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SISTERS OF THE MISSISSIPPI STRUGGLE:

EXAMING THE CONTRIBUTIONS BY WOMEN TO THE FIGHT FOR VOTING
EQUALITY IN MISSISSIPPI IN THE EARLY 1960s

By:

Morgan Ackerman

M.A. University of Louisville, 2015

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts in History

Department of History
University of Louisville
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May 2015

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A Thesis Approved on

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ABSTRACT

SISTERS OF THE MISSISSIPPI STRUGGLE: EXAMING THE CONTRIBUTIONS BY WOMEN TO THE FIGHT FOR VOTING EQUALITY IN MISSISSIPPI IN THE EARLY 1960s

Morgan Ackerman

14 April 2015

This thesis examines the contributions made by women in the fight for voting equality in Mississippi in the early 1960s. The covered period began with the immediate reaction to the *Brown Vs Board of Education* decision and culminates with the Mississippi Freedom Democrat Party's challenge to be seated in place of the regular (and proactively segregated) Mississippi delegation to the 1964 Democratic National Convention. The focus of primary concern of this thesis is the grassroots tactics utilized primarily by women, in contrast to the more visceral marches and civil disobedience espoused by male leaders, and how these differing tactics affected media coverage of the Civil Rights movement as a whole. Conclusions are made based upon personal interviews, letters, and especially newspaper articles and print media coverage of relevant events.

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¹ Quote from Fannie Lou Hamer, who used the phrase on multiple occasions to describe her home state.

² Quote from Stevie Wonder’s 1973 song “Living for the City”.

³ Quote taken from a 1962 internal SNCC memo, in which Bob Moses used the term ‘Mississippi monolith’ to describe the entrenched white resistance faced by the organization.

Blackwell, and Casey Hayden. Special attention is devoted to the actions of these women through the summer of 1964.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Exposition of topic and thesis; purpose and methods; opening statements.

Exposition of Topic and Thesis

The study of African-American history has changed greatly over the last half century. Before approximately the 1960s, the historical representation of African Americans had been that of a large but only marginally important group of virtually all slaves who toiled on Southern plantations but made no other real impact upon America. Popular history of the time seemed to have believed that Frederick Douglas, Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. Dubois, and George Washington Carver were the only notable African Americans up to that point.

During the height of the Civil Rights movement however, revisions of African-American history began to be made. Only then the centrality of African Americans in American history begin to slowly come to light. Although great African American scholars, such as Charles H. Wesley, Dorothy Parker Wesley, and Rayford W. Logan, among others, had been chronicling the many contributions to Americ

an society and history of African Americans for decades, only in the second half of the twentieth century did the African-American history begin to receive its due.

In many ways, Civil Rights history parallels African-American history as a whole. Until notable scholars such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. corrected the record, the narrative of Civil Rights history strongly insinuated that African-American activism began only in the 1950s; that the entire Civil Rights movement essentially laid dormant between Reconstruction and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Many scholars have now thoroughly eviscerated that misconception and it is now accepted fact that the 1950s marks only the time when the Civil Rights began to win nationally relevant victories and not the beginning of the agitation. Gone forever is the painting of Rosa Parks as simply a woman too tired to walk to the back of the bus; she is now known as a dedicated activist with a decades-long career.

As the narrative of Civil Rights history continues to evolve, the role of women therein continues to evolve as well. Recent scholarship has illuminated the contributions of women to Civil Rights from many perspectives. Taylor Branch chronicled Martin Luther King's aversion to women in positions of power⁴; Lynne Olson demonstrated women's persistence in all areas of the Civil Rights struggle, despite chauvinism both within the movement and from society at large, and Sara Evans argued that women's experiences in the Civil Rights movement directly inspired the subsequent women's

⁴ Branch chronicled Dr. King's reluctance to allow Ella Baker even temporary control of the otherwise moribund SCLC program Crusade for Citizenship, despite, in Branch's telling, Baker being more experienced than any other candidate. King did eventually allow Baker the position, though only as "acting director".

Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years: 1954-63*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988. 231-32.

liberation movement.⁵ On the subject of grassroots-level Civil Rights activism, John Dittmer wrote the seminal work, *Local People*. Though these works are all of great importance to the body of knowledge, this project is fundamentally different in focus from each. This research concerns itself strictly with the voting equality struggle, as opposed to the broader spectrum of Olson's and Evans's work. And, whereas Dittmer discusses both genders and deals strictly with the accomplishments of grassroots-level activism and its ramifications within the state of Mississippi, this project deals specifically with the unheralded heroines of the Mississippi movement. Furthermore, this project coming after such historians as these have already long proved the essential contributions of women, the major argument herein lies not in reproving that women made vital contributions to the Mississippi movement, but rather how those contributions affected national and local media perception and coverage of the Civil Rights movement as a whole.

Though many historians have studied the role of women in the Civil Rights Movement from many angles, there remains areas to be illuminated. Rather than the contributions of women to the Civil Rights struggle as a whole, either thematically or chronologically, this research focuses strictly on women in the fight for voting equality in Mississippi. This project makes no claim to chronicle the entirety of the struggle for African-American voting rights in Mississippi, as that could fill a volume, and the point could be argued that that struggle continues to this day.

⁵ Lynne, Olson. *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970*. New York: Scribner, 2001.

Evans, Sara. *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement & the New Left*. New York: Vintage Publishing, 1980.

To break such a large topic down to a thesis length argument, this project focuses on five women who particularly affected the Mississippi agitation for voting equality: Clarie Collins Harvey, Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Jackson Gray Adams, Unita Blackwell, and Casey Hayden. Featuring these particular women is not intended to insinuate in any way that they are more important than women not featured; far too many women played significant and heroic roles in the Mississippi struggle to feature all of them. Rather, the hope of this research is to illuminate five particular heroines.

Clarie Collins Harvey founded Womanpower Unlimited to assist jailed Freedom Riders and quickly built a full-fledged Civil Rights organization from it. Fannie Lou Hamer grew up on a cotton plantation in the Mississippi Delta; a viciously cruel environment which sculpted her into a brazen and forceful campaigner against the atrocities of Jim Crow economics. Victoria Jackson Gray Adams organized many meetings and rallies in the extremely dangerous Hattiesburg area and taught African Americans the essential reading and citizenship knowledge needed to pass registration tests. Unita Blackwell rose from political novice to helping organize the Mississippi Freedom Democrat Party. Casey Hayden was a founding member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who brought her fierce anti-segregation beliefs and organizational talents to the Mississippi movement from east Texas via Atlanta.

Though these women may have engaged in different activities, the common thread throughout all of their activism was concentration on grassroots-level organization of their loved ones, acquaintances, and communities into cohesive units which could then

attain through force of numbers voting rights. Suffrage⁶ equality was far from the only goal, but in many ways, was the essential victory which could make most other goals possible. As Mississippi freedom activists knew, many of their ultimate goals (integration, equal protection of law enforcement, equality in schools, etc.) would remain moot until African Americans in the state could vote in numbers commensurate with their population. Furthermore, African Americans knew they could not expect anything approaching integration or equality while segregated from participating in elections in a state that repeatedly elected politicians such as Theodore Bilbo, Ross Barnett, James O. Eastland, and Paul B. Johnson, Jr.⁷ For that reason, the women featured in this research focused their attention upon equal access to voting as a primary *raison d'être* within the Civil Rights movement.

The precise focus of this project is the tactics utilized by women in the Mississippi movement agitating for African-American voting rights and how the differing tactics affected media coverage of the Civil Rights movement as a whole. Unlike their much more studied male counterparts in the struggle, who could organize bus boycotts, marches on Washington, and visceral acts of large-scale civil disobedience and direct action, women tended to concentrate on the equally important grassroots-level organizing. These women, and many others, utilized the strong community networks

⁶ Though African Americans had officially had the right to vote, for men, since 1870 and women since 1920, the fact remains that African-American voting in Mississippi remained essentially non-existent until the 1960s. As African Americans were not allowed the right to vote by resistance at the local level, the term *suffrage* appears in this text as synonymous with voting equality in practice.

⁷ Before Johnson Jr. realized the catastrophic effects blatant racism and violence was reaping upon the state's economy, that is. Johnson Jr. was the governor who famously declared that James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner had likely faked their disappearance and gone to Cuba.

built around local churches. John Lewis agreed with this tactic, citing the communal importance of churches to African Americans. In a 1973 interview, he argued that, “The black church has a strong influence on the black community by using the church. The people in SNCC that went to organize people in some of the small towns and rural areas many times worked through local church groups, community organizations and the minister.”⁸

Massive events such as Dr. King’s marches brought national attention and media coverage to the Civil Rights struggle, and were absolutely necessary thereto, but community organizing was equally important. If not for the community networking and mass meeting organizational work done primarily by women, all the momentum and national attention generated by such events as the March on Washington could have easily been lost like leaves scattered in the wind. John Lewis articulated this in the 1973 interview. He spoke of the importance of community organizing, saying “In my estimation, it might be a helpful thing to have no one leader, no spokesman speaking out of Atlanta or New York”. Lewis continued, arguing an essential facet of the Civil Rights movement is “to have people dealing with their problems in their own communities, in their own neighborhoods, in their own counties, in their own congressional districts in all the states.” Finally, Lewis concluded that, in his belief, “Black people too often in the South during the days of the civil rights movement got the feeling that some Messiah is going to liberate them, going to free them”.⁹

⁸ Lewis, John. Interviewed by John Bass and Walter Devries, 20 November 1973. Accessed via The Southern Oral History Project, in conjunction with *Documenting the American South*, an archival collection maintained by the University of North Carolina. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/A-0073/A-0073.html>. 7.

⁹ *Ibid*, 42.

The momentum gained from large-scale demonstrations like the March on Washington was not lost however. Judging by today's free access to voting for all those qualified regardless of race, the Mississippi movement succeeded in its quest for equality in suffrage. Women played an essential role in that victory. The particular tactics utilized primarily by women, though male activists did these things also, included organizing communities, planning mass meetings (frequently at local churches), developing systems of passing along necessary information, keeping vital information away from the segregationist establishment and any African Americans who might have parlayed sensitive information to the repressive establishment. Such activities tended to garner less media coverage, but when newspapers (the media outlet upon which this project focuses) covered events organized and sometimes directed by women, the reports were often fundamentally different from large-scale events directed by male activists. It is then the primary thesis of this research that the grassroots, organizational tactics utilized by women in the fight for voting equality in Mississippi fundamentally altered media coverage of Civil Rights agitation altogether.

Methods

This research utilizes primarily archival material, unpublished where possible. The newspapers and periodicals cited herein were all accessed from each's archives. Of primary importance for this research are: *Time Magazine*, The Chicago Tribune, The Los Angeles Times, the Jackson Daily News, and the (Jackson) Clarion-Ledger.

Integral also to this project are documents accessed through a research trip to Jackson, Mississippi and New Orleans, Louisiana. In Jackson, the Margaret Walker

Research Center at Jackson State University provided invaluable documents, including the *Womanpower Unlimited* papers collection and many posters and fliers advertising events such as mass meetings from the period of this research. Also in Jackson, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History provided crucial local newspaper archives which feature prominently herein. The Amistad Research Center at Tulane University in New Orleans provided essential documents for this research. Housed there are the personal papers collections of Clarie Collins Harvey and Fannie Lou Hamer, as well as NAACP internal reports and a vast array of documents sourced in his project.

Online databases of archival material also proved essential to this research. The Henry Hampton Collection at Washington University Library's Film and Media Archive has digitized nearly all of the interviews conducted for Hampton's *Eyes on the Prize* documentary. From these interviews, firsthand accounts are cited and used to make conclusions herein. Archives digitized by the Wisconsin Historical Society provided much information as well. Primary among those collections are the Robert Beech Papers, 1963-1972, and the Hank Werner Papers. Furthermore, the interview of Clarie Collins Harvey cited in this project appeared in Robert Penn's 1965 collection of interviews with Civil Rights advocates entitled "Who Speaks for the Negro?" Penn's interviews are now digitized in an archive of the same name courtesy of Vanderbilt University.

Printed materials utilized include Unita Blackwell's autobiography, *Barefootin'*, as well as John Dittmer's seminal work on grassroots-level organization in Mississippi, *Local People*. Maegan Parker Brooks' *To Tell It like It Is: The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer* compiled several of Hamer's speeches in their entirety and was of tremendous assistance. John Lewis's memoir of the movement, *Walking with the Wind* gave effusive

praise to women involved in the Mississippi struggle and proved to be an essential source for this research.

This body of this research is organized into four main chapters. Chapter two offers brief biographical sketches of the women featured herein: Clarie Collins Harvey, Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Jackson Gray Adams, Unita Blackwell, and Casey Hayden. Not intended to be full biographies, these sketches focus on the events in these women's lives which prepared them for and propelled them into the dangerous work of Civil Rights activism during one of the most dangerous times to be doing so. Chapter three illustrates the legal and social situations in Mississippi prior to and in the early stages of the height of Civil Rights activism, from the immediate reaction to *Brown V. Board of Education* through approximately the mid-1960s. This chapter discusses some of the many legal challenges issued against segregation and voting disenfranchisement and newspaper coverage thereof. Chapter four deals with women in action. Contemporaneously with one another, each of the featured women began, in their own distinctive ways, to embark upon agitation to win suffrage as the ultimate goal because suffrage was known to be the gateway to most other goals of the entire Civil Rights movement. Chapter five chronicles the crescendo of this project: the Mississippi Freedom Democrat Party's (MFDP) challenge to be seated at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. As will be chronicled in Chapter five, the MFDP's decision, led by women, to reject the offered two seats as a compromise rather than replacing the segregated official Democratic delegation proved to be equally as controversial as the challenge itself in the accompanying newspaper coverage. Finally, Chapter six makes conclusions in support of the primary thesis of this research: the grassroots,

organizational tactics utilized by women in the fight for voting equality in Mississippi fundamentally altered media coverage of Civil Rights agitation altogether.

II. “LAND OF THE TREE AND HOME OF THE GRAVE”¹⁰:

Brief biographical sketches the life experiences of the women whom feature prominently in this research.

1. Clarie Collins Harvey

Clarie Collins Harvey was the daughter of Malachi and Mary Rayford Collins, successful owners of a funeral home and insurance company in the town of Louisa. She earned degrees from Tougaloo College, Spelman College, the Indiana Institute of Mortuary Science, Columbia University, and New York University. An astute businesswoman as well, Harvey built the family businesses into a multi-million dollar corporation, and co-founded State Mutual Savings and Loan, Unity Life Insurance, and the Industrial Insurance Company.¹¹

Though born into one of the few middle-class, affluent African-American families in early 1900s Mississippi, Harvey gravitated toward civil rights activism through her concern for African Americans more acutely penalized by racism than she. In a 1964 interview, she said that, “My own growth out of college, where I was concerned with

¹⁰ Phrase used on several occasions by Fannie Lou Hamer to describe her home state.

¹¹

<http://www.amistadresearchcenter.org/archon/?p=collections/findingaid&id=261&q=&rootcontentid=96089>.

people and how they developed, and how they would become mature” explained “the first half” of her interest in civil rights¹².

Harvey also recalled being inspired by an impressive familial lineage. She reported having a great-great-great grandfather who earned and maintained his freedom as a peanut grower and vendor. Furthermore, his son [neither named by Harvey] set himself the task of earning his own plantation, and worked so hard toward that goal that “When he come in from the fields you could hear the sweat sloshing in his boots”¹³, but did eventually succeed in accumulating a plantation in Lauderdale County which brought the family affluence for generations. Two generations later, Harvey’s father, Malachi Collins co-founded, along with four other prominent African-American men, the Jackson, Mississippi chapter of the NAACP in the latter half of the 1920s. As a founding member of the Jackson NAACP’s Youth branch, Clarie came of age alongside Ms. Gladys Noel Bates, filer of Mississippi’s first lawsuit for equalization of Caucasian and African-American teacher salaries.¹⁴

Harvey explained in a 1964 interview that she was deeply moved and highly influenced by her 1962 visit to Ghana, Africa for the 1962 World without the Bomb Peace Conference. Of her experiences, Harvey recalled, “My feeling in Africa was one of complete identification, a feeling of going home and that I had really found my roots...it made me feel I had finally touched base, that I had put my feet down solid on

¹² “Who Speaks For The Negro?” Archive by Robert Penn Warren and Vanderbilt University. Interview with Collins Harvey recorded 9 February 1964.

<http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/clarie-collins-harvey>

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ <http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/clarie-collins-harvey>.

what my roots were.”¹⁵ Harvey credited her African experiences as the nebulous of her drive to work toward integration: to risk her livelihood, property, and even her life toward the cause of ensuring that all people, regardless of location, ethnicity, or background could live “the abundant life.”¹⁶

In addition to a profound sense of having found her ethnic roots, Harvey also met Ghanaian Supreme Court Justice Madame Jeggi, who spoke candidly about the discontinuity between White Americans’ attitudes toward native Africans and African Americans. Harvey recalled Jeggi saying “They [White Americans] lean over backwards, being nice to us here, and yet we read about when they go home they kick you in the teeth... How do you think the mother feels when they are nice to the mother, and they mistreat the child?” Harvey said she had never thought of herself or her racial brethren as children of Africa, but once planted, that philosophy seeded thoughts on the necessity of union among all African Americans, to which Jeggi referred as “children of Africa.” Furthermore, Harvey realized in Madame Jeggi’s words a “whole new respect for us, looking on us as children of the Mother Africa because we are now asserting ourselves and really reminding the people of America that there are certain rights under the Constitution that were guaranteed to us-and we haven’t gotten them- we’re just a little bit late getting.”¹⁷

¹⁵ “Who Speaks For The Negro?” Archive by Robert Penn Warren and Vanderbilt University. Interview with Collins Harvey recorded 9 February 1964.

<http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/clarie-collins-harvey>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

2. Fannie Lou Hamer

Though both were native Mississippians who found their way to civil rights activism, the early life experiences of Clarie Collins Harvey and Fannie Lou Hamer could not have been much more dissimilar. In contrast to Harvey's birth into relative affluence, Fannie Lou Hamer was born into grinding poverty on a cotton plantation in rural Sunflower County in 1917, the twentieth child of sharecroppers James Lee and Lou Ella Bramlett Townsend. To make ends meet, Mrs. Townsend also worked as a domestic in the evenings after her plantation work had been completed, while Hamer's father was also a minister, occasional bootlegger, and ran a juke joint during the winter months. Hamer lived her first forty-five years toiling in a life of monotonous struggle of twelve to fourteen hour work days (commonly referred to as "can see til can't see") performing back-breaking toil in the blistering Mississippi heat while enduring the hardships of abject poverty, *de facto* slavery, Jim Crow oppression, artificially low wages, racial depredation, and lacking legal recourse against acts of overt exploitation and violence perpetuated against African Americans by Whites acting with legal and social immunity.

Fannie Lou Hamer later summed up her childhood by describing her native Sunflower County as being home to "The ruralest of the ruralest and the poorest of the poorest". At the time, local African Americans earned an average wage of \$1.25 per day; Lou Ella Hamer's domestic work frequently paid her twenty-five cents per day. Many African-American families in the area eked out an existence with combined salaries of approximately \$300 per year.¹⁸ Under such hardships, and even with all members of the

¹⁸ Lee, 2.

family contributing as much as each could (Fannie Lou herself began picking cotton at age six), the Townsends were much like most other African-American families in that their economic circumstances forced frequent meals of only field onions and gravy, tying cloth around their feet in place of shoes, and warming feet in the winter by standing in places where the cows had been laying.¹⁹

Joining the family in wage-earning by cotton picking at the age of six left little opportunity for young Fannie Lou Hamer to attend school. The daily reality of grinding poverty stipulated that she could only attend school while her work was not urgently needed in the fields, which meant the four winter months between finishing harvest work and beginning the cycle again the following spring. Her mother encouraged Hamer's education, and counselled her that it was proper for white children to attend school for seven months while she could for only four. In Lou Ella Townsend's words, the white children needed seven months to learn the same material Fannie Lou could master in four months.²⁰

Hamer genuinely loved school while she did get to attend, and her intelligence quickly became evident. She frequently won spelling bees and entertained adults with her ability to recite poetry. Even though Hamer received very little formal education, her intelligence manifested itself early and throughout her life, as evidenced by her quick and deft adaptation to the world of power politics into which she was later cast with remarkable rapidity.²¹

¹⁹ Hamer, Fannie Lou. *To Praise Our Bridges: An Autobiography*. New York, KIPCO Press, 1967. 1-3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

In addition to school years being only four months long, economic need forced Hamer to quit formal schooling at the age of twelve. She did however take advantage of other opportunities to gain education. After leaving school, she continued to hone her reading skills through Bible Studies, and teaching other sharecroppers to read and write. Furthermore, Hamer displayed both her own learning and desire to help her fellow sharecroppers by teaching them systems of weights and measures, basic proficiency in mathematics, and other skills which allowed them to better defend themselves from plantation owners' manipulations of cotton yields.²²

Hamer grew up surrounded by more than sufficient poverty, inequity, and lack of legal protection or recourse to inspire her to a life of activism. The struggles of poverty and the legal infrastructure which systematically prevented blacks from rising from it were prominent themes throughout Hamer's activism, but this motivation alone did not entirely account for her career. Additionally, Fannie Lou grew up in the presence of at least two extraordinary women before becoming equally extraordinary herself. As mentioned previously, Hamer's mother Lou Ella Townsend taught her children to love being African-American, as that was the way God intended them to be, to always respect themselves and act in a way which engendered respect for them among others, and to pursue as much education as was possible to attain given their circumstances. Whether or not Lou Ella Townsend foresaw the death of the endless cycle of sharecropping or blacks en mass demanding their legal, constitutional, and social rights as happened

²² Lee, 5.

decades later is impossible to say, but all signs indicate she was an amazing woman living too early for the country to appreciate her.

Circumstances of her maternal grandmother's life gave Hamer impetus of a much different, though even more urgent, variety. Having virtually complete control over the lives of African Americans, White men frequently exerted this control for lascivious purposes. Hamer may have spoken publicly about this less frequently than her more common themes of voting rights and equal access to education, experiences of gender-based degradation also deeply affected the trajectory of Hamer's life.

Life experiences taught Hamer from a very early age that African-American women in the Jim Crow South held virtually no agency over their own bodies and no legal recourse against rape. Fannie Lou Hamer first began to learn these lessons when she was too young to comprehend their full meanings as she listened to the stories told by her grandmother, Mrs. Eliza Bramlett. Of her grandmother telling these stories, Hamer later recalled that "She was a slave...I didn't know what to make of it as a child."²³

In addition to the stories of bondage into which Mrs. Bramlett had been born, she also told her grandchildren horrific tales of the sexual abuse she endured. As Hamer learned from Mrs. Bramlett, her mother was one of only three children fathered by Mrs. Liza's husband. The other twenty children the couple raised were conceived by white men who forced themselves upon Mrs. Bramlett. To fully comprehend that fact it bears repeating: during the course of her life, [white] rapists [acting with legal and social immunity] impregnated Mrs. Liza Bramlett twenty times.²⁴ In a later interview,

²³ Hamer, 21.

²⁴ Lee, 9.

Hamer's sister, Mrs. Laura Ratliff, explained that Bramlett warned girls frequently how "The white folks would do her," saying that "This man would keep her long as he want to and then he would trade her off for a little heifer calf. Then the other man would get her and keep her as long as he want- steady having babies, and trade her off for a little sow pig."²⁵

Not only did Southern society generally allow white men to indulge their sexual desires toward black woman, or at least turned a blind eye thereto, black women also had no legal recourse to prevent rape or hold perpetrators thereof responsible. With no practical access to voting, laws which blatantly discriminated against them, and legal prohibition against blacks from testifying in court for any reason and especially against a white person²⁶, black women faced virtually no prospect of legally punishing their rapists. Furthermore, fighting back against any such crime carried the ever-present threat of retaliatory lynching, which often occurred greatly out of proportion to precipitating events, or for no provocation at all.

In contrast to Mrs. Bramlett's experiences, or likely as a result thereof, Mrs. Bramlett's daughter and Hamer's mother, Mrs. Lou Ella Townsend became renowned for her personal courage and protection of her own children as she fought [both figuratively and literally] to prevent her children from having similar experiences as her mother, to the extent it was possible. In perhaps the most stunning example of Mrs. Townsend's fearless protection of her children, she tussled with the plantation boss, who had struck her son. Mrs. Townsend succeeded in body slamming him to the ground after he had

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ <http://www.abhmuseum.org/2012/10/the-five-pillars-of-jim-crow/>

mocked her warning. Perhaps out of shame, or lack of wanting to lose as diligent a worker as Mrs. Townsend, the boss neither retaliated nor ever again crossed the path of Mrs. Townsend.²⁷

Lou Ella Townsend also inspired her daughters, especially Fannie Lou, in ways less dangerous and violent. She worked hard to instill in Fannie Lou pride about being African- American, especially when Hamer said she wished she was white so she would have the nice things she saw Mr. Marlowe’s family enjoying. Also, when Hamer complained that the white children went to school (which she very much enjoyed) for seven months per year while she and the other African-American children only received three months of schooling, Townsend explained that that was because the White children required twice as much schooling to learn the same curriculum. Furthermore, Mrs. Townsend also made for Hamer a black doll to play with and begin to internalize the lesson that black is equally as beautiful as white. In Hamer’s recollections, her mother counseled her that “I want you to respect yourself as a Black child, and as you get older, you respect yourself as a Black woman...If you respect yourself enough, other people will have to respect you.”²⁸

As these lessons began to sink in for Hamer, she initially began to resent white people, before she realized that the true enemy toward which ire must be directed was the system which propagated inequity. As she recalled later, she began to learn that “It wasn’t because this cat [the white man] was the best, but it was because of the kind of crook that he was, you know, the white man was such a crook.” Before hateful, if

²⁷ Lee, 12.

²⁸ Lee, 13.

factually grounded, sentiments took hold though, Mrs. Townsend instructed her daughter in the futility of hatred and instilled in her love and acceptance for all people and to remember their Christian faith demanded their doing so. These lessons later became manifest in Hamer's speeches. One frequent comment she made therein was that "Ain't no such of a thing as I can hate and hope to see God's face."²⁹

Once Fannie Lou Townsend married Perry "Pap" Hamer in 1944³⁰, she moved to the nearby plantation of Mr. W.D. Whitlow and soon after took the position of timekeeper. That coveted position involved keeping records of hours worked, bales of cotton brought in by each cropper, weights of each bale and monies owed to croppers. Hamer quickly began to use her position to figuratively and literally tip the scales back toward justice for sharecroppers. She was known among croppers for subtle acts of revolt such as placing stones on the scales to counter owners' rigging thereof, for garnering fair prices for cotton, teaching the croppers mathematics and reading skills they needed to prevent themselves being cheated, and intervening directly to Mr. Whitlow on their behalf.³¹

Fannie Lou Hamer grew up with at least two incredible and indomitable women to inspire her to fight against the social wrongs which surrounded them. She also inherited the intelligence and strength of character to do just that. These facts combined

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Fannie Lou and Pap's marriage seems to be common-law as no records are known to give a precise date. Different sources have given the marriage date as early as 1942 and late as 1945. The 1944 date was given by Hamer herself in an interview and for the purposes of this research is assumed correct.

³¹ Lee, 19-23.

with the lifetime of toil and racial depredation which surrounded Hamer to inspire Fannie Lou Hamer to become an unlikely but very forceful and influential Civil Rights activist.

3. Victoria Jackson Gray Adams

Much like Clarie Collins Harvey and Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Jackson Gray Adams had chafed against the constraints of racism and Jim Crow economics all her life. She recalled being inspired by an impressive familial lineage, just as Hamer and Harvey had been. In an interview, Adams explained that during her formative years, her grandparents had greatly influenced her with their strong independent streak. Her grandparents had been landowners whom instilled self-reliance into their progeny. As Adams recalled, “Being raised in an environment where people were basically dependent upon themselves for their livelihood... had a lot to do with what I think because, first of all, Papa did not allow us to work out [as domestics in white homes].” Furthermore, Adams’s grandfather would not allow her to seek employment, arguing instead that as a landowner, she would be her own employer and have access to crop and timber earnings with which to support herself.³²

When asked about her entrance into civil rights agitation, Gray remembered the event which she called her “first step into the movement.” She recalled that, at the age of ten or eleven (1936 or 1937),³³ her father had been forced by lack of employment opportunities to temporarily move the family to Detroit. At a stop during their return to Mississippi a short time later, the family followed the other passengers into the bus

³²Adams, Victoria Gray. Interview conducted by Charles Marsh, 06 April, 1995. 1-2. Accessed via **The Oral History Project Archives**: <http://archives.livedtheology.org/node/107>. 2.

³³ Adams herself was unsure of the exact date.

terminal, only to be stopped by a “very kind looking white hair older lady,” who shepherded them away from their fellow passengers and to the ‘colored’ waiting area. “For me it was rough, very rough. I was very angry” Adams recalled, “And there’s a tremendous difference in the quality of the facility. For me, that was revealed there.”³⁴

Adams further recalled a second major event which, when combined with the bus terminal incident, cemented her determination to fight the wrongs of socially and legally enshrined racism. Adams recalled her grandfather being very ill when she was sixteen. The doctor made a house call and wrote a prescription which Adams’s grandmother instructed her to take into town and get filled. Adams hurried to the bus stop, only to have the driver wait for her to walk up to the open doors, slam them shut in her face and drive off. Adams recalled that being the culmination of many incidents, after which she “was in protest.” Of the time after the bus stop, Adams says “This was going on every day-don’t drink out of this water fountain or use this restroom; come to the back door to be fed. Well, I simply didn’t eat. I wasn’t going anywhere [that was segregated] because I didn’t have to do that and I didn’t.”³⁵

At the heart of Adams’s opposition to racism was the juxtaposition of the grave importance placed by society upon different skin color and her own family’s wide range of skin colors. According to her, she was always aware that the only true difference between her and the (relatively) privileged whites around her was skin color. She recalled being bemused by the belief that such a trivial issue created such vast differences in people, in the minds of white segregationists. This became especially true for Adams

³⁴ Adams interview, 6.

³⁵ Adams Interview, 7.

when she looked to her own family, and the tremendous differences in skin tones. Adams explained that her father's father was the son of a slave mother and plantation-owner father. Furthermore, her mother's mother was the scion of an African-American father and Native American mother. This caused a lineage of widely divergent skin tones, about which, in Adams's telling, no one in her family made a fuss or even cared about. Adams described her confusion at this discontinuity by saying, "So, I didn't understand it. That was a primary thing with me. I know the people that I knew just didn't understand it any more than I did, but they accepted it. I couldn't accept that."³⁶ Adams continued to refuse to accept the racial status quo, and her activism graduated from a part of to the focus of her life after a chance meeting with Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes.

4. Unita Blackwell

Just as Fannie Lou Hamer, who rose from giving her first ever civil rights speech to a nationally-televised live speech at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in only two years, Unita Blackwell experienced a similar meteoric rise in the Civil Rights movement. She wrote in her autobiography that she had never been inside her county courthouse at the beginning of June 1964, and by the end of that same month, she was helping establish the Mississippi Freedom Democrat Party (MFDP) and preparing to attend the Democratic National Convention as a member thereof.³⁷

³⁶ Ibid, 8.

³⁷ Blackwell, Unita. *Barefootin': Life Lessons from the Road to Freedom*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2006. 46-47.

Unita Blackwell pointed to a childhood of racial discrimination and abject poverty in Helena, Mississippi (just north of Pascagoula) as the onus which propelled her into the movement. In her autobiography, she wrote that “I’m proud of my rich, dark coloring now, but coming up it was a source of hurt and shame for me.” Blackwell recalled being inspired by her mother and other members of her family who admired her education, but had been forced by poverty out of school and into the cotton fields. Relative to their lack of educational opportunity, as Blackwell remembered, her finishing the eighth grade was then equivalent to graduating college today.³⁸

Unita Blackwell recounted also the pivotal event which she credited with launching her into the civil rights movement. In her telling, she and new husband, Jeremiah, visited his grandmother, Mrs. Vashti Blackwell, in Mayersville, Mississippi (along the Mississippi River, opposite the Arkansas-Louisiana border) soon after marrying. Once there, Mrs. Blackwell, herself fairly well educated and a former teacher in a local Rosenwald school,³⁹ asked her son and daughter-in-law to help her regain her welfare checks. Mrs. Blackwell had been disqualified for assistance after the welfare office found out that Jeremiah had begun sending money home from his job as a cook for the Army Corps of Engineers. Unita deduced that the only way for the welfare office to have found that out was by illegally opening Mrs. Blackwell’s (and assumedly countless other African-Americans’) mail. Unita went to the post office and confronted the postmaster about the federal offense they were committing by opening others’ mail. She remembered that he denied any involvement, but Mrs. Blackwell had no further problems

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Schools financed by Julius Rosenwald and established by Booker T. Washington in the early 1900s for the education of African Americans.

receiving her welfare checks. Unita Blackwell remembered that, at that time, whites were entirely unaccustomed to being confronted or even questioned by African Americans, and shocked at her bravado to do so.⁴⁰

Confronting the white establishment for its blatant racism and disregard of the law had a profound impact on the budding Civil Rights heroine to be as well. Of the experience she later wrote, “Miss Vashti was happy about getting her welfare check, and I was pretty pleased, myself, that I’d been successful. I think this was the first time I had ever stood up to a white person to get what rightfully belonged to another black person... I had taken charge of something. And I had made a difference.” “One black woman” Blackwell continued, “had changed the way one thing was done in the Mississippi Delta. If that could happen at that time and place, I knew it was possible for one person to make a difference anywhere, anytime.”⁴¹

Blackwell emerged from her confrontation feeling exuberant, but quickly thereafter was reminded of the harsh economic reality for Mississippi African Americans. She and Jeremiah were just able to eke out a living with her dividing her time between the cotton fields and as a domestic, and he cooking for the Army and picking and chopping cotton, but she sought more. She wrote of an intense desire to break free of the cycle of poverty, of subsistence existence, and being under the thumb of the white establishment and Jim Crow economics. After three years of traveling to Florida to pick tomatoes, the couple was able to buy a brand new television. From this purchase, Unita

⁴⁰ Blackwell, 54-55.

⁴¹ Blackwell, 54-55.

Blackwell heard for the first time news of rising tide of the Civil Rights movement and found her calling.

Upon returning to Mississippi from the Florida tomato-picking season in 1964, Unita Blackwell began hearing about the emerging Civil Rights movement. She remembered hearing about the Freedom Rides, but they came nowhere near Mayersville. Blackwell's action in the movement was kick-started by a secret meeting of organizers and a few African Americans brave enough to attend the meeting held at the farm of Mr. Henry Sias. Mr. Sias was retired African-American school teacher in his eighties who carried guns, owned his own land, and unabashedly refused to kowtow to the racist establishment. Blackwell reflected that, before the meeting, she had never given voting much thought. She described it as "one of those understood rules in Mississippi: Voting was for white people only. So ignorance and fear kept most of us right where we'd always been."⁴² After the meeting, Mr. Sias told Jeremiah civil rights workers, and SNCC organizers in particular would be arriving soon.

True to Mr. Sias's word, as she sat on her front porch seeking shelter from the intense June heat, Unita Blackwell saw SNCC workers for the first time. In her words, she immediately knew they were outsiders by their fast, purposeful walk and told her friend Coreen that she would like to meet some of the organizers coming to town. Coreen counseled against it, reminding Blackwell that if the establishment found out about it she could easily end up dead. "I don't know what difference it'd make; I'm dying anyway" Blackwell remembered responding.⁴³

⁴² Blackwell, 66-67.

⁴³ Ibid, 71.

Unita Blackwell needed only to wait until the following Sunday for her chance to meet the two organizers and become part of the movement. In her telling, they walked into her church, Moon Lake Missionary Baptist Church in nearby Rolling Fork, just as she was teaching her Sunday school pupils the lesson of God helps those who help themselves. The organizers, Louis Grant from New York and Bob Wright from Virginia, spoke to the congregation, and scheduled a registration education meeting. Blackwell attended the meeting and, as Grant and Wright asked for volunteers, her Sunday school lesson came back to mind. “God helps those who help themselves” she pondered. “I figured the time had come to put those words into practice myself. I was barefootin’ into new territory, and I didn’t know where the road would lead me, but I knew I’d never get anywhere if I didn’t take the first step.” Jeremiah indicated to her his desire to stand and volunteer as well, and for the couple to do so simultaneously as a show of solidarity. Once he was ready, “He got up and I got up. I’ve been standing up ever since.”⁴⁴

5. Casey Hayden

Casey Hayden came to the Mississippi movement from east Texas via Atlanta. The daughter of a politically liberal, University of Texas graduate, single mother and granddaughter of the county sheriff, Hayden remembered being “an outsider from the beginning”. After being active in anti-segregation efforts while a student at the University of Texas, Hayden was a founding member of SNCC and SDS (Students for a Democratic Society, along with first husband, career activist Tom Hayden) and a Freedom Rider with the Albany, Georgia group. She worked for Ella Baker in Atlanta

⁴⁴ Ibid, 73-75.

before coming to Tougaloo, Mississippi to work with literacy projects and Freedom Votes. She joined the MFDP at its inception.⁴⁵

When asked about her Mississippi work for *Eyes on the Prize*, Hayden explained that, “We were creating parallel institutions, that's what that was all about, so that a freedom vote, when blacks can vote, we were running parallel votes. The freedom schools were a similar strategy which we developed later. There was a lot of discussion of parallel institutions at the time for people who were excluded from regular, institutional functionings [sic] in the culture.” Despite Hayden’s many reasons to fear for her safety in Mississippi- she was an agitator, an outsider, a woman, and Caucasian- she recalled usually not feeling afraid, such was the fervor of her belief the movement was doing the right thing.⁴⁶ Even if being Caucasian made her work more dangerous, Hayden felt it was vital that SNCC, and the voting rights struggle continued to have both African Americans and Caucasians working toward a freer society. In Hayden’s words, “another aspect of Freedom Summer was that... we wanted to try to create, on a human level, actual human interactions between blacks and whites, which was impossible with the social structures [as] it was [sic] in the state, just to break it open on a personal level in local communities.”⁴⁷

Contrary to being consumed with fear, Hayden remembered a profound sense of purpose and exhilaration at the work she and her SNCC compatriots were accomplishing.

⁴⁵ <http://www.crmvet.org/vet/haydenk.htm>.

⁴⁶ Interview with Casey Hayden, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on May 15, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection. Accessed via: <http://digital.wustl.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eop;cc=eop;rgn=main;view=text;idno=hay0015.0191.047>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

As she reflected, “This was the early sixties and... kids on college campus were reading the existentialists and... the black students were like heroes, they were like existentialist heroes and people wanted to get close to this.” Hayden continued, “It was exciting, and it was very beautiful, it was beautiful, it was happening, it was beautiful. And it drew white intellectuals, it was real, it was more real or more profound than most anything else happening and they wanted to get close to it... I felt privileged to be there.”⁴⁸

Casey Hayden was also briefly married to Tom Hayden, life-long liberal activist and politician and founder of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Tom Hayden was one of the earliest northern Whites to come to Mississippi to register African Americans during the height of the Civil Rights heyday, arriving the first time in 1961. As precarious as being a vanguard of the Freedom Summer volunteers was, Tom Hayden felt the work was necessary. He later argued that, “the thinking was, if this simply remains a black thing, where the white official violence is visited upon black sharecroppers or black civil rights workers, how will a country that is significantly prejudiced respond?” He then added, “The conclusion was that for all the problems in it, it would be necessary to bring down the white sons and daughters of the country's middle class from the liberal north by the hundreds, by the thousands if possible.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Interview with Tom Hayden, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on December 2, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection. <http://digital.wustl.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eop;cc=eop;rgn=main;view=text;idno=hay0015.0986.048>

III “HARD-TIME, MISSISSIPPI”⁵⁰

An outline of the cultural and legal situations in Mississippi from the immediate reaction to *Brown V Board of Education* through roughly the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Though ever-present, racial hostilities in Mississippi (and throughout the South) entered a decade-long period of relative calm following the end of World War II. Post-war prosperity allowed many Whites a feeling of economic well-being at a time when racial problems seemed to have ameliorated themselves. While employment and wages for whites rose, the NAACP and other organizations continued to push for legislative changes, but those could (and usually were) defeated easily, either through court subterfuge or open, legally-sanctioned racism, or the sociologically intransigent reaction to legal victories in civil rights cases. Warnings about massive social upheaval, civil rights agitators being minions of communism, and other such dire forecasts had proven false as repercussions of court victories could be abated and exclusionary voting laws and voter intimidation kept African-American voter turn-out (and even registration) at levels far too small to be significant.⁵¹

Though southern whites may have felt complacent on racial issues, African Americans were nonetheless very much working toward long-standing goals of integration and equality. Southern whites may largely have not noticed these efforts at

⁵⁰ Quote derived from the 1973 Stevie Wonder song “Living for the City”.

⁵¹ “Southern Negroes & the Vote: The Blot Is Shrinking, But It Is Still Ugly” *Time*, 29 July 1957.

the time, being distracted by post-war affluence and recovery, high employment, and general prosperity for American whites. Even if outside the notice of southern whites, racial activists continued working toward equality, and even gained momentum. John Dittmer described 1945-1955 as a decade of “Intensifying black activism in Mississippi, beginning with modest voter registration efforts and culminating in an attack on the color line in the state’s public schools.”⁵² As Dittmer detailed, Mississippi was in 1945 a state in desperate need of racial reforms. He cites 1950 census data, which recorded that among the African-American population, two-thirds of men worked in agriculture, eighty percent of those as either day laborers or sharecroppers on white-owned plantations. Black women fared no better; only 58,000 black female Mississippians in 1950 worked outside the agricultural sector, and two-thirds of those labored as domestics.⁵³ Furthermore, the lack of occupational opportunities precipitated a vast discrepancy in median income. In 1949, White Mississippians earned a median annual income of \$1,614⁵⁴, while Black workers earned a median of \$601 and one-third earned less than \$500 per year.⁵⁵

A lightning bolt shattered the decade-long calm felt by whites on 14 May 1954. On that day, newly appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Earl Warren issued the court’s unanimous decision in the landmark *Brown v Board of Education* case. After lower courts supported states’ rights to conduct education as they saw fit, the

⁵² Dittmer, John. *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995. 19.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 19-20.

⁵⁴ As compared to the national median of \$5,292, according to: U.S. Department of Commerce. “Current Population Reports: Consumer Income”. Washington: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 18 February 1951. Accessed via: www.iowadatascenter.org/datatables/urbanrural/urstincome19502000.pdf.

⁵⁵ Dittmer, 20.

consolidation of five cases challenging segregation, the death and replacement of Chief Justice Fred Vinson, and hearing the case twice after initially being unable to come to a consensus, America's highest court famously ruled "We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."⁵⁶

The prospect of integrated schools shocked and emboldened whites across the South. Many whites may have been able to disregard the propaganda of all rights for African Americans being communistic at its root, but the specter of endangering white *children* to the hobgoblins of white stereotypes of African-American behavior proved too much for a large number of white southerners. The assumption of white students' learning having to be slowed to the presumed lassitude of African-American children's learning, and worst of all, white teenage girls left unprotected from the perceived lascivious eyes and minds of young black men motivated many whites to form and join citizens' councils, support (if only through silence) the invigorated Ku Klux Klan, and to support avowedly racist politicians and state-mandated segregation; a movement known under the blanket term 'massive resistance'.

Mississippi Circuit Court Judge Thomas P. Brady encapsulated the extent to which whites opposed voting, or any legal rights, for African Americans in his pamphlet *Black Monday*. Issued in direct response to *Brown*, Brady's pamphlet spared no vitriol for the decision, for African Americans, or for the perceived unconstitutional power-grab by the Supreme Court over the rights of individual states. Brady also attempted to cloak

⁵⁶ <http://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/get-involved/federal-court-activities/brown-board-education-re-enactment/history.aspx>.

his racism in the guise of pseudoscience and the argumentative power of vocabulary beyond the capacity of much of his intended audience.⁵⁷ In doing so, Brady took his place in a long line of bigots who have sought vainly to attach scientific backing to an inherently unscientific but economically convenient and culturally accepted institution.

About *Brown*, Brady wrote that, “As Stalin, the master of confusion, long desired, the people of America have finally been driven into quandary. Torn between conflicting ideals and misled by deceptive half-truths, they know not what to believe and are lost in a morass of indecision”. Brady then made the object of his ire clear, writing “There is however one segment of our populace which is not confused. It knows what it wants, and whither it wants to go. It is the communized and socialized minority groups.”⁵⁸

Brady then drifted to the main point of which he sought to convince readers: anyone supporting African Americans having any civil or legal rights had to be a communist and direct minion of Stalinist agents determined to wreak havoc and ultimately destroy America. Brady painted the *Brown* decision as “An illegal usurpation of the legislative prerogative of those State Legislatures and of Congress. The hordes of Russia and Red China know that another deadly blow has been dealt our Constitution, that outmoded, effete document which still precariously stands in the way of a new, brave communistic order in this country.”⁵⁹ Following Brady’s example, tying civil rights advocates to communism became a favored trope in the 1950s as segregationists sought

⁵⁷Bond, Bradley G. *Mississippi: A Documentary History*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003. 230-233.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 230-233.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*.

to discredit the Civil Rights movement by aligning it with communism, which segregationists assumed most Americans despised even more than Civil Rights.

An article in the Jackson Daily News the immediate aftermath of *Brown* predicted violence as a direct result of the decision, but was careful to place the blame for that violence squarely upon the Supreme Court rather than the actual perpetrators. According to the article, “Human blood may stain Southern soil in many places because of this decision, but the dark red stains of that blood will be on the marble steps of the US Supreme Court Building.”⁶⁰

Ms. Aubin Newman’s letter to Judge J Skelly Wright, then of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, protested the *Brown* decision and demonstrated the nearly psychological fear some southern whites felt about integration. Therein she argued that “If the Government tried to force the [white] children to go to [integrated] schools, I imagine we would hear of many mass murders and suicides, because so many [white] people rather see their children dead than live a lifetime of shame and degradation which integration would cause.”⁶¹

As many scholars have chronicled, the *Brown* decision motivated many white Southerners to organize and mobilize into White Citizens’ Councils and other groups to collectively oppose civil rights for blacks. This happened quickly, and by 1958 was already reaping political consequences. In that year, George Wallace lost the Democratic Gubernatorial campaign in Alabama to hardline segregationist John Malcolm Patterson.

⁶⁰ Webb, Clive, ed. *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 3.

⁶¹ Bond, 239.

Upon conceding defeat, Wallace famously told supporters that “No other son of a bitch will ever out-nigger me again.”⁶²

Wallace was of course an Alabama politician, but his actions and sentiments are included herein because they are more remembered than contemporaneous Mississippi governors, who held similar positions. Mississippi governors of the time included Hugh White (1936-1940, 1952-1956) who infamously refused to order an inquiry into the Emmitt Till murder, and Ross Burnett (1960-1964), who once declared that the reason Mississippi’s percentage of population being African-American was the highest in the country was because African Americans “Love our way of life here, and that way is segregation.”⁶³ Collectively in 1956 a coalition of Southern senators issues the “Declaration of Constitutional Principles” (commonly known as the “Southern Manifesto”) which decreed southern sentiments on *Brown*, and accused the decision of “Destroying the amicable relations between white and negro races that have been created through ninety years of patient effort by the good people of both races.”⁶⁴

Made without intent of irony as that statement seems to have been, it at least accurately described the status of blacks relative to whites at the time. Upon its formation, SNCC workers stated the grievous situation clearly, stating, “The present condition in which the South finds itself is more dangerous than Reconstruction. It is more insidious than Reconstruction. It is more dangerous in that the present Court decisions are built on gradualism. To induce us to agree or to force us to comply step by

⁶² Webb, 5.

⁶³ Jackson Clarion-Ledger, September 25, 1963; James W. Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (New York, 1966), pp. 273-274

⁶⁴ Bond, 247.

step.” SNCC authors continued, explaining that, “In Reconstruction there was the attempt to force the hideous monster upon us all at once. Our ancestors rallied and stopped it. Its weakness then was that they attempted to enforce it all at once. It will take special precautions to guard against the gradual acceptance, and the erosion of our rights through the deadly doctrine of gradualism. There is only one course open to us and that is stern resistance. There is no other alternative.” Finally, SNCC added, “Negroes are now trying to...expose the real basis of white supremacy. Without the right to register and vote Negroes cannot take part in any phases of Mississippi’s form of republican government. What recourse do the white supremacists leave Mississippi Negroes, if Negroes cannot voice their opinions at the polls?”⁶⁵

As organizations such as the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), and CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and COFO (Council of Federated Organizations) began grassroots canvassing the South for approximately the next half decade, very little changed in the day to day lives of the vast majority of black southerners. For all intents and purposes, once Fannie Lou Hamer began her activist speeches, she did so in an environment still controlled by the same politicians and mindset which paved the way for the murderers of Emmitt Till, George W. Lee and many others to escape justice and gave no sign of breaking any time soon.

⁶⁵ SNCC *Voter Registration Laws in Mississippi*. SNCC Papers, 1959-1972 (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1982) Reel 67, File 340, Page 783. Accessed via: http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/C_CC7c_VoterRegistrLawsInMS.htm.

State Attorney General J.F. Coleman's 1954 statewide count of voters revealed the magnitude of African-American voter registration problem which faced by Civil Rights workers in the following decade. The first-ever full census of voting in Mississippi concluded only 22,104 African Americans out of a total of nearly 500,000 eligible to register actually were. At the same time, 503,000 Whites were fully registered. Among other glaring irregularities, Tunica County, in the far northwest corner of the state, had an eighty percent African-American population but only four black voters. Noxubee County, with sixty percent black residents, and twelve other counties did not have a single registered African American.⁶⁶ Coleman made no secret that he commissioned the study to assess the threat of African-American voting. The Jackson Daily News quoted him as explaining that its purpose was to "get a clear picture of what strength whites face in their fight to keep segregation."⁶⁷

To further strengthen the white stranglehold on political power, Mississippi voters would, the Jackson Daily News announced, decide on a proposal already approved by the 1954 regular session of the state legislature which would require all new voters to interpret "without any help whatsoever... a statement on the meaning of constitutional government." County registrars would have sole discretion to approve or deny applicants' interpretation. Editors reported that "legislatures made no secret that the amendment was designed to further restrict the number of Negro voters."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ "Negro Vote in the State Is Below the 25,000 Mark". Jackson Daily News, 24 March 1954.

⁶⁷ "Coleman Claims Negro Vote In State Will Total Only 22,104 In Tuesday Election". Jackson Daily News, 23 August 1954.

⁶⁸ "Negro Vote in the State Is Below the 25,000 Mark". Jackson Daily News, 24 March 1954.

The segregationist establishment used any means possible to get civil rights cases dismissed from courts and maintain the status quo which SNCC raged against. In April of 1950, Forrest County African Americans sued County Court Clerk Luther M. Cox, whom they claimed refused to allow them to register to vote because of their race. At issue was a state law which allowed registrars to selectively require an interpretation of the state constitution as part of the registration process. Cox argued the state gave him that authority and he had therefore done nothing illegal. Federal District Judge Sidney C. Mize agreed, dismissed the case, and ruled that African Americans must first “take their case to the State Election Commission before coming into a state or federal court.” In an accompanying article, the Daily News also reported that Judge Mize had recently dismissed on a similar technicality an NAACP lawsuits for teachers at black schools to receive pay equal to their counterparts in white schools.⁶⁹

Court-supported racism did not escape the notice of national media forever however. By the mid-1960s, *Time* magazine was regularly issuing editorials on a vast array of racial problems in the South. In November of 1965, *Time* editors reported that, “All-white juries have steadfastly refused to believe the evidence in the trials of whites charged with murdering civil rights workers; only one assailant in 26 such murders since 1960 has been sentenced to prison.”⁷⁰ Among whites cleared of race-based crimes were James Lackey, Cecil Myers and Howard Sims, who murdered Washington D.C. assistant superintendent of public schools and decorated World War II veteran Lemuel Penn on a

⁶⁹ “Suit of Negroes in Vote Refusal Case Scheduled”. Jackson Daily News, 09 October 1950; “Dismissing Vote Denial Charge, Mize Rules Negroes Must Seek State Help First”. Jackson Daily News, 12 October 1950.

⁷⁰ “The Courts: How to Reform Southern Justice”. *Time*. 19 November 1965.

Georgia highway in 1964. Though the trio's guilt was never in doubt, an all-white jury had acquitted them, prompting federal charges under US Legal Code 18, Section 241. However, "Two federal judges tossed the indictments out, ruling that freedom from murder is not one of the rights protected by Section 241."⁷¹

Aid for segregationists' efforts stretched to the highest positions of Mississippi state government. During the Jim Crow era, a line of staunch segregationists had served in the governorship of Mississippi, including Hugh L. White, who refused to order official investigations into the Emmitt Till and George W. Lee murders, and Ross Barnett, who infamously claimed that African Americans loved segregation. Such attitudes permeated Mississippi government throughout the period, making racial progress virtually impossible until the advent of federal involvement. Then state Attorney General Joe Patterson epitomized state intransigence when he spoke of his proposed injunction against implementation of the Voting Rights Act when he explained that Mississippi politicians "realize Congress has the right to protect individuals under the 15th Amendment. But we don't concede it the right to write the election laws of the state of Mississippi."⁷²

By October, 1957, African-American Mississippians' struggle for voting equality had begun receiving increased national media attention, even if limited and timid in nature. Writing for the Associated Press (AP), journalist Tim Parker observed on 05 October 1957 Governor J.P Coleman, Senator James O. Eastland, and State Representative John Bell Williams claimed on a television panel show days before that

⁷¹ "The Courts: How to Reform Southern Justice". *Time*. 19 November 1965.

⁷² "Mississippi: Into the Ditch" *Time*, 17 September 1965.

“There is harmony between the races in the state.” According to Parker, Governor Coleman contended that African Americans were “Not ready to vote in Mississippi.”⁷³

Fannie Lou Hamer’s autobiography contradicts Governor Coleman’s contention of African Americans’ antipathy toward voting. As will be discussed in Chapter four, Hamer recalled being immediately invigorated by the possibility of voting as soon as she learned she had the constitutional right to do so. In her telling, she volunteered to register during the first SNCC meeting she attended and straight away grasped the possibilities voting held. Unita Blackwell wrote of a similar feeling toward voting in her autobiography. She corroborated Hamer’s account saying that, when the organizers asked for volunteers to register, she “stood up, and I’ve been standing up ever since.”⁷⁴

Conversely, Ross Barnett, state Governor from 1960 to 1964, expressed sentiments similar to Governor Coleman’s throughout his term. In one particular exchange, Barnett mocked the passage of the twenty-fourth amendment to the US Constitution, which banned poll taxes as unconstitutional. “The poll tax won't keep 'em from voting... what keeps 'em from voting is Section 244 of the Constitution of 1890.” Barnett jeered. Section 244 requires that voter registrants read or have read to them and demonstrate reasonable comprehension of any section of the Mississippi Constitution of 1890, a document which Barnett himself joked “damn few white men and no Niggers at all can explain.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Parker, Tim. “Negroes Eyeing Right to Vote”. *Jackson Daily News*, 05 October 1957.

⁷⁴ Blackwell, 75.

⁷⁵ “Mississippi: A Vote for Reason”. *Time*, 27 August 1965.

Staunch segregationist and registrar of Humphries County⁷⁶ G.H. Hood unwittingly echoed Barnett's remarks when called to a public hearing on voting irregularities in February of 1965. The commissioners leading the hearing had noticed a glaring discrepancy in the implementation of Section 244. Though all candidates were required to interpret a section of the State Constitution, White voting applicants had almost invariably been asked to explain Section Eight, which states simply that American citizens born in Mississippi are also citizens of the state, but African-American applicants were virtually assured of being asked to interpret Section 182, a far more complex section demarcating the conditions by which tax benefits may be offered to encourage manufacturing. Upon being asked to interpret Section 182 for the commission, Hood declined rather than admitting that he also could not.⁷⁷

Victoria Jackson Gray Adams illustrated a further absurdity in requiring applicants to interpret such a complex passage as Section 182: there were at the time no educational qualifications required for the position of registrar. Many registrars themselves did not understand the passage and almost certainly failed many African-American registrants who interpreted it perfectly. Adams belittled this frustrating fact by saying she knew of Ph.D.-holding African-American applicants being told they had not properly interpreted Section 182 by registrars who had not completed grammar school.⁷⁸

Mississippi NAACP president Medgar Evers quickly disputed the notion that African Americans were either uninterested or unprepared for suffrage rights. In

⁷⁶ Just northwest of Hinds County, which contains Jackson.

⁷⁷ "Interpretation, Anyone?" *Time*, 26 February 1965.

⁷⁸ Adams Interview,

http://archives.livedtheology.org/sites/archives.livedtheology.org/files/tmp/Downloadable%20Version%20of%20Full%20Interview%20Victoria%20Gray%20Adams%204-6-1995_0.pdf.

response to Coleman’s television panel comments, he told Tim Parker that voting registration “could be the first occasion for our calling upon the [newly established] Civil Rights Commission.”⁷⁹

Lack of an appropriate federal response, before 1965, further complicated matters for voting equality advocates. As civil rights activism came to the national forefront, the reaction of President Dwight Eisenhower was lackadaisical at best until his hand was forced by the flouting of federal orders of integration in Little Rock. At the dawn of the 1960s, President John F. Kennedy paid lip service to the movement, but largely had his hands tied by more urgent foreign affairs and fierce opposition by high-ranking Southern congressmen.

Even when the federal government did act, it did so tepidly. Then Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach’s lukewarm action on civil rights followed precedents set in the previous decade and further proved that civil rights activists could not rely on Washington. After a 1960 study of registration irregularities in the South, the Civil Rights Commission came to the tepid recommendation that, in cases of proven racial exclusion, the President be given power to appoint federal registrars to ensure voting rights to all. *Time* magazine reported on Eisenhower and Attorney General William P. Rogers’s cool reception, both of whom believing the plan “would frontally assault what remained of “states’ rights” and might ultimately be cast aside by the courts as unconstitutional.” As a counterproposal, Rogers sought to enable federal district courts

⁷⁹ Parker, Tim. “Negroes Eyeing Right to Vote”. Jackson Daily News, 05 October 1957.

to appoint “voting referees” to qualify voters who may have been excluded due to race in elections at all levels.⁸⁰

After passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, Washington vowed to oversee elections and prevent intimidation, but sent federal registrars to only fourteen counties throughout the South; only two to Mississippi counties. Katzenbach defended the decision to oversee only two of eighty-two counties in the state with the lowest African American voter registration, saying, “There have been some signs of compliance in Mississippi lately, and we didn't want to kill it.” “Also, we filed our first poll-tax suit in Mississippi” Katzenbach continued, “And you don't want to hit one state too hard.” The Attorney General concluded by saying that, if federal mandates are not met, further action would be required. “The whole idea is to generate compliance. If we don't get that compliance, we'll appoint new examiners in a lot of new areas” Katzenbach said.⁸¹

As Unenthusiastic as Washington's efforts may have been, they did nonetheless get results once implemented. “In Mississippi's Lauderdale County, segregationist subterfuge had held African-American registration, even after the Voting Rights Act theoretically eliminated any hindrance, to the glacially slow rate of less than eighty per day. The first day federal registrars oversaw registration in the county however, 300 African Americans succeeded in registering.⁸²

The state political apparatus being determined to resist integration allowed for many blatantly illegal acts to go unpunished. One of the more atrocious examples of

⁸⁰ “Civil Rights: Within the Framework”. *Time*, 08 February 1960.

⁸¹ “Civil Rights: Trigger of Hope”. *Time*, 20 August 1965.

⁸² “The South: Fact of Life”. *Time*, 03 sept 65.

Whites' disregard for African-American rights involved either forced or duplicitous sterilizations of Black women. Fannie Lou Hamer took up this issue while speaking to a Capitol Hill Select Committee panel on Mississippi on 08 June 1964. The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) put together the hearing for the purpose of bringing to light the endemic race-related violence in Mississippi and, COFO hoped, to secure federal protection for volunteers during the upcoming Freedom Summer. From this testimony came a report and official recommendation of protection for activists; recommendations the families of the Mississippi three would soon wish federal authorities had heeded.⁸³

In addition to her testimony regarding violence inflicted upon her and her associates for their voting rights activism, including being severely beaten in a Winona, Mississippi jail cell on orders of Highway Patrol officers, Hamer added testimony about her knowledge of African- American women being subjected to sterilizations without their consent or knowledge until after the fact. In arguably the worst aspect of Hamer's testimony, she estimated that local doctors at the North Sunflower County Hospital sterilized approximately six in ten black women, no matter the reason for their visit to the hospital.⁸⁴ The issue of sterilization without consent is another with which Hamer had personal experience. She did not specifically inform the panel of the fact, but Hamer herself had been subjected to the procedure herself in 1961 while seeking treatment for a uterine tumor.

⁸³ Brooks, 40-41.

⁸⁴ Brooks, 41.

Perhaps even Hamer, known for her brazen, fearless, and uncompromising speeches, found this topic too painful to discuss before an audience of strangers. Even if Hamer did not mention her personal experience in the matter, she bravely brought to the attention of the Capitol Hill Select committee one of the most egregious consequences of state politicians operating virtually without punishment. Various laws around the country did allow for sterilization of the mentally disabled until the 1970s,⁸⁵ but the unchecked and endemic racism of Mississippi's power brokers allowed doctors to sterilize many African-American women against their will.

Opinion pieces in local newspapers demonstrated the vociferous extent to which some whites opposed the Civil Rights movement. One in particular ignored native Mississippian activists such as Hamer, Harvey, and Blackwell, and told white citizens of Clarksdale "Our esteemed mayor has sold Clarksdale to a pack of communistic, atheist, low moral punks from outside the boundaries of our beloved state." Under the pseudonym "A Local Civil Group," the author(s) lumped all civil rights workers together and labeled them "juvenile delinquents, beatniks, and prostitutes" and argued they "came to this community for one reason—to stir up and cause as much trouble as possible." According to the author(s), the group immediately demanded an "integrating of our factories and setting up a school to train Negroes" and local leaders who did not openly oppose them were referred to as "Yankee-Negro loving primack⁸⁶." The piece finished by exhorting local whites that "In order to preserve our way of life, our citizens must take a stand. We must protect our wives and children by banning together in an untiring effort

⁸⁵ <http://www.policymic.com/articles/53723/8-shocking-facts-about-sterilization-in-u-s-history>.

⁸⁶ "primack" appears in the original text as "prima ck". This is an assumed typographical error, but the intended word or meaning of "primack" could not be determined by the author of this research.

to relieve our county of racial agitation and defeat from public office do-nothing politicians.”⁸⁷

The state of Mississippi’s challenge to a federal court decision in 1959 proved the inventive intransigence of the white supremacist establishment. As the State-Times reported of the case, “The state of Mississippi is making a determined effort to overturn a federal court decision that would have white prosecutors out soliciting Negroes to qualify to vote.”⁸⁸ The three judge panel of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that “It could not believe that in a county with more than fifty percent Negroes there was not one qualified to serve on a jury, unless they were systematically kept off” in striking down an African-American man’s conviction for the murder of white woman on the grounds that, as there were no African-American jurors in the state of Mississippi, he had not been tried by a jury of his peers. Mississippi state officials responded by contending that, because state law requires jurors to be registered voters, the court’s decision would allow African Americans en masse to simply refuse to register to vote, depriving the state of potential black jurors, and thereby preventing the prosecution of any African American accused of any crime.⁸⁹

Through successive registration campaigns, black voter registration in Mississippi began to increase. Studies during the latter half of the 1950s indicate a grievous lack of voting participation by Mississippi Blacks, though the white establishment quickly insisted local African Americans simply had little to no interest in voting.⁹⁰ Among the

⁸⁷ “Warning—Citizens of Clarksdale” Clarksdale Press-Register 20 August 1964.

⁸⁸ Herbers, John. “State Fights Jury Challenge” (Jackson) State-Times, 01 March 1959.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ As discussed in Chapter four, the notion of African-American apathy towards voting was thoroughly eviscerated by the Freedom Votes of 1964.

findings by the Southern Regional Council (SRC) into the matter, of a state-wide African-American population of 497,350, only 20,000 registered for the 1956 elections. Furthermore, a total of fourteen African Americans cast ballots in thirteen counties with a Black majority citizenry, and five counties did not record a single African American vote.⁹¹

By 1960, records indicate the state had only 22,000 registered black voters; only 2,000 more than four years previous. Federal intervention in the wake of the Voting Rights Act greatly increased the rate of Black registration and by 1966, the number had grown to 163,000, an increase of nearly 750 percent.⁹² As the Clarion Ledger-Jackson Daily News pointed out however, an increased number of registered voters did not necessarily mean increased votes cast, nor did it change long-standing opposition to political equality for African Americans. As editors opined, “The newly enfranchised Negro is a relatively small minority with respect to voting rights. And in that fact is the reason that, despite increased Negro political activity in the South, southern attitudes against integration appear to be hardening.”⁹³

Nonetheless, Hamer and company still held high hopes for the benefits voting would bring. Speaking at a meeting of the Mississippi State University chapter of Young Democrats, Mississippi NAACP President Aaron Henry predicted voting would benefit African Americans in three primary ways. Voting would give them political power, allow them to vote directly for the programs and candidates they favored, and would

⁹¹ “Southern Negroes & the Vote: The Blot Is Shrinking, But It Is Still Ugly” *Time*, 29 July 1957.

⁹² Littlewood, Tom. “Negro Voters Today Exceed Last Year’s Total by 500,000”. (Jackson) Commercial Appeal, 06 November 1966.

⁹³ “Registrants Lose Ground”. Clarion Ledger- Jackson Daily News, 27 November 1966.

establish African Americans as a bloc which politicians could no longer ignore.

According to Henry, “We can anticipate political support on the state and national level for legislation aimed at ending poverty and generally improving the lot of the poor man.”

Speaking of a future in which African Americans voted en masse, Henry opined that the tradition of injustice in courts would be “the most difficult practice to change.”⁹⁴

In the summer of 1957, *Look* magazine opined on the deluge of negative publicity the NAACP had received since the U.S. Supreme Court ordered integration of schools, and the obstacles faced by Ruby Hurley, NAACP regional secretary for the Deep South. According to *Look*, “Never has the organization been so [sic] denounced as it has been in the South since the Supreme Court 1954 ruling on desegregation. Those [NAACP members] who live in the South, surrounded by hostility, sometimes lose heart.” *Look* continued, informing readers that “Stirring them up is the responsibility of a vigorous young woman named Mrs. Ruby Hurley... a regional secretary in charge of coordinating the activities of 350 branches in seven southern states” *Look* editors told readers.⁹⁵ A Virginia native who spent more than forty years fighting for Civil Rights causes and rose in NAACP to the rank of Field Secretary for the entire Southeast, Hurley explained that, in the South, “Everybody’s afraid, and nobody knows what they’re afraid of.” When asked by reporter Ernest Dunbar what frightens Southerners, Hurley added, “For one thing the white citizens’ councils. They have created so much confusion over the

⁹⁴ “Henry Sees Better Future for Negroes”. (Jackson) *Clarion Ledger*, 12 January 1967.

⁹⁵ Dunbar, Ernest. “Inside the NAACP: Ruby Hurley’s South”. *Look Magazine*, 06 August 1957. Accessed via Clarie Collins Harvey Papers, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans. Box fifty-six, folder six. Hereafter cited as Dunbar, Ernest.

integration issue that I doubt if there are [sic] a handful of people down here, white or Negro, who can tell you what the Supreme Court actually said.”⁹⁶

Voter education took a significant step forward with the March 1963 establishment of the Voter Education Project (VEP). Executive Director Leslie W. Dunbar billed the VEP as “primarily a research effort designed to develop educational programs which will be most effective in providing voters with the knowledge and will to register.”⁹⁷ Dunbar outlined the magnitude of the problem that lack of voting caused the South when he noted that, during the 1960 Presidential election, the eleven former Confederate states comprised the nation’s eleven lowest numbers of voters by state. Further, Dunbar encapsulated the importance of VEP’s strategic mission, saying “Civil rights is, at bottom, the fundamental domestic issue, linked inseparably as it is with every other issue with which the administration (of VEP) has shown concern.”⁹⁸

Surprisingly, Dunbar concluded that “One of the principle barriers to Negro registration in these areas seems to be more involved with the attitudes of Negroes themselves than with the attitudes of whites.” Among reasons listed for lack of African American voting, Dunbar cited refusal to miss work Monday through Friday, combined with resistance to Saturday registration due to “a great variety of accumulated personal affairs to take care of on the one business day when they are off work.”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Dunbar, Leslie W. “First Annual Report of the Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council, Inc. for the Year April 01, 1962 through March 31, 1963”. Harvey Papers, Box sixty, folder eight. Hereafter cited as Dunbar, Leslie, First Annual Report.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, Box sixty, folder thirteen. Underline included by Dunbar.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Furthermore, Dunbar found significant resistance to African American voting from African Americans themselves, for a variety of reasons. Many reported a general disillusionment with voting, others believed politics was a “white man’s business,” many argued nothing would come to fruition and the vast majority of eligible African Americans who chose not to vote believed the risk of violent repercussion did not justify the paltry (if any) value voting gave to the few African Americans who cast ballots. VEP conceded a historical justification for these beliefs, but nonetheless advocated the necessity of continued agitation. Dunbar argued that “Registration programs in these areas will have to direct their major efforts toward persuading the Negro masses that politics can be a meaningful vehicle for securing their rightful place in society.”¹⁰⁰

Unita Blackwell’s autobiography demonstrated that the belief in voting as a “white man’s business” was hardly universal. Therein, Blackwell recalled mass arrests at protests incited by state subterfuge in attempt to undermine the Voting Rights Act of 1965. She describes state politicians rescinding the most egregiously exclusionary laws in an effort to keep those which carried the most practical effects in place. Blackwell remembered being jailed and held at the state fairgrounds because so many arrests were made. Even while incarcerated, Blackwell worked to keep the goal of voting equality alive, even as the hopes of her cohort sometimes waned. As she recalled, “I moved myself into the bathroom; I stayed in that bathroom most of the time during the day. Eleven days I sat on a garbage can in the bathroom.” She explained doing this because,

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* Underline in final quote appears in original text.

“That was the only way I could talk to the women in private and try to hold them together.”¹⁰¹

Leslie Dunbar illustrated the small town of Laurel, Mississippi¹⁰² as having a particularly sophisticated apparatus to prevent African-American registration. According to Dunbar, Laurel’s Black citizens could only register one day per month. Dunbar reported observing registration on the “Black Day” in March, 1962, at which time, 198 African Americans stood in line throughout the business day; the unnamed county registrar admitted only nine for the registration test and all nine were ruled to have failed.¹⁰³ On Laurel, and likely speaking indirectly on all of the American South, Dunbar concluded that, “The literacy tests, the character tests, the entire registration machinery is specifically designed not to insure a qualified electorate, but to insure a white electorate...The patience of Job would wear thin on such a political tread mill.”¹⁰⁴ To support his frustration, Dunbar recorded at least 513 denied attempts to register by African Americans, though, according to Dunbar, White subterfuge prevented a precise number of registration rejections of African Americans from being known.¹⁰⁵

Conversely, Dunbar called the Greenwood, Mississippi effort “One of the most successful of the Voter Education Project-supported programs.”¹⁰⁶ He espoused the work therein, headed by Mississippi Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), then directed

¹⁰¹ Blackwell, 126-127.

¹⁰² Ninety miles southeast of Jackson.

¹⁰³ Dunbar, Leslie W. “First Annual Report of the Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council, Inc. for the Year April 01, 1962 through March 31, 1963. Harvey Papers, Box sixty, folder one. 9.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 32.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 29.

by Bob Moses, and staffed by members of the NAACP, SNCC, CORE, and several smaller local organizations. Despite, or because of, Greenwood's successes, local African Americans suffered myriad retaliatory tactics from White segregationists. Dunbar recorded that county officials withheld welfare assistance from African Americans who attempted to register, and an assassination attempt of Bob Moses and Randolph Blackwell. The attempted drive-by shooting hit neither man, but injured driver James Travis, a young local SNCC worker. Dunbar recorded little surprise when a grand jury reduced three accused culprits' charges from Felonious Assault to Assault and Battery, and an all-white jury acquitted them of all charges.¹⁰⁷

Anne Moody wrote about the same sometimes tepid interest of African Americans in becoming voters as Leslie Dunbar chronicled in his reports, albeit in a much more exasperated tone. In her autobiography, Moody wrote of African Americans' apathy and resistance to fighting back against those oppressing them frequently being as infuriating as segregation itself. After arriving in the town of Canton¹⁰⁸ to organize for COFO, Moody found approximately fifty teenagers who showed up to canvass every day, but no adults willing to do so.¹⁰⁹ Moody recorded finding this particularly frustrating because African Americans owned nearly half of the land in Madison County¹¹⁰ and outnumbered Whites by more than three-to-one. Of her frustration Moody wrote, "I just couldn't see how the Negroes in Madison County could be so badly off. They should

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 29.

¹⁰⁸ Twenty-five miles north of Jackson.

¹⁰⁹ Moody, Anne. *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. New York: Laurel Publishing, 1968. 287.

¹¹⁰ Ownership of land did not provide African Americans with nearly the prosperity it could have however. As Moody explained, the federal government capped cotton production to prevent market glut, and each county determined how much each land owner could produce. The lion's share of contracts went to White farmers, while many acres of black-owned land laid fallow and unprofitable. Moody, 287-288.

have had everything going for them... [but] most Negroes have been thoroughly brainwashed. If they aren't brainwashed, they are too insecure."¹¹¹

Leslie W. Dunbar's second annual VEP report carried much the same tone as the first. Therein, he argued after a year's experience in the project that Mississippi, "presents more resistance to would-be Negro voters than any other state and offers more intimidation and violence to Negroes than all others combined."¹¹² The intimidation and violence bore the fruit segregationists hoped for, and Dunbar reported that VEP's efforts during its first two years resulted in a meager increase of 3,871 registered African Americans statewide. This paltry gain in voting numbers brought the number of registered Mississippi Blacks to approximately 22,000, a mere 6.6 percent of those eligible.

Such small results undoubtedly discouraged VEP, especially given the lofty goals the organization had for the second year of operation. Initially, VEP extended their year-two activities by eight months, so as to include the 1964 Presidential election. Early goals for 1964, as reported by Dunbar, included support for literacy programs to help applicants pass registration tests, initiation of programs to explain the use of voting machines or the marking of ballots, classes in government to acquaint voters with an understanding of public officials and their duties and responsibilities, and pilot, non-partisan 'get out and vote' programs.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Moody, 287.

¹¹² Dunbar, Leslie W. *Second Annual Report of the Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council, Inc. for the year 04/01/63 through 11/31/64*. Harvey Papers, Box 60, folder 2. 9.

¹¹³ Dunbar, Leslie W. *Second Annual Report of the Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council, Inc. for the year 04/01/63 through 11/31/64*. Harvey Papers, Box 60, folder 2. 9-19.

Success in increasing African-American voter registration began to garner national attention by the summer of 1962. That June, the U.S. News and World Report (USNWR) informed readers that 100,000 African Americans had registered in the preceding twelve months, meaning African Americans then comprised approximately fifteen percent of the former Confederacy's potential electorate.¹¹⁴ The pace of increase in African-American registrants reached its zenith between autumn of 1965 and spring, 1966. The Jackson Clarion-Ledger reported that during that span, 35,797 African Americans registered. This period corresponded with federal officials working toward black registration in twenty-three of Mississippi's eighty-two counties. Leflore County (in the southern delta region) saw the largest increase with 5,583 new registrants; Rankin County (immediately east of Jackson) had the smallest increase with 135.¹¹⁵

The USNWR article demonstrated that American media then perceived the civil rights movement in paternalistic and racist terms. Editors gave no credit to African Americans for their increased political activity, but rather reported that "The campaign was inspired by federal officials who were unhappy about the violence that greeted 'Freedom Riders' in bus stations in Alabama and Mississippi." Editors further noted that the Civil Rights Council, headed by prominent Atlanta whites, "directed the activities," including the establishment of a voter education project which was "headed by a Negro."¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ "Negro Goal: Balance of Power in the South". U.S. News and World Report, 11 June 1962. 56.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Further complicating matters, when the Civil Rights Commission did seek registration records from circuit clerks, state attorney general Joe T. Patterson told clerks they are under no legal obligation to comply with requests, and actively encouraged them not to do so. Patterson identified Aaron Henry as the leader of the Clarksdale NAACP branch, and referred to him as the “Chief trouble-maker and agitator of the NAACP in Clarksdale.” Patterson then added, “It is indeed unfortunate, but certainly not unexpected, that the Mississippi Advisory Committee to the Civil Rights Commission has seen fit to become a pawn of the NAACP in Mississippi.”¹¹⁷

Through successive registration campaigns, black voter registration in Mississippi increased, but at a glacially-slow pace before federal authorities began monitoring registration. In 1960, records indicate the state had only 22,000 registered black voters; by 1966¹¹⁸, the number had grown to 163,000, an increase of nearly 750 percent.¹¹⁹ As the Clarion Ledger-Jackson Daily News pointed out however, an increased number of registered voters did not necessarily mean increased votes cast, nor did it change long-standing opposition to political equality for African Americans. As editors opined, “The newly enfranchised Negro is a relatively small minority with respect to voting rights. And in that fact is the reason that, despite increased Negro political activity in the South, southern attitudes against integration appear to be hardening.”¹²⁰

Hardening attitudes against integration had to be attacked in several different ways. Fannie Lou Hamer used religious arguments, common sense, and for certain

¹¹⁷ Hill, Charles M. “Clerks Told: No Negro Voter Reports Needed”. Jackson Daily News, 16 October 1960.

¹¹⁸ One year after passage of the Voting Rights Act and the arrival of federal monitors.

¹¹⁹ Littlewood, Tom. “Negro Voters Today Exceed Last Year’s Total by 500,000”. (Jackson) Commercial Appeal, 06 November 1966.

¹²⁰ “Registrants Lose Ground”. Clarion Ledger- Jackson Daily News, 27 November 1966.

subjects, mockery. One subject Hamer could not ignore, nor resist mocking, was that of several anti-miscegenation laws which either already existed or were being proposed during her activism. Before being nationally abolished by the Supreme Court decision in *Loving v Virginia* on 12 June 1967, Mississippi and fifteen other states enforced anti-miscegenation laws, which forbade white citizens from marrying non-whites, especially African Americans, and six states had passed amendments to their constitutions forever prohibiting interracial marriages.¹²¹

Occasionally Hamer's responses to these laws came in the form of vociferous rebukes, but more frequently she chose to demonstrate their ridiculousness. In an example of the later, Hamer told her audience at a mass meeting in Indianola, Mississippi in October 1964 that "Some of the white people will tell us, 'Well, I just don't believe in integration'. But he been practicing integration at night a long time! If he hadn'ta been, it wouldn't be as many light-skinned Negroes as it is in here." Hamer continued the argument, but moved to the point at which she spoke of the need for unity among all people. She then said that "The seventeenth chapter of Acts and twenty-seventh verse said 'He has made of one blood all nations.'" So whether you black as a skillet or white as a sheet, we are made from the same blood and we are on our way!"¹²²

Hamer continued to mock the existence of anti-miscegenation laws when so many white men took so many sexual liberties with African-American women. Even after the Supreme Court struck down such laws, Hamer continued to ridicule White opposition to

¹²¹ <http://www.tn.gov/tsla/exhibits/blackhistory/pdfs/Miscegenation%20laws.pdf>.

¹²² Brooks, Maegan Parker and Davis W. Houck, eds. *To Tell It Like It Is: The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011. 49.

interracial marriages and relations. In one example, she told an audience at Michigan State University in 1970 that “I’m very black, but I remember some of my uncles and some of my aunts was as white as anybody in here, and blue-eyed, and some a kind of green-eyed- and my grandfather didn’t do that you know.”¹²³

Legal injustice, in addition to cultural intransigence, economic self-interest, voting intimidation, and several other factors continued to hamper the civil rights movement throughout its heyday and beyond. However daunting these combined challenges may have been, many civil rights heroes rose to meet them. Many of these heroes have been deservedly lauded for their bravery and perseverance. Several however, especially female activists who labored in the even more dangerous areas outside the spotlight which shone upon Martin Luther King and others have received nothing approaching their due for their work which changed history, America, and race relations forever.

Women such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Jackson Gray Adams, Unita Blackwell, Clarie Collins Harvey, Casey Hayden and many, many others risked their lives and everything they owned in the fight for voting equality. They did this in spite of the grave physical dangers, and pronouncements from Mississippi state politicians that African Americans were not interested in voting and that they enjoyed the segregated way of life. The court cases discussed herein taught these women and their compatriots that concentrating on legal reform could only produce so much improvement in the lives of African Americans. In order to effect real change, Hamer and company had to

¹²³ Lee, 9.

organize at the grassroots level; to get communities, to the furthest possible extent, to unite and demand change.

As these heroines realized, voting was the essential key to realizing true change. Fannie Lou Hamer and company could look at schools still segregated nearly a decade after *Brown* and know that state politicians could drag their feet *sans* penalty as long as so very few African Americans in the state could vote. The heroines of the Mississippi struggle followed news of the court battles and legal shenanigans discussed herein and learned that politicians would do everything in their power to deny African Americans their civil rights until they were voted out of office. The hardened intransigence of the racist White establishment forced Hamer and company into lives of activism.

IV. WOMEN ATTACK THE “MISSISSIPPI MONOLITH”¹²⁴

Discussion of the Civil Rights activism of the women who are the primary focus of this project: Clarie Collins Harvey, Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Jackson Gray Adams, Unita Blackwell, and Casey Hayden. Special attention is devoted to the actions of these women through the summer of 1964.

The life experiences such women as Clarie Collins Harvey, Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Jackson Gray Adams, Unita Blackwell, Casey Hayden and many others had accrued by the early 1960s prepared the heroines of the Mississippi fight for voting equality to engage their battle in many different ways than their male counterparts. In addition to readiness to engage in the movement, women frequently also brought to the fore bravery which exceeded that of their male counterparts.

Anne Moody wrote of just such an instance during the summer of 1963. After a mass arrest following a pray-in at the Canton, Mississippi Post Office, local activists and several clergymen awaited bail together in the local jail. As Moody recalled, “Most of the ministers were scared stiff. This was the first time some of them had seen the inside of a jail.” Moody also recalled taking an almost macabre joy in hearing that the NAACP could not afford to bail the ministers out immediately, forcing the terrified ministers to

¹²⁴ Quote paraphrased from: Moses, Robert Parris. *Memo to SNCC Executive Committee Concerning Mississippi Project*. William Heath Research Papers, 1963-1997; Z: Accessions, M2009-045, Box 5, Folder 17. Accessed via: <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15932coll2/id/1812>.

remain incarcerated with the activists. The irony of the terrified men, who hitherto had fancied themselves in charge of events, amused Moody. She concluded her description of the event by saying, “I just got my kicks out of sitting there looking at the ministers. Some of them looked so pitiful, I thought they would cry any minute, and here they were, supposed to be our leaders.”¹²⁵

John Lewis echoed Moody’s thoughts on women often being the bravest of the activists. He remembered that it was essential for organizers to find their own bravery before attempting to instill bravery into local residents. According to Lewis,

One group of people who helped us find our own courage in these communities were the local women, the matriarchal heads of so many of these households. Over and over again we found that it was these women- wives and mothers in their forties and fifties, hardworking, humorous, no-nonsense, incredibly resilient women who had carried such an unimaginable weight throughout their own lives and had been through so much unspeakable hell that there was nothing left on this earth for them to be afraid of- who showed us the way to mobilize in the towns and communities where they lived. No one was more ready, eager and willing to climb on the Freedom Train in these little towns and on these little farms than the women.¹²⁶

As many scholars and memoirists have described at length, women, along with churches, were very often the backbone and glue of communities, especially African-American communities in the South. More often than not, the women of southern communities performed the majority of organizing and planning events, kept community-wide lines of communication open, and passed information throughout their networks. Women also frequently came to the movement already more capable organizers than their male counterparts. As Sara Evans has chronicled, women tended to be brought up in a

¹²⁵ Moody, 272.

¹²⁶ Lewis, John. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1998. 188.

way that fostered compassion and understanding. This allowed women a stronger natural sense of community, as well as “empathy, listening, warmth, and noncompetitiveness.”¹²⁷

Interrelated to the contributions of women to African-American communities was the centrality of churches. Within the confines of Jim Crow society, churches frequently were the only places African Americans could congregate in relative safety. During the relative calm decade between the end of World War Two and the *Brown* decision, church women became adept at organizing people and events and passing information throughout the community. This frequently had to be done in secret for fear of provoking white reprisals.

By the first years of the 1960s, Civil Rights rumors began to trickle even into the closed society of Mississippi.¹²⁸ Despite the best efforts of the white segregationist establishment, word began to reach even the most rural areas of Mississippi about Freedom Riders, and sympathetic whites willing to come to Mississippi to fight for the rights of African Americans. The Civil Rights had existed in America, though in subtler forms, for centuries, but in the 1950s the movement began to accomplish major victories which propelled it to its zenith in the 1960s.

For many Mississippi African Americans, the advent of the movement in their areas was a dream long in coming. Many African-American women saw the movement as validation of a long-repressed desire to fight back against the racism which so oppressed their lives. Some could not get involved quickly enough once they knew they were not alone. And when the time for action came, many women were ready, willing,

¹²⁷ Evans, 140.

¹²⁸ Blackwell, 82.

and able to put to use their years of experience in organization, planning, and community-wide networks toward the fight for better lives for themselves and better futures for their children. Whereas their male counterparts had hitherto focused on legislation and, by the 1960s, began shifting toward mass demonstrations and direct action, women recognized other equally important duties to be fulfilled. Although there was of course a great deal of overlap in duties, women in the Civil Rights movement tended to gravitate toward grassroots organization and drumming up support among their own neighbors, friends, and acquaintances.¹²⁹ The fundamentally different strategy women tended to utilize focused on creating a critical mass of ground-level support for the movement. The women discussed in this work worked tirelessly and bravely to recruit their friends and community into local action.

As increasing numbers of activists (both women and men) began fighting for equality, the dangers of doing so also escalated. White segregationist intransigence famously took the lives of Martin Luther King, Jr., Medgar Evers, and the ‘Mississippi Three’, but also threatened the lives of most equality agitators. Fannie Lou Hamer frequently described having to keep all lights off after dark and avoiding windows due to armed night riders, and told the 1964 DNC Credentials Committee that a home in which she had stayed after being fired for attempting to register was hit by sixteen bullets ten days after her attempt.¹³⁰ Anne Moody described in detail a similarly harrowing brush with violent reaction against Civil Rights. While working in Canton, MS, Moody and her

¹²⁹ Blackwell, 83-86.

¹³⁰ Hamer, Fannie Lou. Testimony “Before the Credentials Committee, Democratic National Convention”. 22 August 1964. Accessed via American Radio Works’ *Say It Plain: A Century of Great African American Speeches*, an extensive online archive.
<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/sayitplain/flhamer.html>.

coworkers learned of a plot to rid the town of the agitators. Being outside of town in a rural area and not having a car, the group decided their only protection would be the cover of the tall weeds behind the Freedom House lodging them. The angry and clearly intoxicated mob did in fact show up and searched the premises. Moody recalled lying in the thick weeds with a “horrible feeling that they could see us as plain as daylight and I just trembled all over”. According to Moody’s coworker, who was close enough to hear the conversation, the Whites fell for the ruse and thought the agitators had left. They discussed burning the house down, but decided to return another night when the organizers were there.¹³¹

One of the many women who answered to call to join the Civil Rights movement as soon as she heard it was Clarie Collins Harvey. Harvey had worked all her life toward betterment of life for African Americans in the South (see chapter two), but the arrival of Freedom Riders to Mississippi in 1961 propelled Harvey into the prime of her activist career.

On the evening of 26 May 1961, Harvey and associates from the Methodist Church of Jackson visited jailed Freedom Riders. There, she learned that many Riders had refused to post bail and remained either incarcerated or, if released, in Jackson to fight their charges in court. Harvey saw immediately that these young people, her philosophical brethren, would need several types of assistance while awaiting trial. As Harvey remembered, “This planted a seed within me-the need that people were going to have if they remained in our community for thirty-nine days, when they had not come

¹³¹ Moody, 300-302.

prepared to stay. Harvey recalled being especially motivated by the fact that, unlike civil disobedience protests to come, “It came out at the hearing very clearly that these people had never intended to be arrested in the first place.” According to Harvey, the Riders had been shepherded onto a bus without a restroom and having not been allowed to use the police or bus station restrooms before leaving Montgomery. Law enforcement officers on the bus refused to allow the driver to stop at a restroom along the drive between Montgomery and Jackson¹³². When finally stopped in Jackson, the riders found the Trailway bus station restrooms segregated and the African-American facilities marked ‘out of order’. Law enforcement officers then shepherded Black Freedom Riders into white-only facilities, and promptly arrested them for trespassing.¹³³

Harvey recalled that by the following afternoon, she had used her contacts in the local churches to assemble twelve volunteers and “at least seventy-five dollars”; the nebulous of the organization soon to be known as Womanpower Unlimited. Before the end of the summer of 1961, Womanpower Unlimited had grown in scope to, as Harvey remembered, to nearly two hundred women “providing for the needs of these people... send them in clothes and toilet articles and writing paper and that sort of thing.”¹³⁴ Though dangerous to rile white anger at a time when segregationists still operated outside the law with little to no worry of prosecution, Harvey recalled that Womanpower’s efforts quickly paid dividends. Upon Freedom Riders’ release, their stories quickly made national news; articles in *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Jet*, and *Study* among others included riders’ testimony that the efforts of volunteers to provide

¹³² A distance of approximately 250 miles, according to mapquest.com.

¹³³ <http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/clarie-collins-harvey>.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

necessities to them during incarceration, as well as food and lodging afterward, provided proof that their efforts were appreciated and supported by the Black community at large and that these women “represented something of the mind of the community”.¹³⁵

Harvey fully understood the importance of the Freedom Riders’ presence in Jackson, and the reciprocation of that gratitude propelled Womanpower Unlimited into a sustained Civil Rights organization from the ephemeral effort to provide Freedom Riders assistance at its origin. According to Harvey, “the presence of the freedom riders did more for Jackson’s Negro community than anything I know that has happened in my years living here”.¹³⁶ Harvey continued, arguing that, before freedom riders’ arrival, African Americans were not unified in purpose, disorganized strategically, and utilizing precious little cooperation between organizations. Furthermore, Harvey recalled that after having conversations with Riders, many local Black youths began to realize that wide arrays of careers which they had never considered or even known about could be opened to them through civil rights agitation. Parents also began to visualize the possibility of improving their own communities, rather than educating their children and then sending the best and brightest elsewhere. In Harvey’s words, “We began to look at ourselves and say... Maybe there is another way of life that’s possible right here. Maybe we don’t have to send our children to Los Angeles and to New York and Chicago and Detroit when they get educated. Maybe they can get their jobs right here if we do certain things for ourselves within our community.”¹³⁷

¹³⁵ *ibid.*

¹³⁶ *ibid.*

¹³⁷ Harvey Interview.

Under the leadership of Clarie Collins Harvey, Womanpower Unlimited initially began for the purposes of providing safe lodging to Freedom Riders and personal supplies for activists incarcerated in Parchman Penitentiary.¹³⁸ In addition to Collins Harvey's guidance, Womanpower Unlimited elected as founding executive committee Ms. A.M. Lovelace, Ms. Anna Lee Gary, and Me. AME Logan; as well as various committees which represented a cross section of local nurses, educators, a choir director, and Jackson State University students, and housewives.

An early flyer invitation to meetings attested to the racially progressive and grassroots nature of Womanpower Unlimited's message and goals. Therein it stated, "Every churchwoman of every racial background in every part of the United States who is convinced that God made of one blood all men, and who wants to express this conviction in concrete, effective action is invited."¹³⁹ Organizers further expostulated to invitees that, "There is no hope of reaching the goals except if genuine and full partnership is achieved at every level of action by all who together comprise the 'one family.'¹⁴⁰

One of Womanpower Unlimited's most fearless and vocal activists was Ms. Annell Ponder. As an organization Field Supervisor, Ponder told members days after the murder of James Travis, a twenty-two year old registered voter and SNCC activist, that violence did scare many African Americans away from the civil rights struggle, but poverty was the single-biggest detriment to activism. Ponder further reported that state

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Womanpower Unlimited flyer. Posted around Jackson, MS and surrounding area, summer 1961. *Womanpower*: Series one, Box one, Folder one. Jackson State University, Jackson, MS.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

officials had, in autumn of 1961 cancelled involvement in surplus food subsidies programs, depriving Mississippi's poorest citizens (both White and African-American) of vital food for the coming winter.¹⁴¹

Frustrated as she may have been, Ponder nonetheless closed on a positive note, praising activists. She extolled the effort and bravery of her comrades in arms, saying, "I was and continue to be constantly amazed at the bravery, persistence, performance, and perseverance of these workers (most of them native Mississippians) as they have endured and overcome one disaster after another." Ponder claimed over 1,300 African Americans attempted to register between 01 March 1962 and writing her report that summer; a fact which prompted her to report that, "The people of the Delta have started from the inside to melt the iceberg, and I'm happy to share in the thawing process with them."¹⁴²

Womanpower Unlimited quickly expanded focus into voter registration and citizenship education. At its first voting registration education classes, WU attracted twelve students, all women aged nineteen to sixty. The group included four housewives, one maid, one retired teacher, and two students. Ponder then explained the success of the classes, noting that by the night of her speech, eleven men and thirty-four women in Leflore, Bolivar, Sunflower and Hines counties had set up twenty-four courses. Ponder reported the retaliation faced to that point had been mostly economic. In addition to common tactics, Ponder reported police brought in dogs, ostensibly to protect activists,

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Ponder, Annell. Speech to Womanpower Unlimited members. *Womanpower*: Box one, folder eight.

but encouraged them to bark all night, landlords began refusing to make repairs, and several WU members' husbands were fired.¹⁴³

Annell Ponder was also present along with Fannie Lou Hamer in Winona, Mississippi on 11 June 1963 when a state highway patrolman and local police brutally beat and imprisoned members of a group returning from a South Carolina citizenship training seminar. According to Ponder, and corroborated by others, the group was turned away from all-white Staley's Café. Local police, whom the group's bus driver had already called once they initially refused to sit in the back of the bus upon changing busses at the state line, arrived quickly thereafter. Once Ponder began writing down the officers' license plate numbers, officers arrested the group and severely beat them in the local jail. Ponder later wrote that the Winona experiences, "Add a new dimension to the chilly depths and widths of the effect the iceberg, and it points up the need for more citizenship education. People like those officers need training and rehabilitation before they can function adequately as law enforcement officials in a democracy."¹⁴⁴

As Womanpower Unlimited continued gaining steam throughout 1962, happenstance led SNCC organizers to find the definition of a diamond in the rough: Fannie Lou Hamer. In August of 1962, Hamer heard talk of SNCC (previously unheard of to her) holding a meeting about citizenship at a church local to the Sunflower County cotton plantation where she had worked as a timekeeper for eighteen years. Reverend James Bevel of the SCLC and SNCC activists James Forman, Reginald Robinson, and Bob Moses spoke at the meeting which drastically changed the remainder of Hamer's

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Womanpower Unlimited*: Box one, folder eight.

life. Forman, Robinson, and Moses's speeches gave many in the audience profound new knowledge, specifically their constitutionally-guaranteed right to vote.¹⁴⁵

Although the Fifteenth Amendment guaranteed African-American men the right to vote ninety-two years before, and suffrage been granted to all women forty-two years previously, information had been so tightly controlled on Mississippi plantations that many African Americans were not even yet aware of these facts. Speaking for herself, and assumedly many other African Americans, on the subject, Hamer later stated that "Until then, I'd never heard of no mass meeting and I didn't know that a Negro could register and vote."¹⁴⁶ Reverend Bevel closed the meeting with a powerful sermon entitled "Discerning the Signs of Time". Bevel based the sermon on Luke 12:54 and identified what he called unmistakable portents of God's will becoming manifest and advised listeners into action just as "One would see clouds forming in the sky and prepare for coming rain."¹⁴⁷

As a result of the meeting, eighteen African Americans agreed to go to the county courthouse in Indianola and register to vote the following Friday, 31 August 1962. Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer signed on her willingness first of the eighteen. Hamer remembered of the evening, "I could just see myself voting people outta office that I know was wrong and didn't do nothin' to help the poor." Furthermore she recalled, "I had made up my mind that I was gonna come out there when they said you could go down that Friday and

¹⁴⁵ Hamer, Fannie Lou. *To Praise Our Bridges: An Autobiography*. New York: KIPCO Publishing, 1967. 12.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 13-14.

try to register.” About Hamer that night family friend and fellow meeting attendee June Jones remembered, “Her bravery made them brave.”¹⁴⁸

In a later interview, Hamer further explained the extent to which the initial mass meeting had vitalized her latent desire to be a speaker of change. She said of that night, “When they asked for those to raise their hands who’d go down to the [county] courthouse [approximately twenty-six miles away in Indianola] the next day, I raised mine. Had it up high as I could get it.” Though possibly oblivious to the dangers of that act at the time, she later reflected that “If I’d had any sense I’d a been a little scared. The only thing they could do to me was kill me and it seemed like they’d been trying to do that a little bit at a time ever since I could remember.”¹⁴⁹

Hamer quickly found out about the white resistance she should have feared. Upon arrival at the courthouse in Indianola, Hamer and her group found a fiery mob there to meet them. Hamer later remarked that the mob reminded her of a crowd of Jed Clampetts¹⁵⁰, but derisive remembrances do not affect the violent intent of the mob. After being told only two people could come in at a time, Hamer and Ernest Davis went in first. Circuit clerk Cecil B. Campbell recorded their information and administered their literacy tests. As would be expected, given the subjective evaluation thereof, both Hamer and Davis failed. Hamer found her result especially unsurprising because her evaluation consisted of reading, copying, and interpreting Section Sixteen of the Mississippi State Constitution¹⁵¹, which states that “Ex post facto laws, or laws impairing

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

¹⁴⁹ Lee, 26.

¹⁵⁰ Patriarch of the hapless southern family featured on *Beverly Hillbillies*.

¹⁵¹ On her first registration attempt, Hamer was one of the few African Americans not chosen to interpret Section 182 (see pages 40-41). African-American registrants not chosen to interpret Section 182

the obligation of contracts, shall not be passed.”¹⁵² Hamer later remembered that she knew she could read and copy the passage, but interpreting it was impossible (for even educated whites) at the time. She encapsulated her predicament later by remembering that “I knew as much about de facto law as a horse know about Christmas Day.”¹⁵³

Contemporaneous law in Mississippi stipulated that the name of everyone who attempts to register to vote be listed in a local newspaper for two weeks. That of course ensured that Blacks’ voting registration attempts became common knowledge, and that Blacks trying to register did so knowing that vengeance-seeking racist mobs would quickly find out their names, addresses, and employers. Making that information public, and so readily attainable, likely was a key factor in the fact that in 1960, blacks accounted for sixty-one percent of adults in Sunflower County, but only one percent of the registered voters.¹⁵⁴

After such an audacious appearance however, Hamer did not even receive the “luxury” of waiting for her name to appear in the following day’s newspaper. She and her group were delayed during their return by their bus being pulled over and their driver cited for “Driving a bus the wrong color” and fined \$100.¹⁵⁵ Finding the driver not in possession of nearly that amount and not wanting the headache of taking a group of nineteen to jail, the officer reduced the fee to \$30, which the group paid communally. Upon finally arriving home, plantation-owner Marlowe greeted Hamer with the news that

were assured to get Section 16, an equally convoluted section which most registrars also could not understand.

¹⁵² http://www.sos.state.ms.us/ed_pubs/constitution/constitution.aspee.

¹⁵³ Lee, 27-29.

¹⁵⁴ Lee, 31.

¹⁵⁵ Hamer, 1964 DNC Credentials Committee Speech.

<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/sayitplain/flhamer.html>.

she must either rescind her application or leave the plantation by the following morning. Among other things said to Hamer by Marlowe in her retelling, he told her that “We in Mississippi just ain’t ready for this kinda thing”, to which Hamer allegedly responded, “I didn’t try to register for you; I tried to register for myself”.¹⁵⁶

Hamer realized that the ultimatum did not actually imply a choice for her to make and decided to leave the plantation, without her husband and two adopted daughters that night. Marlowe confirmed the prescience of Hamer’s understanding soon thereafter when he also fired Pap and rescinded the car they had been buying without refund. In the meantime, Hamer stayed with several family and friends (briefly at each) before finding refuge at the home of her niece in Cascilla, in neighboring Tallahatchie County.¹⁵⁷

After two months however, Hamer experienced a tectonic shift in opinion. In the face of attempts on her life, the virtual certainty of more attempts upon her return, and the legal immunity which would almost certainly have been granted to the perpetrator(s) thereof, Hamer decided to return to Ruleville. Her adopted daughters, whom had accompanied her to Cascilla, cautioned her about the violence, but to no avail. Hamer counseled them that “I’m not a criminal. I hadn’t done one thing to nobody, I went down to register for myself and I got a right to live in Ruleville because its people there have done way more thing[s] than that, they still here, and I’m going back to Ruleville regardless.”¹⁵⁸ In a very telling explanation, Hamer added “My parents helped to make this town and this county what it is today, because it was out of their sweat, tears, and

¹⁵⁶ Brooks, 44.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Lee, 35-36.

blood that they [landowners] got as much land that they have here; and I have a right to stay here.”¹⁵⁹

Hamer demonstrated in no uncertain terms the extent of her brazenness in her testimony in the federal trial of the state troopers indicted for the beating Hamer received in a Winona, Mississippi jail cell. Hamer had to have realized the significance of white officers actually being put on trial for violence committed against blacks and made sure her testimony was as proportionately bold as the situation was transformative, or as many Civil Rights activists hoped it would prove. In her testimony, which took place in Oxford on 02 December 1963, Hamer was starkly honest and fearless of consequences. Hamer withheld no details as she recounted the events of 09 June, 1963; she readily identified the perpetrators (facing her in the courtroom) who ordered her to be beaten by two black inmates. As Hamer attested, she and her group had stopped at a café in Winona on their return from a conference in Charleston, South Carolina. Four members of her group attempted to get food from the café and were summarily dismissed. Local police quickly arrived and Hamer and several members of her group were arrested.¹⁶⁰

According to Hamer, once at the jail, one of the officers told the two black inmates that “I want you to make that bitch wish she was dead.” Hamer testified that “The Negro told me to stretch out on the cot, on my face, and that’s what I did, and he beat me. He beat me something terrible.” Despite the beating, Hamer remained true to

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Hamer, *Testimony before the Credentials Committee, 1964 Democratic National Convention*. Say it Plain Online Archive by American Radio Works.

<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/sayitplain/flhamer.html>.

her nonviolent philosophy. “I never at no time resisted, because it wasn’t any need, because at the time I was being beat it was five men in there.”¹⁶¹

Hamer attempted to shame, or at least find some humanity in the second inmate ordered to beat her. Before he beat her, Hamer asked him “How can you do it?” Her question did not get the desired response however, and only “You better get our arms out the way” in reply. Asked about how long the beating took place, Hamer replied, “I don’t know, but when, when they was finished my hands was navy blue and I was hard. I was hard like metal. And he told me to get up, Mr. Basinger did, and go back to my cell, and I was, it was like I was drunk or something.”¹⁶² The severity of the beating left Hamer unable to lie down especially on her back and left side (which had been permanently damaged by a childhood bout with polio) for the remainder of her time in the Winona jail. Injuries from the beating proved so severe that at the time of her testimony, six months later, she still felt “A hurting, and its hard places, you can feel. It’s hard in places in my hip, and at times I just be sore.”¹⁶³

The following Tuesday (11 June 1963), authorities held a mockery of a trial of Hamer for the charges of Disorderly Conduct and Resisting Arrest. Unsurprisingly, she received guilty verdicts on both charges. During the drive back to the jailhouse, Hamer told Officer Surrell, who kicked her into his patrol car at her arrest and played a central role in her beating, “I would like to see these people when they face God, with the kind of

¹⁶¹ Brooks, 7-8.

¹⁶² When asked about Ms. Hamer’s likely injuries, given her narrative of feeling like she was drunk after standing, and her hips and legs feeling “hard like metal”, William Lowe, RN speculated that she had certainly suffered a concussion, as well as likely bone bruising in the places which felt like metal. Given Ms. Hamer’s continued perception of that feeling for at least six months after, Lowe also believed neurological damage to be highly possible.

¹⁶³ Brooks, 7-15.

thing they have done to us.” According to Hamer’s testimony, Surrell responded “Don’t say it to me, because you haven’t seen me. I wasn’t on duty yesterday.” Hamer knew better though, adding “But you see, I remembered too many things about it.” After paying fines, Hamer secured her release the following day.¹⁶⁴

As infuriated and shaken as Hamer had to have been over the Winona beating, she remained steadfast in her commitment to nonviolence. She pointed out in testimony that physical resistance at the moment of the beating would have been futile with five men surrounding her,¹⁶⁵ but her reaction is more than simply pragmatic. Significantly, Hamer chose to take her revenge on the witness stand of the officers’ trial. She continued speaking of deliverance, devotion to scripture, and of the need for more blacks to conquer their fears so the race as a whole could conquer Jim Crow, but made no call for violent revenge.¹⁶⁶

After testifying in the trial of the officers who ordered her beating (which resulted in all defendants being acquitted), Hamer’s next major appearance came on 08 June 1964 in testimony to a Capitol Hill Select Committee panel on Mississippi. The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) put together the hearing for the purpose of bringing to light the endemic race-related violence in Mississippi. Also, the organizers sought federal protection for their volunteers for the upcoming Freedom Summer. From this testimony came a report and official recommendation of protection for activists;

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

recommendations the families of the Mississippi three would soon wish federal authorities had heeded.¹⁶⁷

Not only for the scale of the audience, is Hamer's testimony herein also significant because her speeches first demonstrated a profound shift in technique. Due to the very specific nature of the panel, Hamer detailed specifically the violence which she had experienced personally in retribution for her attempts to vote and raise awareness for other black citizens to do so as well.¹⁶⁸ While doing so, Hamer took notice of the effect her personal narrative had and thereafter adopted these events as mainstays in her speeches. Biblical quotations and religious language maintained their prominent place in her speeches, but afterward, Hamer always included her personal testimony of violence, which demonstrated that Hamer was no spectator speaking from a distance about things of which she was only peripherally aware.¹⁶⁹

When asked her purpose of testimony, Hamer responded "To tell about some of the brutality in the state of Mississippi"¹⁷⁰, then listed her experiences beginning upon her first attempt to register to vote. She detailed how she was fired immediately upon her return home, how eleven days later, attempted assassins shot sixteen times into home in which she had been staying after leaving the Marlowe plantation. She went into further detail about the Winona beating, which occurred as her group returned from a voter registration workshop in South Carolina. In her telling, Hamer insinuated that she was already a known enemy of the segregationists. She recounted that, as she stepped of the

¹⁶⁷ Brooks, 16.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 17-18.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 35.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 36.

bus to make sense of the commotion, one of the officers screamed “Get that one there,” as if Hamer was a recognized criminal. Hamer reported seeing fellow activists, including Ms. Euvester Simpson, being roughed up and having her clothes torn before Hamer herself received a significant beating from two black inmates brandishing a blackjack. In her characteristic fearless manner, Hamer again openly identified the perpetrators of these crimes in a fashion many before her had (justifiably) been too timid to do.¹⁷¹

Like most of her compatriots in the movement, Victoria Jackson Gray Adams¹⁷² had long agitated against racism before officially joining the movement. Her official entrance into the movements’ ranks happened by happy accident however. After receiving from the local NAACP branch an invitation to southeastern Mississippi to open Hattiesburg to the movement, organizers Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes found all city churches had reconsidered and closed their doors to the movement. Watkins and Hayes then went to a local shop and discussed their predicament. While so doing, they were overheard by the shop’s owner, who suggested they get in contact with his sister, Victoria Gray. Gray, owner of a cosmetics company, immediately agreed to implore her pastor at St. John’s AME church in nearby Palmer’s Crossing to open the church to the movement, was successful in doing so, and the movement officially gained a life-long firebrand.¹⁷³

By the time of Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes arrived in Southern Mississippi in 1962, Victoria Gray Adams was teaching Sunday school classes, staging her own acts of subtle resistance such as refusing to address every white person as ma’am or sir, and

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 36-37.

¹⁷² Different sources give differing versions of Victoria Jackson Gray Adams’s name; this research uses the source’s version in the information and citation from each source.

¹⁷³ Adams, Victoria Gray. Interview conducted by Charles Marsh, 06 April, 1995. 1-2. Accessed via The Oral History Project Archives: <http://archives.livedtheology.org/node/107>.

chafing for opportunities for more activist work. She called Watkins and Hayes's arrival the time when things became very, very interesting. She immediately agreed to a supporting role, to attempt to register to vote, and to travel to Dorchester, Georgia to learn to be a citizenship training course teacher.¹⁷⁴

In a later interview, Adams indicated her having faith in education as a path to independence which would bear more fruit than repeated registration attempts. Though she did of course value voting as integral to the movement, she also remembered feeling exasperated at the endless means the segregationist establishment used to prevent African-American registration. As she recalled, "First, they [the segregationists] were always one step ahead of you. First you could go back, you could take the [registration] test as often as you wanted... but then it got to the point you could only take the test every three days."¹⁷⁵

What Adams thought bore more fruit, and referred to as "the first really dynamic thing we did" were the citizenship and literacy courses. Adams recalled many of her students, mostly young and elderly African Americans, were more focused on learning to read and write than the citizenship aspect, but she quickly learned she could easily instill citizenship through the guise of reading and writing lessons. In her words, "You can teach people to read the Constitution as easily as you can teach them to read 'see Dick run' if they don't know any of it. And you can teach them to write their name, telephone number, social security number and address as well as you can teach them to write 'ABC'

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Adams interview, 15.

if you will. And so, that's what we did."¹⁷⁶ Though Adams remembered that teaching the courses allowed her to impact the movement while incurring relatively little harassment, she was hardly sheltered from harassment entirely. Once she joined a group of volunteers to attempt to register, she saw with sadness that two members of her group, both city bus drivers, were fired the very day of their attempted registration.¹⁷⁷

Adams recalled that by 1964, she was "totally involved" in the movement. She reflected that "The whole thing [her full involvement] probably emerged from the first Freedom Day in Mississippi...the uniqueness of that day was that an invitation went out to the clergy, pastors of the local churches to come and support the movement."¹⁷⁸ On the first Freedom Day Adams referenced, 22 January 1964, 150 African-American residents of Hattiesburg, assisted by COFO, attempted to register. Reporting the following month, John C. Smith recorded that fifty-one ministers arrived in support, thirty-one of whom from the United Presbyterian Church. He reported also a mass meeting the evening before attended by 500-600 people which included singing, registration instruction, and motivational speeches by Lawrence Guyot, Aaron Henry, Rabbi Ungar as representative of the Jewish attendees, and Smith himself spoke for the United Presbyterians.¹⁷⁹ Adams remembered fondly of the importance of that first Freedom Day that "Some of those ministers who came in that cold winter day in Hattiesburg never went back to wherever they came from... and really got caught up

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷⁸ Adams interview, 26.

¹⁷⁹ Smith, John C. "Report on Civil Rights Participation in Hattiesburg, Mississippi" *Ministers' Project volunteers' Reports, February-August 19, 1964*. Robert Beech Papers, 1963-1972; MSS 945, Box 6, Folder 6. Accessed via: wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15932coll2/id/16792.

realizing that here was a way for them to actually... understand the minority as you're supposed to do. I think that was the real element of the Mississippi movement."¹⁸⁰

Immediately after Unita Blackwell stood up and volunteered to attempt to register to vote, she threw herself heart and soul into the movement. As she wrote, "When the movement came into my life, it was like a big drenching rain had finally come after a long dry spell. I just ran out in it and soaked it up... Being a freedom fighter didn't just become part of my life; it *was* my life."¹⁸¹ Blackwell began helping organizing meetings and grassroots canvassing of her friends, family, and community. Her bravery and commitment quickly caught the attention of Stokely Carmichael, then in charge of SNCC activities in the Second Congressional District, which included Mayersville. Among other ways, Carmichael influenced Blackwell by introducing her to Fannie Lou Hamer. During their initial meeting, Blackwell discovered that Hamer was already a friend of Blackwell's uncle Jesse; he had arranged lodging for Fannie Lou and Pap Hamer after they were evicted from the Marlowe Plantation following Fannie Lou's first registration attempt. Hamer also moved Blackwell with her telling of her severe beating at the Winona, Mississippi bus terminal by State Patrolmen. Blackwell told Hamer she was furious and that she should be as well, to which Hamer answered "We mad all right, but it ain't going to solve our problems to sit here and be mad. You got to get mad enough to go out and get people to try to register to vote." Blackwell was soon after began working with Hamer as a SNCC field representative.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Adams Interview, 26.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 78. Italic included in original text.

¹⁸² Blackwell, 82-83.

The position of field representative for SNCC gave Blackwell the responsibilities of organizing her own county of Issaquena and nearby counties.¹⁸³ Duties included organizing meetings, speaking to anyone who would listen about registration and the essentiality of voting, determining the most critical needs of the people, controlling the flow of information so it reached essential people but remained secret from anyone dangerous to the movement, and sensing those among the African-American population who would pass information on to the white establishment. Blackwell also worked to locate local sympathizers willing to help the movement in any capacity, from financial assistance to cooking, to providing lodging and basic necessities to the volunteers. Another of Blackwell's duties quickly became providing whatever assistance possible to people fired and evicted for attempting to register. Sometimes this duty proved much more helpful than even Blackwell realized at the time. Such was the case for Annie Laurie, a local sharecropper and mother of nine who was dismissed immediately for attempting to exercise her Constitutionally-guaranteed right to vote. With the small fund it was able to organize, SNCC bought a small plot of land and a trailer home in which Laurie lived until her children bought her a new home fifty years later.¹⁸⁴

One of the more significant ways in which women aided in the struggle for voting equality in Mississippi was through Freedom Schools. As Hamer, Adams, and Blackwell attested, women tended to focus much more of grassroots-level organization, especially at local churches and in Freedom Schools, both as teachers and students. An early letter from Mississippi Summer Project (MSP) staff intoned the purpose of the Freedom

¹⁸³ In her autobiography, Blackwell did not specify which counties constituted 'nearby'.

¹⁸⁴ Blackwell, 85-87.

Schools as to “Provide an educational experience for students which will make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities, to find alternatives, and, ultimately, new directions for action.”¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, SNCC argued that “The Freedom Schools are a war against this academic poverty [prevalent in Mississippi]. It is not just the courses provided, but the fact that the schools are a focal point for personal expression against the oppression, on the one hand, and for personal growth and creativity, on the other. The regular Mississippi schools are fundamentally opposed to this approach.” SNCC justified referring to Mississippi as a state enmeshed in “academic poverty’ by pointing out that a bill proposed in state government in 1963 which would have required a high school education of members of local school boards was defeated because it would have forced out so many current board members.¹⁸⁶

In addition to these goals, and the teaching of basic subjects of science, mathematics, and remedial reading and writing, the MSP also instructed teachers to devote time each day for voter education activities during the evening sessions (teaching was divided into morning and evening sessions so allow students to continue working and to avoid the worst of the summer heat).¹⁸⁷

Internal COFO memos and instructions to incoming teachers indicated the rousing success of Freedom Schools. According to COFO, by 21 July 1964, forty-one functioning Freedom Schools in twenty communities throughout the state staffed by 175

¹⁸⁵ Mississippi Summer Project Workers. *Memo to Freedom School Teachers: Overview of the Freedom Schools*. Hank Werner papers; Z: Accessions, M65-066, Box 1, Folder 1. 69. Accessed via: <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15932coll2/id/2631>. 1.

¹⁸⁶ SNCC. *Mississippi Freedom Schools: New Houses of Liberty*. SNCC Papers, 1959-1972; Reel 68, Page 0093. Accessed via: http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/B_13_NewHousesOfLiberty.htm.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 2.

full-time teachers instructed 2,135 students; approximately twice the number of each expected during planning sessions.

Whether as a teacher or student, women demonstrated and argued for the necessity of Freedom Schools. One particular prospective female student wrote to COFO that a school was needed in her area of Benton County (just southeast of Memphis) because, “We work eight to nine hours daily and get paid daily after work is over. We get paid \$3.00 per day... [to]... chop cotton 8 1/2 hours to 9 hours per day... When it’s harvest Negroes pick cotton by hand for \$2.00 for a hundred pounds and some places \$3.00 per hundred.”¹⁸⁸ A female student of the Holly Springs Freedom School (also in Benton County) described her economic situation by saying, “The working conditions are really bad. The wages are very low. The amount paid for plowing [with] a tractor all day is three dollars.” The unnamed student continued, saying, “In the fall of the year when the crop is harvested and sold to market, the white man gives the Negro what he thinks he needs, without showing the Negro a record of the income the white man has collected for the year... This way of livelihood is not much different from slavery.”¹⁸⁹

In addition to the dangers of Civil Rights work, women in the movement also fought through chauvinistic attitudes among many men in their own ranks. Though equally committed to the fight for equality in general and voting rights in particular, many women in the Mississippi movement saw themselves relegated to the traditional ‘women’s tasks’ of cooking, and banal clerical duties. A manifesto addressing women’s

¹⁸⁸ COFO. *Mississippi Freedom Schools*. Hank Werner papers; Z: Accessions, M65-066, Box 1, Folder 1). 44. Accessed via: <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15932coll2/id/2631>.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

grievances, issued anonymously by SNCC workers for internal circulation in November of 1964, attested to the misogyny of men claiming to be working for freedom for all. The tone of the manifesto is unabashedly exasperation, especially in regard to what the author(s) see as the valuable contributions of women being wasted or lost due to chauvinism. The author(s) noted that “Undoubtedly this list will seem strange to some, petty to others, laughable to most.”¹⁹⁰

The author(s) listed grievances, including field-experienced female workers assigned to clerical and typing duties, women being subject to answering to frequently much less experienced men, and the complete lack of women in leadership positions despite the presence of fully capable women for the positions. According to the manifesto, “Although there are some women in the Mississippi project who have been working as long as some of the men, the leadership group in COFO is all men.” The author(s) pointed out the juxtaposition of such misogyny within agencies which billed themselves as agitators for freedom. The manifesto argued that, “the average SNCC worker finds it difficult to discuss the woman problem because of the assumptions of male superiority. [Within the movement] Assumptions of male superiority are as widespread and deep rooted and every much as crippling to the woman as the assumptions of white supremacy are to the Negro.”¹⁹¹

Women in the Mississippi Civil Rights movement gained another major opportunity for action with the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democrat Party (MFDP). After decades of systematic exclusion from the Democrat Party (effectively the

¹⁹⁰ http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/SNCC_women.html.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

only party that mattered in Mississippi politics), Annie Devine, Victoria Gray Adams, Fannie Lou Hamer, and several male counterparts in the movement formed the MFDP to oppose the official Democratic Party of the state. To give itself legitimacy and educate supporters of the legal processes, thorough care was taken to ensure the foundation and election of all party delegates conformed to all applicable federal and state laws. Even the venerable Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Mississippi to speak in favor of the MFDP, saying “America needs at least one party which is free of racism.” King’s speeches worked, and by the end of the summer MFDP had registered 80,000 members.¹⁹²

At the MFDP’s first convention in Jackson, esteemed Civil Rights advocate Ella Baker gave the keynote address and informed members in no uncertain terms of the difficulty of the road ahead. “I’m not trying to make you feel good” she told members, but exhorted them that “Until the killing of Black mothers' sons is as important as the killing of white mothers' sons, we must keep on.” From that first convention, the MFDP affirmed its commitment to diversity and being a representative of African Americans especially, but also of all disenfranchised Mississippians, male and female, Caucasian and African American. Among the first officials chosen were SNCC field secretary Lawrence Guyot as state chairman, Fannie Lou Hamer as vice-chair, and Annie Devine, Charles McLaurin, and Victoria Gray as national delegates.¹⁹³ Though the MFDP was predominantly African-American, the party welcomed people of all races and genders. Some Whites played essential roles as well, including Reverend Edwin King and three other Whites, who served as MFDP delegates to the 1964 DNC. Likely the most

¹⁹² http://www.crmvet.org/info/mfdp_atlantic.pdf.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

prominent White MFDP member, King served as Chaplin of Tougaloo College, and was the only white member of the Black Mississippi Methodist Conference. King had been rejected from the White Methodist Conference because of his racial views.¹⁹⁴ He also ran for Lieutenant Governor on the MFDP's Freedom Ballot in 1963, and, as a MFDP delegate to the 1964 DNC, was one of the two delegates to whom a voting seat had been promised in the Democrats' offer to the MFDP.

The MFDP further demonstrated its emphasis on diversity by choosing two women of four candidates to stand for election in the state-wide mock election held in 1964 to demonstrate African-American interest in civic involvement. The candidates were: Victoria Gray, opposing Senator John C. Stennis, and Fannie Lou Hamer, opposing Representative Jamie L. Whitten. Running on largely similar platforms, Hamer and Gray each vowed to increase educational benefits, anti-poverty efforts, urban renewal, Medicare, rural development, and to guarantee constitutional rights to all.¹⁹⁵ MFDP candidates appointed these issues as their focus in direct contradiction to the official Democratic candidates. Many of the official candidates, such as James O. Eastland, Witten and Stennis were scions of political machines which saw them elected many times over and whom favored segregationist, exclusionary policies which benefited the white elite and middle class at the expense of the great majority of Mississippians: poor whites and all African Americans.

¹⁹⁴ According to the Biographical sketch accompanying the Edwin King Papers Collection, housed at the University of Mississippi Libraries. Accessed via:
http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/general_library/archives/finding_aids/MUM00251.html#series1.

¹⁹⁵ COFO. Challenge of the Mississippi Freedom Democrat Party. Hank Werner papers; Z: Accessions, M65-066, Box 1, Folder 1. 63. Accessed via:
<http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15932coll2/id/2631>.

Many women whom did not even call themselves civil rights fighters occasionally influenced activists more than activists influenced them. Young organizer Charles McLaurin learned this lesson soon after arriving in Sunflower County from his native Jackson. While driving three elderly ladies to the county courthouse in Indianola, McLaurin began to tremble with fear, even as the three ladies talked quietly about insignificant matters. Upon arrival in Indianola, McLaurin became very afraid of a white mob waiting for them. The women however, showed no fear as they walked up the courthouse steps “as if this was the long walk that led to the Golden Gate of Heaven, their heads held high.” McLaurin later said these three brave women made such an impression on him that he would never forget their bravery and calm, dignified determination in spite of their being turned away by the registrar.¹⁹⁶

In a similar vein, young Mrs. Joyce Brown invigorated many in the movement with her fearlessness though only sixteen years old.¹⁹⁷ After white supremacists bombed the Freedom School in which Brown both attended and taught in McComb, in the southwest corner of the state, SNCC could not find members of the Black community willing to rebuild the school or any churches willing to allow schooling in their building. Determined to continue, Brown and fellow teachers returned to teaching, guiding classes outside in the shadow of the smoldering ashes of the buildings. About the experience, Brown wrote the poem ‘The House of Liberty’, which proclaimed her singular determination to fight her fear and defeat the racist establishment, and chided the

¹⁹⁶ Olson, Lynne. *Freedom’s Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970*. New York: Scribner, 2001. 249-50.

¹⁹⁷ <http://www.crmvet.org/poetry/pbrown.htm>. CRMVET.org is an online archive collected by Tougaloo College which documents Civil Rights agitation in first-person accounts of veterans of the movement.

African-American community for their cowardice. In the conclusion of the poem, Brown wrote:

In a bombed house I have to teach school
Because I believe all men should live by the Golden Rule.
To a bombed house your children must come,
Because of your fear of a bomb.
And because you've let your fear conquer your soul,
In this bombed house these minds I must try to mold.
I must try to teach them to stand tall and be a man,
When you their parents have cowered down and refused to take a stand.¹⁹⁸

Joyce Brown's powerful admonition of the African-American community prompted enough support for the movement that churches became available for meetings, and many people either joined anew, or donated money or food thereto. Realizing a fighter in Brown, Freedom School students from across the state appointed Brown Chairman of the planning committee for the upcoming mass meeting of Freedom students in July of 1964.¹⁹⁹ Subsequent COFO memos demonstrate that the Freedom School in McComb came to thrive after the Black community began to support it. Even if located in "Mississippi's stronghold of racial terror- the southwest", McComb's Freedom School had, by the end of the summer of 1964, 108 students.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ Text of poem accessed via: <http://www.crmvet.org/poetry/pbrown.htm>.

¹⁹⁹ COFO. *Memo Concerning Freedom Summer Schedule of Events*. Hank Werner papers; Z: Accessions, M65-066, Box 1, Folder 1. Accessed via: <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15932coll2/id/2631>.

²⁰⁰ COFO. *Freedom School Data*. Hank Werner papers; Z: Accessions, M65-066, Box 1, Folder 1. Accessed via: <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15932coll2/id/2631>.

John Lewis spoke of difficulties women faced during the movement. He argued that one of the lesser known problems SNCC faced was frustration among veterans. In Lewis's telling, this was especially true in the case of national media attention being given almost exclusively to northern white volunteers. Many local African-American volunteers, with years of experience behind them, found national attention exasperating because whites from outside the south tended to get lauded while local veterans were ignored. Lewis discussed the problems of dealing with such frustrations as complicated and multi-faceted. In one example, he cited a SNCC typist in Greenwood, with three years of volunteering under her belt, who could type twenty-five words a minute. Then, in Lewis's words, "some white student or lady came down and she can type sixty to seventy words a minute and this young girl is replaced because you need to get the work out."²⁰¹

The MFDP organized in 1964 two mock elections which have come to be called Freedom Votes. Therein, all citizens of Mississippi were invited to cast ballots which were not counted toward official tallies, but would show how large a contingent of voters excluded from regular ballots wanted to become part of the political apparatus.

According to the MFDP's press release announcing the campaign, "The Freedom Vote Campaign is patterned after the Freedom Vote held last November when Aaron Henry ran for Governor. At that time, 80,000 votes were cast."²⁰² The MFDP went on to explain that the two main purposes of the campaign were to "Demonstrate how Negroes

²⁰¹ Lewis Interview.

²⁰² MFDP. *Fact Sheet: 1964 Freedom Vote Campaign- 10/30- 11/02*. Accessed via Tougaloo College's online archive of Civil Rights primary source documents entitled *Civil Rights Veterans*. http://www.crmvet.org/docs/6410_mfdp_freedomvote-press.pdf.

in Mississippi would vote if they were allowed to register, and to demonstrate that Negroes in Mississippi do want to vote and that the cause of the low Negro registration is intimidation rather than lethargy.”²⁰³ The release goes on to argue the necessity of efforts to break white segregationist control of the state’s voting mechanism by informing readers that only 28,500 of the approximately 430,000 eligible African-American voters (6.7 percent) were then registered.²⁰⁴

Freedom Primer #2 informed Mississippians that the Constitution of the United States stipulates that no one can be prevented from voting because of race. It also informed readers that “The most important thing that people [whom want to end segregation] have to do before they can vote is to register at the courthouse. Both Negroes and whites are supposed to register, but most Negroes are not allowed to register.” As the primer explained, many African Americans were turned away by sheriffs, county registrars, clerks of court, or potentially violent mobs outside. The exclusion of African Americans from becoming voters not only prevented them from voting, but also of entering any position within the state political establishment, as being a registered voter is a requirement thereof. According to the primer, all of these facts made participation in the Freedom Vote a vital part of the fight for voting equality; the MFDP had to have records and irrefutable proof of the fallacy of the segregationist argument that African Americans simply did not want to be participate in voting and politics in any capacity.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ MFDP. *Freedom Primer #2*. Document accessed via Civil Rights Veterans archive, Tougaloo College. http://www.crmvet.org/docs/ms_primer2_64.pdf.

John Lewis later explained that the Freedom Vote was the brainchild of Bob Moses and Al Lowenstein, a life-long activist and former Dean of Stanford University. Lewis argued that the plan was for the vote to be modeled after a similar vote had been conducted in South Africa. Just as the South African vote, the Mississippi ballot would have a “full-scale election, with real candidates and real ballot boxes.” The main purpose was to “give black men and women the sense of actually *voting* and to dramatize to onlookers the exclusion of blacks in the actual political process.”²⁰⁶

The Freedom Votes became a great success and demonstrated African Americans very much wanted to be involved in politics. In a greater showing than even organizers hoped to achieve, the Freedom Vote of 1964 garnered a total of 471,160 votes statewide²⁰⁷ With these documents in hand, the MFDP was able to prove inarguably that their Freedom Vote Campaign Fact Sheet had been entirely correct: the absurdly low totals of African-Americans registered voters was in fact a result of intimidation and subterfuge by the white establishment far more than political apathy among African Americans.

²⁰⁶ Lewis, John. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998. 232.

²⁰⁷ Walton, Hanes Jr., et al. *The African-American Electorate: A Statistical History, Vol One*. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press, 2012. 586.

V. “SICK AND TIRED OF BEING SICK AND TIRED”

The Mississippi Freedom Democrat Party’s challenge to be seated in place of the all-white state delegation at the 1964 Democratic Nation Convention.

The MFDP, and several of the female activists therein, reached their nationally visceral zenith with the 1964 challenge to the official delegation to the Democratic National Convention. After years of grassroots activity to obtain voting equality, many in the movement, began to despair of winning equality with the dominant Democratic Party, configured with segregationists and ensconced as it was. In making such a brazen and nationally-conspicuous challenge to the dug-in brokers of the ‘closed society’ of Mississippi however, the MFDP did so without approval of many fellow African-American activists. As the two organizations frequently did, SNCC and the NAACP disagreed on the tactic of the convention challenge. SNCC-affiliated activists tended to be younger, and more ready to demand quicker actions and results than their counterparts in the NAACP, who tended to prefer legislative reform as a path to gradual progress.²⁰⁸

The MFDP challenged the regular delegation on grounds of racist exclusionism, ignoring the majority of Mississippians to serve the interest of the few white elites, barring half the state’s population from participating in white-only primaries, and disloyalty to the party due to their support for Republican candidate Barry Goldwater

²⁰⁸ http://www.crmvet.org/info/mfdp_atlantic.pdf.

rather than Lyndon Johnson. Regarding the final charge, MFDP members predicted, correctly, that long-time Mississippi Democratic delegates would break ranks with the party over the race issue, just as they had done to Harry Truman in 1948.²⁰⁹

Going into the 1964 Convention, delegations from Mississippi and Alabama had made their preference for Barry Goldwater clear. Though joined by their fellow southern delegations, these two states most vociferously opposed Civil Rights planks included in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. The delegations' dispute over race culminated with their public support of Goldwater and refusal to sign oaths of loyalty to Johnson as the party's candidate in the November 1964 election.²¹⁰ Their refusal to officially declare fealty to Johnson and the convention's compromise acquiescing two seats to the mostly African-American MFDP led the majority of both the Mississippi and Alabama delegations to walk out of the convention.²¹¹

Even leaving the state of Mississippi was a victory for the MFDP. Just before the delegates left, elected chair of the party Lawrence Guyot was imprisoned on fabricated charges of indecent liberties with a minor which were dropped soon after the convention concluded. Upon learning the remaining delegation planned to attend without Guyot, governor Ross Barnett and attorney general Jim T. Patterson obtained court-ordered

²⁰⁹ http://www.crmvet.org/info/mfdp_atlantic.pdf.

²¹⁰ The Deep South states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina did in fact go to Goldwater in the general election. Along with his home state of Arizona, they were the only six states to do so.

²¹¹ Kraslow, David. "Alabamans Defy Ruling, Take Convention Seats" Los Angeles Times, 25 August 1964. UK microfilm collection.

injunctions preventing the MFDP from leaving the state. According to Unita Blackwell, the delegation simply ignored the injunction.²¹²

Despite these obstacles, MFDP members felt exhilarated by their recent accomplishments in organizing the party and mobilizing supporters, and by the fact that they were about to demand, before the eyes of the nation, their long denied Constitutionally-guaranteed rights. Victoria Gray Adams spoke of this exhilaration, saying

I think one of the things that made the delegation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party so hopeful, so expectant was the fact that people had made a discovery; a discovery that there is a way out of much of that is wrong with our lives. And that is and that there is a way to change it and that is through the execution of this vote. And so we can't get past these people at the state level because they've locked us out, but we know that once we get to the national level, with all of the proof that we have been locked out, and the fact that we've had the courage to go ahead and create our own party... we feel like we were going to get that representation that we'd been denied for so long."²¹³

Unita Blackwell remembered that the day and a half trek to Atlantic City as mostly without incident, other than an attempt by the Klan to stop the group in Tennessee. A female freedom fighter of a different sort thwarted their attempt however. When the white bus driver began to slow down due to Klansmen beginning to assemble a barricade, a "petite young brown-skinned woman" pulled a switchblade knife from her purse and put it to the driver's throat. She demanded the driver speed through the blockade. Seeing the busses were not going to stop, the Klansmen "scattered like scalded chickens and all their stuff went everywhere."²¹⁴ Other than this incident. Blackwell

²¹² Blackwell, 107.

²¹³ Interview with Victoria Gray Adams, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on November 9, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

²¹⁴ Blackwell, 109.

remembered a calm and enthusiastic journey to Atlantic City, with delegates well aware of the magnitude of their endeavor. “The bus ride to Atlantic City, New Jersey, was full of I say, enthusiasm that we had done this. We had had our own elections. We had our delegates, and we were going to challenge. It was something different and new” Blackwell later said about the drive.²¹⁵

Once the MFDP delegates traveled to Atlantic City for the challenge with the battle-tested and experienced vice-chair Fannie Lou Hamer as the ranking member of the party. The minefield through which Hamer led the MFDP was made far more complicated by the Democratic Candidate whom they came to support being lukewarm on racial matters at the time. Though Lyndon Johnson made Civil Rights a key part of his presidency with the Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, and Great Society program, he wished to keep racial matters away from the forefront of the 1964 campaign. Republican challenger Barry Goldwater sought to capitalize on the growing white backlash against Civil Rights and, if successful, could have eroded Johnson’s hoped-for reelection landslide as a voter mandate to continue Kennedy’s legacy. States’ rights firebrand George Wallace openly sought to steal white racists’ votes from Johnson, and once Wallace garnered thirty percent of Democratic votes in Wisconsin and Indiana, Johnson knew Wallace was more than a regional loudmouth who could be ignored.²¹⁶ Johnson summed up his desire to keep racial matters on the back-burner during the election in a July 1964 telephone conversation with Georgia governor Carl Sanders.

²¹⁵ Interview with Unita Blackwell, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on May 7, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection. Accessed via: <http://digital.wustl.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eop;cc=eop;rgn=main;view=text;idno=bla0015.0999.011>.

²¹⁶ <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2001/spring/lbj-and-white-backlash-1.html>.

Therein he told Sanders that "If we have to get elected on civil rights, then we're already defeated . . . unless we can get the campaign on some other basis, why it is just going to be agonizing."²¹⁷

Riots that broke out in Harlem and other cities merely weeks after passage of the Civil Rights Act, and Goldwater's capitalizing on them for political points made Johnson's desire to keep Civil Rights away from the campaign spotlight untenable. As historian Jeremy D. Mayer argued, by the 1964 Democratic convention, "Johnson's fears of a white backlash... reached a fever pitch." Mayer quoted Johnson telling Texas governor John Connally "If they just keep on rioting in Harlem you are going to have unshirted Hell, and you're going to have it in New York, you're going to have the same type of rebellion there, and in Chicago and Iowa . . . this thing runs deep. You're going to see more cross-voting this year." Connally encapsulated the extent of southern segregationists' fury at the Civil Rights Movement when he answered Johnson, saying, "If they have a hundred thousand Negroes up there . . . and they picket this thing . . . and then the convention kicks them [segregationist delegations] out, the impression throughout the country is going to be, well, they just got kicked out because the niggers wanted them kicked out."²¹⁸

²¹⁷ Recording of Telephone Conversation between LBJ and Carl Sanders, July 24, 1964, 12:30 p.m., Citation #4328, Recordings of Conversations— White House Series, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX. Accessed via: <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2001/spring/lbj-and-white-backlash-2.html#nt1>.

²¹⁸ Recording of Telephone Conversation between LBJ and John Connally, July 23, 1964, 5:31 p.m., Citation #4322, Recordings of Telephone Conversations— White House Series, LBJ Library. Accessed via: <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2001/spring/lbj-and-white-backlash-2.html#nt51>.

News media covered the events of the 1964 Democratic National Convention varied widely. *Time* magazine glossed over the convention with nary a mention of a challenge to a recognized state delegation on charges of racism and party disloyalty. *Time* surmised the events as banal, telling readers that, “At the 1964 Democratic National Convention, the networks achieved the impossible. In their frenetic scramble to make the trivial significant and the significant momentous, they succeeded in making the convention seem even duller than dull reality.”²¹⁹

The Chicago Tribune painted the convention as tiresome, banal, and dominated by the whims of President Johnson other than the MFDP challenge. Though the Tribune also did not discuss the merits of the MFDP’s challenge, one article did acknowledge its occurrence and intimate an opinion on the challenge by titling the article “Democratic Convention Branded Most Undemocratic.”²²⁰ According the Tribune, “Convention managers would not admit it for obvious reasons, but the convention was saved from insufferable boredom by the controversy of seating the... Mississippi delegation. There was no precedent for the invasion of the floor by Negro members of the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party *and* their sit-in *and* stand-in in space reserved for the state.” The article went on to state that the MFDP delegates retained their seats only because the sergeants-at-arms had been warned of television cameras on them and that Johnson wished for no such disturbances to appear on television so as to maintain the appearance

²¹⁹ “What Next from Planet Lyndon?” *Time* 04 September 1964. Accessed via: <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,830579,00.html>.

²²⁰ “Democratic Convention Branded Most Undemocratic” Chicago Tribune, 30 August 1964. Accessed via: <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1964/08/30/page/6/article/democratic-convention-branded-the-most-undemocratic>.

of a solidly united party.²²¹ The Tribune had already referred to the “Grim specter of a party-splitting row” in anticipation of the MFDP’s arrival at the convention. In that 22 August 1964 article, the Tribune informed readers of the high passions within the party over the challenge. Editors quoted Representative Adam Clayton of Harlem as arguing it would be ‘disastrous’ to not recognize the MFDP, and a ‘surrender to the worst form of barbarism’ to seat the all-white delegation.²²²

The Los Angeles Times’ Robert Donovan called the MFDP challenge “the problem which was causing the President and the Democrats the most trouble,” but noted that otherwise, “Beyond the choice of the Vice Presidential nominee...the convention looks like a fairly cut-and-dried affair.”²²³ Donovan predicted a no-win situation for Johnson, as the party’s refusal to seat MFDP could result in racial demonstrations (an especially acute fear in the wake of race riots already occurring in Harlem and many other cities). Conversely, as Donovan argued, seating the MFDP carried the likely ramification of a mass Southern walk-out, which would have posed significant problems for Johnson in the upcoming general election.²²⁴

The following day, the Los Angeles Times’ David Kraslow reported that the challenge had reached “crisis proportions” as a special five-member subcommittee could not engineer a solution before the opening of the convention. The subcommittee had

²²¹ Ibid. Both the italics and juxtaposition of the MFDP’s name appeared in original text.

²²² “Convention Faces Split on 3 Fronts” Chicago Tribune, 22 August 1964. Accessed via: <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1964/08/22/page/1/article/convention-faces-split-on-3-fronts>.

²²³ Donovan, Robert J. “Dixie Clash Grows: Mississippi Dilemma Unsolved; President Silent on 2nd Spot”. Los Angeles Times, 24 August, 1964. Accessed via microfilm collection at the University of Kentucky.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

sought to resolve the issue before the problem could progress to floor challenge, which would have exposed the party's differences on racial matters. Johnson also wanted the party and the convention to both exude an atmosphere of unity of purpose.²²⁵

Robert Donovan continued the Los Angeles Times' extensive coverage of the MFDP's challenge, writing that many Democrats "seized upon the Mississippi case as a symbol. It [is] nothing less than a symbol of democracy itself-of whether Negroes have a right of representation and of participation in government." Donovan then concluded that the MFDP's challenge to the official state delegation was "no longer a mere convention squabble but a question of principle arousing worldwide attention."²²⁶

There in Atlantic City, Hamer, unfazed by the media circus, delivered arguably her most well-known speech. In her deliberate style, she opened her speech with her address, identifying her as a resident of the home county of James O. Eastland. She then unflinchingly recounted being fired for attempting to register to vote, a subsequent retaliatory attempt on her life, and being severely beaten returning from a voter education workshop. In her words, "All of this is on account of we want to register, to become first-class citizens."²²⁷ She closed with one of her most well-known comments, famously exhorting the Credentials Committee and the nation that "If the Freedom party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the

²²⁵ Kraslow, David, "Dispute on Mississippi Still Rages". Los Angeles Times, 25 August, 1964.

²²⁶ Donovan, Robert. "Alabama and Mississippi Disputes Reflect Different Views on Racial Struggle". Los Angeles Times, 25 August 1964. Accessed via the University of Kentucky microfilm collection.

²²⁷ Hamer, Fannie Lou. "Testimony before the Credentials Committee, 1964 Democratic National Convention". Accessed via "Say It Loud: A Century of Great African-American Speeches", an online archive of speeches in full transcript. Archive collected by American Radio Works: <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/sayitplain/flhamer.html>.

brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?”²²⁸

Once “back door dealings” began to happen, largely at President Johnson’s insistence because he opposed the MFDP’s seating for fear of losing Southern support, Hamer demonstrated her determination to not be intimidated by anybody. Discerning that the primary driver of their immediate difficulties was Senator Hubert H. Humphries, and that he wanted the MFDP stifled to further his personal vice-presidential ambitions, Hamer minced no words in her rebuke of him. She told him directly, “Mr. Humphrey, I’ve been praying about you and I’ve been thinking about you, and you’re a good man. But are you saying you think that your job as Vice-President is more important than the rights of our Black people in Mississippi. Senator Humphrey, the trouble is, you scared to do what you know is right. Senator, I’m going to pray for you some more.”²²⁹ In Unita Blackwell’s recollection, that comment caused Hamer to be excluded from all subsequent negotiations for the remainder of the convention.²³⁰

On the morning of Wednesday, 26 August, the Los Angeles Times, among other outlets, reported that the Democrats had reached an agreement ending the troublesome MFDP challenge. As the Los Angeles Times reported it, the compromise gave the MFDP two seats, with full voting privileges. The compromise precipitated a walk-out by the regular Mississippi delegation, which stood by its refusal to concede any compromise with the MFDP. The compromise suited neither of the Mississippi delegations, but as the

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ http://www.crmvet.org/info/mfdp_atlantic.pdf.

²³⁰ Blackwell, 113. In her autobiography, Blackwell does not specify by whom or what legal means Hamer was excluded from meetings, but simply states that she had been for the comment she made directly to Humphrey.

Los Angeles Times recorded, “it accomplished the basic objective of President Johnson and the Democratic National Committee: it kept the South in the convention.”²³¹

According to MFDP members present, the women in the group, primarily Fannie Lou Hamer and Annie Devine, played the leading role in convincing the delegation to reject the compromise for two seats at the convention in exchange for dropping the challenge. This decision by the MFDP proved to be the most controversial in media coverage and many columnists chided the party for the rejection. A New York Times writer opined that the MFDP “could have accepted a rule that they did not altogether like, instead of slipping into unauthorized seats... They could have made a point not of their demand for total victory but of their loyalty to the national Democratic party and to President Johnson.”²³² Conservative columnists Robert Novak and Rowland Evans took their derision further, snorting that the compromise offered was “far better than [the MFDP] had any right to expect.” Furthermore, Novak and Evans concluded by channeling the time-worn accusation that the MFDP was “dangerously oblivious to the Communist menace to the Civil Rights movement.”²³³

The “slipping into unauthorized seats” to which the New York Times alluded occurred after the MFDP rejected the compromise and then learned the regular delegation had done likewise and walked out of the convention. The Los Angeles Times also reported on the unauthorized taking of seats, stating that MFDP delegates used floor

²³¹ Kraslow, David. “Mississippi Compromise Approved by Democrats” Los Angeles Times, 26 August 1964. UK microfilm collection.

²³² Olson, 232.

²³³ Olson, 323. Novak and Evans’s comments also reveal that, midway through the 1960s, opponents of integration still cherished the fallacy of equality being a product of communist forces, just as Judge Tomas Bradley had in the immediate aftermath of *Brown*.

passed assumedly given them by delegates from other states and caused a melee lasting two hours.²³⁴

The MFDP's rejection of the compromise offering them two voting seats turned out to be equally as controversial as the challenge itself. After speaking to the entire assembly, urging the convention to recognize the MFDP as opposed to the regular delegation, Martin Luther King, Jr. supported the compromise as a solid foundation upon which to build. King shared the MFDP's misgivings however.²³⁵

In a letter to the Amsterdam News, King expounded upon his take on the challenge. Of the compromise he wrote, "This was a significant step. This was not a great victory, but it was symbolic [sic]... But there was not compromise for the persons who had risked their lives to get this far." He continued intimating his mixed feelings for the compromise, saying, "Had I been a member of the delegation, I probably would have advised them to accept this as an offer in good faith and continue to work to strengthen their position."²³⁶

Contrary to the advice offered them by King and others, the MFDP voted to reject the compromise by a margin of seventy percent. At the delegates' meeting to discuss the matter, Aaron Henry and Ed King, to whom the offered seats would have gone, spoke in favor of the compromise, having been won over after initially opposing the agreement.²³⁷

²³⁴ Reston, Richard. "Melee set off by 'Freedom' Unit". Los Angeles Times, 26 August 1964. UK microfilm collection.

²³⁵ King, Jr. Martin Luther. *People to People: Something Happening in Mississippi*. A letter to the Amsterdam News, Received 17 October 1964. Accessed via online archive digitized by The King Center, Atlanta, Georgia. <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/people-people-something-happening-mississippi#>.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ Blackwell, 115.

In Unita Blackwell's remembrance, the main opposition came from women, most vocally Hamer, Victoria Gray, and Annie Devine. These three women spoke against taking the compromise for both practical and emotional reasons. They pointed out that the MFDP would need at least half the seats, or a compromise would be worthless, as having only two votes would allow them to simply be outvoted on every issue. Fannie Lou Hamer told the delegates, and the media afterward, "We didn't come all this way for no two seats. All of us is tired." Delegate Henry Sias remembered being swayed by the women's impassioned arguments. He recalled later that "When those women got through whooping and hollering I changed my mind... I didn't want to be just breath and britches."²³⁸

Toward the end of the convention, Unita Blackwell stopped to take it all in. A delegation of nearly all African Americans, many poor sharecroppers barely eking out a living and approximately half of the group women, had openly defied the segregated political structure of Mississippi on national television. Though officially their challenge was defeated, as the MFDP delegation voted to reject a compromise for two seats, Blackwell felt triumphant. As she recalled in her autobiography, "That night I knew it was true: Another level of slavery had fallen away." Blackwell continued about the experience writing, "Even though we didn't win our challenge, the experience didn't feel like defeat to me. We had, in fact, knocked out most of the regulars from being seated, and we had drawn national attention to our new party and to problems within the national Democratic organization. We had stood proud and strong... I learned that I had a political voice and an ability to use it." Blackwell was correct to feel accomplished, even

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

if the MFDP left Atlantic City in defeat. The challenge brought widespread attention (world-wide as the Los Angeles Times claimed) to the MFDP's cause. Furthermore, after 1964, the Democratic Party vowed to never again recognize an all-white delegation elected by means of systematically excluding voters because of their race.²³⁹

These remembrances are in stark contrast to Blackwell's first attempt register to vote; her euphoria an apt measure of the progress the movement had made in a very short period of time. In an interview for Henry Hampton's *Eyes on the Prize*, Blackwell remembered her first registration experience as frightening and fruitless. According to her, her group was met by "a circle around the courthouse of pickup trucks and rifles and white people getting ready to stop us from going into the courthouse. And we stayed in the courthouse all day long trying to get registered to vote. And only four people got in that whole day."²⁴⁰ When asked about the root of her involvement in the movement, the meaning of having voting equality, Blackwell answered,

"The white people knew what it meant. The black folks didn't know that much what it meant. I was only told when I started off that if I registered to vote that I would have food to eat and a better house to stay in, 'cause the one I was staying in was so raggedy you could see anywhere and look outdoors. That I would have, my child would have a better education. And at that particular point, our children only went to school two to three months out of the year. That was what we were told, it was the basic needs of the people. And for the whites, they understood it even larger than that in terms of political power, and we hadn't even heard that word, political power, because it wasn't even taught in the black schools. We didn't know it was such thing as a Board of Supervisors and what they did, and School Board members, and what they did and even the Mayor. I mean my

²³⁹ Blackwell, 116.

²⁴⁰ Unita Blackwell. Interview conducted by Blackside, Inc. 7 May 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection. Accessed via: <http://digital.wustl.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eop;cc=eop;rgn=main;view=text;idno=bla0015.0999.011>.

mother has never thought in terms that, that I would... ever be anything. So nobody's... never thought about any of those things.”²⁴¹

Fellow activist and *Eyes on the Prize* interviewee Victoria Jackson Gray Adams told of a similar situation at the onset of her agitation for voting equality. In Adams’s words, “In Mississippi... it was a police state for all practical purposes. It was truly a closed society. The law enforcement agencies, the government for all practical purposes was simply not accountable to anyone other than [sic] themselves, you know. And for example, in my hometown... I applied for registration six times before I was ever able to be accepted, and I was only able to be accepted after we had taken our registrar to court. And in fact all, all of my applications were used... by the justice department in trying to have the registrar establish why... I hadn't been registered in the beginning, if you will. And the reason for all this of course was in the state of Mississippi the registrar was all powerful really.”

When asked in 1985 about the lessons learned at the convention, Victoria Jackson Gray Adams voiced complete agreement with MFDP delegates’ rejection of the compromise which offered them a mere two seats.²⁴² As that would that have allowed the recognized delegation to overrule the MFDP on every issue, Adams recalled the MFDP delegates realizing that amounted to receiving nothing in the supposed bargain. Adams explained the MFDP’s position by saying, “I think... the majority of the delegation... realized that we came with nothing, and it made no sense at all with all the risk that had been taken, that were being taken to accept what we knew for certain to be nothing, and to go back there to God only knows what.” She continued, explaining that,

²⁴¹ Blackwell Interview.

²⁴² Adams Interview.

“You may get home and not have a house. You may get home and a member of your family might be missing, or you may not get home at all. And so, we [were] not going to accept anything less than what we came after, which is the real thing, which is representation, which is the right to participate, and if we don't get that then we'll go back and take our chances and regroup and come to fight another day. And that is precisely what we did.”²⁴³

MFDP members undoubtedly knew political reprisals would result from their challenge. The following month, Fannie Lou Hamer and Victoria Jackson Gray Adams began to feel the political wrath of the state's political establishment. Both Hamer and Gray's bids for congressional candidacy rejected on the grounds that their paperwork lacked certification from county registrars that they were registered voters. Furthermore, both Hamer and Adams were ruled ineligible to run as independents in the November 1964 general election because they had ran in the June primaries as democrats.²⁴⁴

Reprisals such as these continued for many years, but the fact could not long be avoided, even by the most ardent segregationist: Civil Rights activists has succeeded in turning the tide against segregation. The cracking of white-only delegations elected by white only electorates, combined with the Voting Rights Act to be passed the following year sounded the death knell for segregationists to assert and maintain their power. This was by no means an instantaneous process; in some ways it continues into the present. Nevertheless, the MFDP challenge to the 1964 Democratic National Convention brought

²⁴³ *ibid.*

²⁴⁴ “Bomb Rocks Mayor's Home in Natchez”. *Chicago Tribune*, 26 September 1964. Accessed via: <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1964/09/26/page/19/article/bomb-rocks-mayors-home-in-natchez>.

the 'closed society' of Mississippi to national attention and ended the racists' ability to hide in the dark and survive by secrecy. The battle to eradicate racism entirely continues, but, in the particular case of exclusion from voting participation in Mississippi, the MFDP nailed the stake in the heart of Mississippi segregationists that would eventually kill their ability to systematically deny a vast swath of the population their Constitutionally-guaranteed right to vote. John Lewis spoke of this sentiment as early as 1973. When asked then if he believed a repeat of the beatings on the Pettis Bridge outside of Selma, Alabama could be repeated in 1973 he said, "Today? No. It's out of the question. I think it's out of the question. I think it would be hard for anything like that to occur in the South. People don't want to go back to that period... both blacks and whites."²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ Lewis interview, page 30. *Documenting the American South* archive, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/A-0073/A-0073.html>.

VI: CONCLUSIONS

The long history of Civil Rights agitation in the United States defies explanation in any single work. As the struggle against oppression of African Americans likely dates back to the forced arrival of the first shipment of slaves in America in 1619; far too many people, strategies, events, and counter events have occurred to fully document them at once. For that reason, this research project focuses on the very specific aspect of female activists in the struggle for voting equality in Mississippi during the first half of the 1960s.

Even in that specific context, the rich and multi-faceted history is far too broad to be encompassed herein. This research makes no claim to fully document all of the contributions made to the struggle by brave women risking their lives and everything they own in the hope of securing a better life. Rather, this project attempts to illuminate some of the accomplishments and staggering acts of bravery and defiance of five heroines who personify the movement. It is one of the hopes of this research that the discussion of these five women intimates the vast array of crucial contributions made by far too many women to discuss in a single work.

Whether named in this research or not, a few common threads ran through the Civil Rights activism of women in Mississippi in the early 1960s. One of the more obvious ones is the bravery necessary to confront the racist monolith that the society and government of the state was at the time. Frequently, African Americans seeking to

register to vote appeared before county registrars virtually sure of the fact that the same registrar would be among the group who fired shots or burned a cross in retaliation soon after. Often, the best case scenario for which an African-American applicant could hope is the registrar would be a just silent accesor to the Klan, the Citizens' Council, or other groups perpetrating racial violence in response to African- Americans' quest for integration and equality.

The second major weapon the segregationist establishment used against the Civil Rights movement was economic warfare. The very evening Fannie Lou Hamer first attempted to register to vote she was forced to leave the plantation on which she had worked for eighteen years. Clarie Collins Harvey received many threats to her insurance companies and funeral home. Like Hamer and Harvey, all the women discussed herein retaliatory attacks of intended violence and economic hardship. In spite of, or in some ways because of, these hardships and threats of violence, the heroines discussed herein persevered in their cause to bring freedom, equality, and integration to everyone.

Though heroines across Mississippi utilized many different tactics, one of the primary goals for virtually all of them was securing voting equality. Integration in practice, equal protection by and from law enforcement, and greater economic opportunities may have been ultimate goals, but access to voting was essential to the achievement of all the other goals. Without African Americans having voting rights, Ross Barnett could have continued to declare that African Americans loved segregation. With no way for African Americans to help vote such politicians out of office, governors of Hugh L. White's ilk could refuse to order investigations of brutal, racially motivated

murders²⁴⁶. Mississippi politicians' long-standing racism and devotion to the Jim Crow economy proved so embedded and intransigent by the beginning of the 1960s that racial compromise proved anathema to them. Just as members of the official Mississippi delegation to the 1964 Democratic National Convention walked out of the entire event rather than concede anything to the MFDP, state politicians back on their home soil could not conceive of African Americans as political equals.

Such thorough intransigence made achievement of voting equality absolutely necessary for the Civil Rights movement to accomplish virtually anything of meaning, and to ensure victories resulted in implementation and remained in place. Still-segregated public schools in the state years after the *Brown* decision and many other ignored court orders to integrate demonstrated that actual and effective change had to derive from the ground-level up. Women in Mississippi responded to this need headlong. While men made the more visceral efforts toward legislation reform, women organized their communities, and built effective communication networks through local churches. Though the efforts of these women may have initially been out of the spotlight, their efforts would pay dividends as the 1950s turned to the 1960s.

By the beginning of the 1960s, segregationists had ignored several court summons toward integration, most notably in public schools. Finding school systems' *all deliberate speed* not speedy enough, many African Americans campaigning for Civil Rights changed tactics. Many activists' focus changed from seeking laws attempting to end segregation to openly demanding such changes through mass-level direct action.

²⁴⁶ As Mississippi governor in 1955, White refused to order official investigations into the Emmitt Till and George W. Lee murders.

When the clarion call came for direct action projects, women's work in community action came to bear and demonstrated its importance. By the dawn of the 1960s, female Mississippians had developed intricate lines of community-wide communication which could disseminate information effectively. Through these networks and mass church meetings organized thereby, the essential task of organizing voter registrants took place. Many women who played vital roles in Civil Rights agitation in Mississippi began their careers at just such meetings. Fannie Lou Hamer attended one organized by SNCC in August of 1962 and raised her hand as soon as volunteers were asked to do so. Likewise, Unita Blackwell attended a SNCC meeting and stood up, for the first of many times, to take her place in the struggle for better opportunities, better education, and better lives for African-Americans in Mississippi and throughout the South.

Of primary importance to the struggle for equality was equal access to voting. Women launched themselves into the fight to secure suffrage in practice for African-American Mississippians; sometimes with a brazenness bordering on being foolishly reckless. Fannie Lou Hamer began speaking at her very first meeting, and continued to do so throughout the remainder of her life. By the time of her testimony at the 1964 DNC, Hamer had taken to announcing her home address for all to hear. Casey Hayden came to the Mississippi Delta, arguably the most dangerous area of the country for Civil Rights workers from her native Texas to help organize the fight for equality.

By utilizing grassroots-level organization, women such as Harvey, Blackwell, and myriad others fundamentally altered perception of the entire Civil Rights movement.

Operating in a time before the women's liberation movement, when men in power could

openly dismiss women activists as less capable than their male counterparts, women faced resistance even greater than that of the much publicized careers of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other notable male activists.

Press coverage of the MFDP's DNC challenge in 1964 demonstrated the dismissive nature some news outlets took to a political challenge which prominently featured women. As Lynne Olson recorded, conservative writers Rowland Evans and Robert Novak mocked the MFDP for rejecting the compromise offer of two voting seats. Evans and Novak argued two seats were "far better than they [the MFDP] had any right to expect".²⁴⁷ Lost in Evans and Novak's criticism is the fact that the 'regular' Mississippi delegation both violated the Fifteenth Amendment by systematically excluding African Americans from their membership and election process, and flaunted their preference for the Republican Barry Goldwater over the Democratic candidate, President Johnson. The Los Angeles Times reported on the challenge in significant detail, but focused on Mississippi NAACP leader Aaron Henry and Tougaloo College Chaplain Edwin King, the two to whom the two offered voting seats had been demarcated.

Though the MFDP's challenge at the DNC in 1964 may have proved unsuccessful, it did nonetheless result in important changes in the Democratic Party. After the challenge, the Democrats never again recognized an intentionally segregated delegation at its conventions. The challenge also demonstrated Democrats' need to court African-American voters; a trend which grew in importance as Republicans and George Wallace campaigned vigorously for the votes of working-class whites. As these

²⁴⁷ Olson, 323.

working-class whites, formerly Democratic bedrock voters, began to be swayed elsewhere, the African-American vote became increasingly important to Democrats.

As important as the MFDP's challenge was however, it received fleeting amounts of press coverage. One of the reasons for that is the challenge not being taken seriously, and the leaders thereof assumed to be political novices. Many veteran political correspondents knew the power and intransigence of the regular Mississippi delegates and knew they would not be defeated by a head-on assault on a stage as big as the DNC. Would the delegation have been so reduced had the primary leaders in Atlantic City been male? That is impossible to answer, but the delegation as it was, featuring women in positions of power, certainly was. In her announcement that the Party had rejected the proposed compromise, ranking member Fannie Lou Hamer made it clear by strong insinuation that she and other women held leadership positions in the Party and were fundamental to the Party's decision-making apparatus. As the 'second wave' of the women's movement had not yet come to full force and national attention, Hamer and her female compatriots could easily have not been taken seriously as a political entity by both the DNC and large swaths of national newspapers.

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Note on language: Some of the archival material sourced for this research project include racial slurs and derogatory attitudes toward African Americans. For the purpose of maintaining historical accuracy, such sources have not been censored within this project, but they are not in any way, shape, or form indicative of the opinions held by the author of this research.

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