying a male citizen the right to vote based on "race, color or previous condition of servitude."

Some 30 years later the 19th amendment granted all women the right to vote using similar language to the 15th amendment. This did nothing to move most black women, in the south particularly, any closer to accessing the right to vote due to barriers like poll tax and literacy tests placed in their way.

Black people attempting to vote often were told by election officials that they had gotten the date, time, or polling place wrong, and when those things didn't work naked violence was used or threatened to keep black people away from the polls.

Slavery and other depravations had left a broad swath of poor blacks in the south uneducated or under-educated putting laws in places to ensure the black people stayed that way.

The state had created the disparity and deprivation then used it to keep blacks from voting. You can understand why Fanny Lou Hamer's blood boiled at the systematic disenfranchisement.

In 1963 Mrs. Hamer became the field secretary for SNCC and began training with others on how to help folks pass the literacy tests.

This next clip has Mrs. Hamer talking about being brutalized by the police as she returned home from this training. It is hard to listen to but important to hear.

Clip 04 – Beating

A harrowing story isn't it? Mrs. Hamer traveled the country telling that story as a part of her testimony. In the Baptist tradition, one is called upon to share your religious awakening. Hamer used the urgency of that sort of testimony to tell her story of brutalization in a way that made it impossible to look away.

One of the things I love about Fanny Lou Hamer is that she wasn't a traditional democrat. She helped co-found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) in 1964 in an effort to prevent the regional all-white Democratic party from stifling African-American voices.

Hamer and other activists traveled to the 1964 Democratic National Convention to stand as the official delegation from the state of Mississippi. The convention was meant to crown its candidate, Lyndon Johnson.

When it was learned that Hamer would tell that the story you just heard Johnson held an impromptu press conference making sure most viewers wouldn't hear Hamer's testimony.

The stunt backfired when the major networks, there were three at the time, played Hamer's testimony in full later the same evening.

Mrs. Hamer's profile rose after the testimony and though she began branching out to work with women's organizations, her primary focused remained poor black and now brown folks who underpaid and underrepresented.

Here is an interview she gave talking about groups like the Black Panthers and others demanding social justice.

Clip 05 - Interview 1968

The attempt to sideline women in the civil rights movement doesn't get nearly enough attention. In Mrs. Hamer's case, she was subjected to colorism, classism, and misogyny. Many college-educated black civil rights organizers found Mrs. Hamer's essence wasn't quite polished enough to be a spokesperson. There were people who refused to share the stage with Mrs. Hamer. The activist Roy Wilkins was heard to say, "That big woman needs to sit down." Implied in that of course is sit down and shut-up.
In 1969, she founded the Freedom Farm Cooperative in which 5,000 people were able to grow their own food and own 680 acres of land. In 1972, she helped found the National Women's Political Caucus. And during the last ten years of her life, she worked on issues affecting her community such as school desegregation, child day-care, and low-income housing.
She unsuccessfully ran for the U.S. Senate in 1964 and the Mississippi State Senate in 1971. In 1970 she led legal action against the government of Sunflower County, Mississippi for continued illegal segregation.

Clip 06 – 1964 Senate Run

Hamer frustrated some feminists and folks on the left with her vocal Pro-Life stance and her promotion of traditional marriage. When it came to her reproductive stance, her faith informed much of her position followed by the sterilization performed on her without her consent.

This notion that all black people are left-leaning, in the same way, seems to confound some white leftists then and now.

When Fanny Lou Hamer was not on the road she was at home holding court with visitors who beat a path to her door from across the United States and around the world seeking her advice on the most effective way to fight for the right to vote.

Mrs. Hamer never fully recovered from the injuries she sustained from that jailhouse beating.

Fanny Lou Hamer died on March 14, 1977, aged 59, in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. 1993 Hamer was posthumously inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1993.

She was once asked if she was scared by the violence all around her and she said.

"I guess if I'd had any sense, I'd a been a little scared,"

"But what was the point of being scared? The only thing the whites could do was kill me, and it seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time since I could remember."

For me, Fannie Lou Hamer is one of the clearest examples that your voice matters and her legacy continues.

Fannie Lou Hamer's legacy is manifest in people like Latosha Brown the community organizer and co-founder of Black Voters Matter. Brown and Hamer have many things in common. Both of them focused their work on the poor and under presented black voters. They both are and were riveting public speakers, and they both sing and sang.

I will include video links to both Mrs. Hamer's speeches and interviews as well as links to LaTosha Brown. Ms. Brown fills me with so much pride and optimism for the future that her hard work should be shared.

You can find videos, photographs, pictures, and other good stuff on the Deep Dive website at www.reggiedeepdive.com. Thanks to Joshua Rich for allowing me to use his beautiful composition Rain as the podcast's theme tune.

Fannie Lou Hamer says VOTE was researched and written by me, Reggie. Thanks for joining me. See ya next time.

Thanks for joining me. If you haven't signed up for the podcast please do.