

Chapter Title: A Pig and a Garden Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farm Cooperative

Book Title: Freedom Farmers

Book Subtitle: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement

Book Author(s): MONICA M. WHITE

Published by: University of North Carolina Press

Stable URL: [http://www.jstor.com/stable/10.5149/9781469643717\\_white.7](http://www.jstor.com/stable/10.5149/9781469643717_white.7)

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of North Carolina Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Freedom Farmers*

JSTOR

PART II

Collective Agency and  
Community Resilience  
in Action

*This page intentionally left blank*

# 2

## A Pig and a Garden

### *Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farm Cooperative*

Down where we are, food is used as a political weapon. But if you have a pig in your backyard, if you have some vegetables in your garden, you can feed yourself and your family, and nobody can push you around. If we have something like some pigs and some gardens and a few things like that, even if we have no jobs, we can eat and we can look after our families. —Fannie Lou Hamer

In order for any people or nation to survive, land is necessary.  
—Fannie Lou Hamer

Fannie Lou Hamer founded Freedom Farm Cooperative (FFC) in 1967 as an antipoverty strategy to meet the needs of impoverished residents of Ruleville, Mississippi, in Sunflower County. Freedom Farm was a community-based rural and economic development project. Its members were unemployed farmworkers who had been dispossessed of access to land and displaced by mechanization. This chapter will show how Hamer's work manifested the basic principles of CACR. It offers an analysis of the political philosophy that led Hamer to create Freedom Farm as an alternative to the second wave of northern migration—the departure from the rural South for northern cities and manufacturing work. Freedom Farm represented an opportunity to stay in the South, live off of the land, and create a healthy community based upon building an alternative food system as a cooperative and collective effort. It was in keeping with Hamer's perspective that if she had a pig and a garden, "she might be harassed and physically harmed but at least she would not starve to death."<sup>1</sup>

## From the Fields to the Democratic National Convention Floor

Born Fannie Lou Townsend in 1917, Hamer was the twentieth child of sharecroppers. She worked in the fields of the Marlowe Plantation in Ruleville, Mississippi, from the age of six.<sup>2</sup> She gained a sixth-grade education and stopped attending the seasonal school to work in the fields full-time by the age of thirteen.<sup>3</sup> Contemporaries recalled with some amazement that as a teenager she could pick two hundred to three hundred pounds of cotton per day, as much as many twice her age.<sup>4</sup> But she was struck with polio in young adulthood, which left her with a limp. She married Perry “Pap” Hamer and experienced involuntary sterilization when she underwent surgery to have a uterine tumor removed.<sup>5</sup> The State of Mississippi endorsed such acts of violence as a means to curtail the rates of African American births.<sup>6</sup> While she and Pap adopted three daughters over the course of their long marriage, she never forgave the state of Mississippi for her forced sterilization, referring to it caustically as a “Mississippi appendectomy.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1962, Hamer attended a mass meeting sponsored by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Ruleville and was among the first to volunteer as a field organizer to coordinate and organize the voter education and registration drives. Later that year, she led a group of African Americans to the state courthouse in Indianola, Mississippi, that applied for voter registration. The state claimed that the entire group had failed the “literacy” exam, a qualification Mississippi and other states used at the time to disenfranchise African Americans. Upon her return to Ruleville, after eighteen years of dedicated service as sharecropper, time- and record-keeper, cook, and domestic on the Marlowe Plantation, Hamer’s boss demanded that she withdraw her application for voter registration or be fired. Her refusal not only led to her dismissal but also eviction for her and her husband, Pap, as they rented a shanty as part of their sharecropping-employment agreement.

About the firing, Hamer later commented, “They kicked me off the plantation, they set me free. It’s the best thing that could happen. Now I can work for my people.”<sup>8</sup> The costs continued to mount in 1963, when Hamer was arrested for registering to vote. In jail, a

group of black inmates was forced by law enforcement officers to beat her. She suffered permanent kidney damage from the incident.<sup>9</sup> It was the first of many brutal attempts to curtail her activism by Mississippi law enforcement officers,<sup>10</sup> many of whom held memberships in organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens' Council.

Hamer became known throughout the civil rights movement for her oratorical skills and for calming organizers and activists by singing spirituals during contentious moments. Hamer's nationally televised testimony before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention in 1964, demanding that the committee seat her and sixty-seven other African American and white representatives of the newly formed Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, stunned the nation. Challenging the all-white delegates officially representing the Mississippi Democratic Party, she succinctly described the acts of terrorism to which she had been subjected. She concluded, "If the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"<sup>11</sup>

President Lyndon Johnson called an emergency televised press conference to divert the nation's attention from Hamer, but his efforts backfired. The video recording of Hamer's powerful testimony was replayed several times throughout the convention and formed part of the backdrop to the long and contentious process leading to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Hamer continued her participation in electoral politics with runs for Congress in 1964 and 1965, and the Mississippi State Senate in 1971, each of which she lost.<sup>12</sup> In 1968, the Mississippi delegation sent Hamer as an official delegate to the Democratic National Convention.

### Center for Activism: Sunflower County

Hamer presumably chose Sunflower County as the site of FFC because it was home, where she had connections and relationships of trust. There was also dire need there. If Mississippi sought to

starve black residents into compliance with the racial hierarchy, it was succeeding in Sunflower County.<sup>13</sup> The county's rates of malnutrition, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and other diet-related illnesses were among the highest in the nation. As elsewhere in the Jim Crow South, the state routinely denied impoverished African Americans public assistance and social services. Opportunities for employment were scant. Sunflower County's black population had the highest infant mortality rates in the country. When Tufts Medical School opened up a community clinic in 1967 in the neighboring county of Bolivar, a considerable percentage of the residents were diagnosed with conditions related to malnutrition. Most of the prescriptions written by physicians were for food. "There was as much food in the pharmacy as there was medicine," the Measure for Measure financial support proposal of 1978 reported.<sup>14</sup>

The 1960 U.S. Census reveals that Sunflower County's population of almost 46,000 was 67 percent African American, 32 percent white, and 0.4 percent other racial groups (Native American, Japanese, Filipino).<sup>15</sup> That year, the USDA bestowed a subsidy check of more than \$167,000 on James Eastland, a wealthy Sunflower County planter and U.S. senator. *Time* magazine aptly called Eastland "the spiritual leader of segregationists" in 1967. The check was marked for investment in increased mechanization in agriculture, not to plant cotton.<sup>16</sup> It led to the unemployment and homelessness of black families whose heads of households were primarily employed as agricultural workers, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and farm managers.

Mississippi has consistently ranked high among U.S. states in poverty rates. In 1960, the median income of black families in the county was \$1,126 per year.<sup>17</sup> In 1965, Mississippi was ranked the "poorest state in the Nation."<sup>18</sup> Federal efforts to respond to extreme hunger and malnutrition included a visit from Senate representatives from the Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty headed by Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania. The tour also included Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Hamer was among the many local residents, politicians, businesspersons, educators, and activists with whom they spoke. After their visit, they demanded that the Department of Agriculture begin more food programs

throughout the state. However, Mississippi congressman Jamie Whitten, the powerful chairman of the Agricultural Appropriations Subcommittee, demanded an end to any data collection that would evaluate the economic situation of those in the area. Whitten fought to ensure that U.S. farm policy would never have a means to recognize the effects of its programs on sharecroppers or other farm workers.<sup>19</sup>

The Second Great Migration was a response to such policies. Between 1940 and 1960, more than three million black people fled southern states.<sup>20</sup> Mechanization and oppression left many black families with little choice but to seek better living conditions, education, and employment opportunities in northern urban areas.<sup>21</sup> In 1960, over 60 percent of the African American population in Sunflower County was employed in agriculture, forestry, or fisheries. Seventy percent of the black male population was employed in the agricultural industry as farmers, farm managers, laborers, and foremen. Twenty-five percent were employed as craftsmen, and non-farm laborers, in manufacturing and other service industry occupations. The remaining 5 percent worked as managers or in positions of sales, private households, or were unreported. Forty-two percent of black women were employed as domestic workers or day laborers, and an additional 36 percent worked as farmers, farm laborers, and managers. Ninety percent of the county's black population had six or fewer years of education. Between 1950 and 1960, Sunflower County's population decreased by 20 percent as African Americans moved north to the urban areas in northern cities, known as the Rust Belt, such as Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago, Pittsburgh and west to California, two areas courting them with promises of employment and liberation from the exploitative economic conditions of Mississippi. Between 1960 and 1970, the county's population declined an additional 20 percent.<sup>22</sup>

### An Organic Intellectual

Hamer's understanding of the facts on the ground in Mississippi reveals her to have been an organic intellectual. Antonio Gramsci argued that every social class creates organic intellectuals who

articulate and identify the collective's objectives. They develop strategies, tactics, and remedies for rebuilding and responding to the economically and politically oppressive obstacles that complicate the lived realities of those whom they represent: "Every social group . . . creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields. . . . He [sic] must be an organiser of masses of men; he must be an organiser of the 'confidence' of investors in his business, of the customers for his product."<sup>23</sup>

Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, and W. E. B. Du Bois all had formal educations, advanced degrees, and credentials. Because they were employed as educators and researchers, many would have considered them to be traditional intellectuals. Hamer's background as a sharecropper and domestic worker with a sixth-grade education fed—rather than impeded—the sophistication of her intellectual achievements.

Applying Gramsci's concept of an organic intellectual to Hamer highlights that her words and works articulated the struggles and issues faced by those who were racially and economically disenfranchised. In her work with SNCC as a major organizer of Freedom Summer, Hamer supervised voter education drives, articulated the struggles of the oppressed, and challenged those whose efforts maintained the status quo.<sup>24</sup> She called out the black middle class, such as church leaders and educators, identifying them as accessories to the crimes of oppression. She also galvanized resources to respond to the immediate concerns of poverty, including hunger, shelter, health care, and housing. Hamer envisioned a model in which the community could achieve self-sufficiency, even within the context of the racially contentious Jim Crow state of Mississippi. Freedom Farm represented a piece of her long-term strategy of self-sufficiency.

In an interview with the Wisconsin-based magazine *The Progressive* in 1968, Hamer articulated the struggles of displaced farmworkers and the elite's intentional use of starvation as a strategy of oppression. Her interviewer summarized what she told him: "Down in Mississippi they are killing Negroes of all ages, on the install-

ment plan, through starvation. If you are a Negro and vote, if you persist in dreams of black power to win some measure of freedom in white controlled counties, you go hungry. . . . There is a way to fight back against this 'non-violent' weapon of white officialdom" In Hamer's words: "Where a couple of years ago white people were shooting at Negroes trying to register, now they say, 'go ahead and register—then you'll starve.'"<sup>25</sup> Hamer's organic intellectualism—her experience of the condition of starvation as a political weapon—enabled her to identify this structural obstacle to collective progress for the African American citizenry. She understood that the exploitative economic relationships between landowner and farm worker and between homeowner as employer and domestic worker were a major impediment to the movement for the vote. In her work with SNCC and with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, she connected the starvation of people in Sunflower County not only to the pressure to migrate but also to the pressure not to register to vote: "Nobody told us we have to move from Mississippi. Nobody tells us we're not wanted. But when you're starving you know."<sup>26</sup> In creating Freedom Farm as a means to develop a sustainable black community on the foundation of agriculture, Hamer illuminated the relationship between economic self-sufficiency and political power and translated the theory into action.

Hamer's strategy connected landownership with voting rights. A 1971 article notes, "Fannie Lou Hamer emphasizes that the leverage of owning land and the fact that land supports people have given those people a wedge into the political machine—rich, white, and racist—that has always run Mississippi."<sup>27</sup> In the same article, Hamer argued simply, "Land is the key. It's tied to voter registration."<sup>28</sup>

As a political organization by and for black people (although it was open to farmers of any race), Freedom Farm brought Hamer's insight to life. By pooling resources, the community was designed to become self-sufficient and therefore able to resist political, social, and economic disenfranchisement and the pressure to relocate to the North. The organization sought to realize Hamer's vision of economic participation as the path to political participation, based on her organic intellectual understanding of the means of

oppression of the people of Sunflower County. By providing housing, health care, employment, education, and access to healthy food that the white power structure of rural Mississippi denied them, Freedom Farm provided a sphere for the development of a free mind, an opportunity to create new identities, and a new form of collective political consciousness. It used the strategies of commons as praxis, prefigurative politics, and economic autonomy to achieve collective agency and community resilience.

### Freedom Farm as Resistance

In creating Freedom Farm, Hamer intended to concentrate on three primary areas: (1) building affordable, clean, and safe housing; (2) creating an entrepreneurial clearinghouse—a small business incubator that would provide resources for new business owners and retraining for those with limited educational skills but with agricultural knowledge and manual labor experience; and (3) developing an agricultural cooperative that would meet the food and nutritional needs of the county's most vulnerable.<sup>29</sup> Local and regional white politicians and businesspersons had lobbied Washington successfully to deny federal funding and anti-poverty resources to impoverished black tenant farmers and farm workers. Denying these farmers and workers food, housing, education, and health care was part of their larger project of restricting the vote and maintaining the racial hierarchy. No less a figure than singer and political activist Harry Belafonte described Freedom Farm's response in a fund-raising letter in March 1967: "Now, to give hundreds of landless poor people a chance at self-help, economic self-sufficiency and political power, Mrs. Hamer has organized a farm cooperative. Acreage of fertile soil is available to the cooperative at exceptionally low cost. A community of free, independent people can be built if financial help is given at this time."<sup>30</sup>

Several Harvard University student organizations also were involved in fund-raising efforts for Hamer and Freedom Farm in this period, leading the *Harvard Crimson* to write in 1970, "Mrs. Hamer said that [FFC's] goal was not only to provide a farm income for

landless families, but also to serve as a social and political organizing center for the blacks of the Mississippi Delta."<sup>31</sup>

Hamer believed that leadership of Freedom Farm should be black and local; she was also very clear that membership and its privileges would be open to anyone who needed the assistance that Freedom Farm offered. At various times, membership rolls included a few families who identified as white. Membership fees were minimal.<sup>32</sup> Even so, inability to pay did not exclude members; during the first year, only thirty families paid dues, but Hamer claimed that hundreds of families belonged in name and that countless others benefited from Freedom Farm.<sup>33</sup> As a document of the time reported, "Freedom Farm Corporation is owned and worked co-operatively by about 1,500 member families in Sunflower County. Founded by Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, nationally recognized civil rights leader, the co-op presently owns 692 acres."<sup>34</sup>

In the context of a white supremacist establishment that did not hesitate to prevent political mobilizing through violent means, the mere survival of black agricultural cooperatives was a feat of resistance. Hamer created Freedom Farm to improve the living conditions of those who were unemployed and homeless while creating opportunities for farmworkers by utilizing their agricultural skills. Under her model of activism, black farmers could stay on the land and build a sustainable community through their own labor, and thereby secure a means to political participation. Through Freedom Farm, she continued her efforts in organizing and educating southern, rural farm workers about electoral participation, registration, and mobilization. As part of Freedom Farm members' efforts to organize land workers, they also actively participated in a political education campaign to educate residents of Sunflower County, using flyers and pamphlets that informed residents about their right to participate in the political process by voting.

Farmers and land workers who fought against structural and economic inequities inherent in tenant farming and sharecropping, those who spoke out against land and/or labor conflicts, and those who participated in voter registration and education drives experienced repression from local white farmers, business owners, politicians, and members of law enforcement. Hamer's own firing

following her participation in a political action was typical, as the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) reported: "The black man who dares speak out or even exercise his constitutional rights usually finds himself and his family thrown out onto the road, and often deprived of the few possessions he did have. 'They wouldn't even let me back in my place to get my clothes or a picture of my mother. I just had to leave everything there,' said one woman who was evicted after she registered to vote, following the 1964 civil rights legislation."<sup>35</sup>

In other cases, farmers were run off the land by threats against their lives. Some left the South with their families and traveled, under dark of night, to northern cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and Gary, Indiana.<sup>36</sup> Others were arrested and/or murdered.<sup>37</sup> The relationship between members of law enforcement and white supremacy organizations made any encounter especially dangerous, even fatal, through extralegal and legal violence such as lynchings, police brutality, and police complicity with mob violence. The murders of civil rights activists Medgar Evers, James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner typified the white racist response to the intense desire for racial equity and justice in Mississippi. The organizing of African Americans who demanded the right to vote and to participate fully in the political process posed a significant threat to Jim Crow, and the establishment fought in its defense.

Not all means employed by the white establishment to maintain the oppression of blacks in the South were extralegal. Mississippi passed laws aimed at debilitating the African American community's capacity to galvanize and work cooperatively for better living and work conditions. These laws rendered illegal many of the measures SNCC, NAACP, and CORE had embraced, including economic boycotts, picketing, and demonstrations. White business leaders, politicians, and law enforcement personnel invoked the state's Secondary Boycott and Criminal Conspiracy in Restraint of Trade Statute.<sup>38</sup> The law journal of Howard University characterized the statute thusly: "This statute imposes civil and criminal liability on any two or more persons who combine to conspire to prevent another person or other persons from doing business with

a merchant, who induce or encourage another person or other persons to cease doing business with a merchant in order to effectuate a reasonable grievance over which the merchant has no direct control or legal authority to correct.”<sup>39</sup>

Given this context, alternative strategies of resistance, such as agricultural cooperatives, were necessary for the survival of the movement to sustain activists, to provide them with a measure of independence so they could avoid joining the migration or being economically cowered to survive, and to sustain another sphere of struggle. NCNW, a key funder of Freedom Farm, conducted an annual review of the organization in its early years. The 1968 review stated, “The important part is that the people themselves have a stake in it; they are not relying on hand-outs; they are enhancing their own dignity and freedom by learning that they can feed themselves through their own efforts.”<sup>40</sup> In keeping with this vision, FFC informed its members about the importance of their vote, encouraged them to run for election, and invited them specifically to identify potential candidates for the county committee of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS). The ASCS was a major force in determining how federal funds would be allocated to local community, agricultural, and other antipoverty projects in the region. These positions were especially important because the allocation of funds for agriculture was one of the ways that elites had denied funding for black farmers and their organizations.

The federal Department of Agriculture issued subsidies to white landowners, planters and plantation owners to allow their land to go fallow, in order to control the price and profitability of cotton as well as to induce investment in innovative agricultural technology.<sup>41</sup> The immediate impact was a dramatic reduction in the amount of farm labor needed. The resulting surplus of labor made it easy for white landowners to render activists unemployed and homeless.

Against these odds, FFC was a community offering respect and fair exchange for members’ labor, a place where they could grow and provide healthy food, and where they could secure safe and affordable housing as well as quality education, health care, and employment opportunities. As an alternative to being dependent upon a white power structure, FFC had bold goals.

## Farming and Economic Autonomy

In an effort to increase access to healthy food, FFC's members worked collaboratively in planting, maintaining, and harvesting the crops in the community gardens. In the community spaces, thirteen of the first forty acres were dedicated to subsistence crops and community gardening, where co-op members planted greens, kale, rape, turnips, corn, sweet potatoes, okra, tomatoes, string, and butter beans.<sup>42</sup> In 1972, these subsistence crops served more than 1,600 families.<sup>43</sup> At least 10 percent of the community garden harvest was donated to needy families whose members were unable to work the fields. Cooperative families shared the remainder, and if there was more than they needed, FFC shipped the surplus to feed needy families as far away as Chicago.<sup>44</sup> Thus, they fed the neighbors who had left them in the Great Migration.

In pursuit of its goals of self-sufficiency, FFC set aside 540 acres to be used for a catfish cooperative and for grazing land for cattle to support the members who lived on the remaining hundred acres.<sup>45</sup> Two years later, they planted three hundred acres in cotton, 209 acres in soybeans, eighty acres in wheat, and ten acres of cucumbers.<sup>46</sup> The income from these cash crops were sold to pay the mortgage on the land. While they had contracts with Atkins Pickle Company and Heinz, according to the historical records, it is unclear the degree to which they were able to fulfill them.

In 1969, NCNW donated approximately fifty pigs to FFC, forty-five white Yorkshire pregnant gilts (females) and five male Brown Jersey boars (males).<sup>47</sup> The animals quickly became local celebrities, affectionately known as the "Sunflower Pigs," and they began what was to be called the "Bank of Pigs" or the "Oink-Oink Project."<sup>48</sup> As NCNW's annual review described it, "The plan was not to provide instant food by butchering the livestock, but to breed them, thus establishing a 'pig bank,' which would be self-sustaining and will provide 300-400 new piglets out of the first litters."<sup>49</sup>

Community women built fences and shelters for the pigs, and the community men did the pig ringing, a process that would prevent the pigs from ingesting the parasitic ringworm. In its first U.S.-based project, Heifer International provided expert assistance



Freedom Farm Cooperative pig bank. Photo by Franklynn Peterson.

in the care, maintenance, and husbandry of the pigs. After reaching full maturity in two years, these pigs were to be mated, slaughtered for meat, or sold for supplemental income.<sup>50</sup> Families kept sows (grown females) and took them to a breeding facility that housed the boars.

Upon delivery of a litter, which typically included nine to twenty piglets, families deposited two piglets in the pig bank.<sup>51</sup> By 1969, the pig bank had provided over a hundred families with pigs, each of which produced over 150 pounds of meat.<sup>52</sup> In its third year, the number grew to three hundred families.<sup>53</sup> By 1973, more than 865 families were beneficiaries of the pig bank,<sup>54</sup> which had produced thousands of pounds of meat and thousands of dollars in supplemental income for member families.

### Support for Housing

Hamer identified housing as another important cornerstone to community development. The condition of available housing in Sunflower County was deplorable. As the *Harvard Crimson* described it, "More than 95 percent of the county's blacks live in houses officially classified as 'dilapidated and deteriorating.'"<sup>55</sup> Additionally, 75 percent of homes in Sunflower County lacked running water, and 90 percent lacked indoor plumbing.<sup>56</sup> In 1969, more than a hundred families were evicted from shacks and tent homes where they resided on white plantations.<sup>57</sup> FFC helped



Freedom Farm Cooperative housing development, Ruleville, Mississippi. Photo by Franklynn Peterson.

members find housing and obtain mortgages and provided financial support to ensure that members stayed in their homes. Hamer articulated the importance of this project thusly: “The state wants us out and the government considers us surplus. We must buy land immediately or our people will die forgotten.”<sup>58</sup>

In 1971, FFC put down a deposit of \$84,000 on 640 acres of land east of Drew, Mississippi, to build additional housing. They developed the Delta Housing Development Corporation, with Hamer serving on the board of directors. In 1972, the U.S. Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) provided funding for eighty new “self-help houses,” and construction began.<sup>59</sup> These new homes were wired for electricity and had running water and indoor toilets.<sup>60</sup> The FmHA released \$800,000 in mortgage funds under its interest credit program, which enabled FFC members to take possession of the properties.<sup>61</sup>

At a speaking engagement, Hamer spoke about the program to provide affordable, adequate housing in the Jim Crow South: “The one kind of remark which really means the most to me is one that I hear frequently outside on really cold mornings. You’ll see two

men walking out their front doors. One will kind of stop, look around and say, 'Phew I didn't realize how cold it was outside!' Every place they ever lived in before, it was always just as cold inside as it was outside."<sup>62</sup>

FFC eventually went beyond renegotiating purchase agreements of homes to allow members to maintain their residences and assisting with the completion of the paperwork necessary to obtain new mortgages. In 1969 and 1970, FFC began to provide housing to members. The organization purchased ninety-two new housing lots, and seventy-three families received housing.<sup>63</sup>

## Education

White planters had little incentive to support their laborers' children's education. Providing a quality education threatened the power and privilege they wielded in their economically exploitative relationship with their tenants and laborers. Classroom instruction usually occurred between December and April after the cotton had been picked and ginned and before the new planting season began. Schools in Mississippi had refused to desegregate after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954, and for the children of black tenant farmers and sharecroppers especially, the state invested little in its schools. Educators were often expected to teach classes for which they were unqualified. They worked under inferior conditions that included substandard facilities, overcrowded classrooms with several grades in a one-room schoolhouse, and old, often racially offensive books and reading materials. Children whose parents were unable to afford weather-appropriate clothing and shoes during the colder months were unable to attend even the seasonal schools.

The implementation of Head Start began to address these issues.<sup>64</sup> Freedom Farm Cooperative was selected as a site for one of the region's first Head Start programs, which served as an anchor of community-based development and as a marker of FFC's success. Hundreds of participating families received health and dental care, early educational experiences, and supplemental nutrition. Millions of dollars in federal funds from the Office of Equal

Opportunity were sent to community-based black organizations, including FFC, under the organizational banner of the Child Development Group of Mississippi. At one point, leaders of Head Start claimed to employ over one hundred workers and serve six hundred preschool children.<sup>65</sup> It had become a major employer for the county. The program served the young people of Sunflower County for several years before white-led protest over the black leadership of Head Start led to the withdrawal of millions of federal dollars dedicated to the program; nevertheless, most of the facilities found community sources of support to sustain them.

In addition to Head Start, FFC provided a number of types of vocational education. The work of building FFC's homes involved approximately twenty men, former farm workers, who were enrolled in the Housing Training program, which taught construction and home building; these men also assisted with building the community center that housed the FFC offices. The program was just one facet of FFC's education, employment, and skills retraining program. In addition to the Housing Training program, vocational educational learning opportunities included life skills such as food preservation, sewing, and childcare.

### Employment

Freedom Farm was a major employer for Sunflower County. It provided full- and part-time jobs for over forty residents. Those jobs included secretary, bookkeeper, farm manager, and farm laborer positions for agricultural projects such as the community garden and the cash crops of cotton, soybeans, and tobacco.<sup>66</sup> FFC also employed summer youth workers who conducted community-needs assessments by fanning out throughout the county to survey residents whose identification of priorities FFC could use to recalibrate its programs.

FFC also developed two sewing cooperatives where members made clothes, and one clothing cooperative that recycled gently used clothing. Members made suede and leather handbags, quilts, African-style clothing, and hats.<sup>67</sup> FFC sold these wares through a storefront in Madison, Wisconsin, with 90 percent of the proceeds



Members of Freedom Farm Cooperative at the sewing cooperative. Photo by Franklynn Peterson.

going to pay the workers.<sup>68</sup> FFC paid all of its employees ten dollars per day, often supplementing the salary with housing, food, and services. One of the cooperatives even had an on-site day care center for the children of its workers.

### Disaster and Poverty Relief

Historically in Mississippi, after the harvesting season—when cotton had been picked, ginned, packed, and sold—farm families were no longer working on the plantations, and many had no source of income. Some might do daywork in white families' houses as domestics or other service occupations. With meager finances for food and other incidentals, even when housing was provided as part of their employment package, many families needed support to survive the winter.

In order to respond to this seasonal scarcity, FFC held fund-raising drives for clothing, food, kitchen supplies, and school supplies such as books, paper, and writing utensils. In the absence of a secure location or community center, Hamer's personal residence often served as a distribution center for these goods.<sup>69</sup>

In 1969, with a generous donation from the NCNW, FFC developed a tool bank as another way to respond to seasonal poverty. Member families could borrow tools for specific projects that would provide self-employment income during the off-season. They could share the labor on projects if they needed support and help from others.

In times of disaster, FFC provided social services to adjoining counties as well as in Sunflower County, offering assistance such as temporary housing for victims of floods, tornados, and other emergencies. When a tornado struck, the organization provided support to more than three hundred people through its relief measures and through Delta Housing Development Corporation. They provided clothing assistance to some eighty families and aided others in paying overdue utility bills.<sup>70</sup> In 1972, FFC established a food stamp fund and provided financial assistance to twenty-five families to purchase food stamps.<sup>71</sup> It provided an additional fifty-seven families with support in applying for federal (public) assistance.<sup>72</sup> FFC also facilitated the Send-a-Box program, cosponsored with NCNW, to respond to the immediate food needs of residents in the Mississippi Delta. It was able to assemble approximately ninety food boxes for the relief of FFC members. FFC also instituted a family mobile health program.<sup>73</sup>

### Fund-raising for FFC

Through her nationwide fund-raising efforts, Hamer brought international attention and resources to the extreme living conditions of those in the Mississippi Black Belt. FFC's members were extremely poor; self-sufficiency and self-sustenance could not be realized immediately. As she transitioned from her work on voter education and registration in the 1950s and into the 1970s, Hamer used the international reputation and attention her ear-

lier political work had brought when she traveled to publicize the struggle of dispossessed land workers in Mississippi and to secure funding for FFC. The proceeds from her national and international speaking engagements provided some income for the organization.

Because of her reputation as a political organizer, Hamer was able to enlist the support of many well-known public figures, such as Harry Belafonte, who stated in a fund-raising letter, "A community of free, independent people can be built if financial help is given at this time. . . . Contributions of \$10, \$100, \$1000 will start a pioneer development, giving a new life to Americans whose living standard is as low as that of the peasants of the underdeveloped world."<sup>74</sup>

As previous sections have demonstrated, the National Council of Negro Women was one of the primary organizations providing technical assistance and financial support. NCNW's historical records list Hamer as a county representative of the organization. The organization's annual reports on FFC achieved the buy-in of its membership, documenting the conditions under which Hamer and FFC acted and enabling FFC to purchase seeds for the community garden and undertake other projects. The subsistence crops FFC grew from these seeds yielded thousands of pounds of produce that FFC harvested to feed hundreds of families. NCNW's annual reports also effectively brought federal attention to the situation of those in the region.

Though the reasons are unclear from the historical record, NCNW withdrew its support from FFC in 1970. Hamer was able to replace the lost funding with support from Measure for Measure, a civil rights organization based in Madison, Wisconsin. Itself a collective—membership consisted of academics and progressive clergy—Measure for Measure donated tens of thousands of dollars, supplies for schools, clothing, and crucial and expensive materials, such as sewing machines for the sewing cooperative. The organization held fund-raising events in support of FFC as well as agricultural cooperatives in North Bolivar County (the subject of chapter 4), and in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Measure for Measure held a walk against hunger in 1969 to raise money for FFC. Similar

events sponsored by American Freedom for Hunger, along with the Young People of Harvard University, and Young World Development raised \$21,000 and \$120,000, respectively. FFC purchased 640 acres and farm equipment with these proceeds.<sup>75</sup>

Crucially, major funders supported FFC's need to be governed locally. As NCNW's 1969 annual report summed up the issue, "NCNW is convinced that much of the success of the program stems from the constant involvement, identification and coordination with local community leadership. Thus, County Coordinators have been selected by NCNW and community representatives to maintain this liaison between the communities and national organization."<sup>76</sup> Measure for Measure shared this point of view. An internal document stated, "Our role has been one of aid and support: we set up no programs, push no plans; we seek to meet needs as expressed by local black leadership."<sup>77</sup>

#### THE DEMISE OF FFC

In 1971, several tornadoes hit Sunflower County. FFC members concentrated their efforts on disaster relief in response. Measure for Measure reprimanded the organization for allocating monies for disaster relief that should have been used to purchase the seeds needed for the growing season. These events were the first inklings of the cooperative's unraveling over the next few years.

In spite of the setbacks the tornadoes represented, the organization continued to provide meaningful assistance. In 1972, member families planted and harvested three hundred acres of cotton, 209 acres of soybeans, and eighty acres of wheat, and they were able to feed thousands in the community with the vegetables they grew on fifty-one acres of land. FFC assisted forty families with their application to FmHA that year. All but two received funding. The organization assisted thirty-five families with funding for deposits on two-, three-, and four-bedroom homes. Thirteen families successfully applied for grants in the amount of eighty-two dollars each to make their mortgage payment.<sup>78</sup> In 1973, FFC had six hundred acres in crop production, three hundred families were recipients of animals from the pig bank, and seventy families were living in the organization's low-income, affordable housing.

FFC distributed scholarships to local high school students to attend college and supported the start of several black businesses.

But donor funds began to dry up. The United States had plunged into an economic downturn, and existing donors had far less to give. The board of directors decided that FFC's survival depended on a massive reorganization in 1972. The social service programs consumed a considerable amount of the organization's attention and funding. Until the farm was financially capable of "independent operation . . . [and] sustaining its own existence," the social service programs would be ended.<sup>79</sup> The part-time professional staff would become full-time so that it could manage both the farm operations and the social programs. Additionally, the board deemed it necessary to engage financial and management services for audits and management suggestions and recommendations.<sup>80</sup>

In late 1972 and early 1973, farmers in the Mississippi Delta experienced droughts and floods, which caused a tremendous crop loss. The sequence was disastrous, as harvesting the few crops that survived the drought from drenched soil was complicated. FFC became unable to pay its seasonal employees. Letters to funders described crops that rotted in the fields because there was no one to harvest them. All told, floods destroyed fifty acres of cotton and soybeans. As a result, the organization stopped farming altogether. FFC could not make payments on its mortgages, its biggest expense, without the cash crops.

A mere four years after the successful launch of the pig bank, FFC closed down its operations. It had not survived long enough to become independent of financial support of grants and donations. The organization sought federal funding from the USDA and other entities that supported antipoverty programs and strategies. The Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization, the Commission on Religion and Race of the United Methodist Church, and FFC's former funder Measure for Measure declined appeals for support. A staunch supporter of Freedom Farm until the end, Harry Belafonte sent out another letter in order to raise funds, but to no avail.

In August 1974, FFC's business manager suffered a fatal heart attack. Hamer also fell ill. At the age of fifty-seven, she was suffering

from high blood pressure, diabetes, and fluid retention.<sup>81</sup> Losing her as a fund-raiser and an inspiration was devastating. The board established the Fannie Lou Hamer Foundation to provide funding for FFC; for the emergency and medical programs, to which they were deeply committed; and to offer scholarships and other financial assistance to the children of farm families to further their education. Nevertheless, FFC had to sell its land to pay overdue state and county taxes in 1976. The dream of a self-sufficient agrarian community was over.

### The Lessons of Freedom Farm

The civil rights movement was successful in dismantling many oppressive Jim Crow policies. It extended voting privileges to African Americans and enforced desegregation of educational and public facilities. These moves all challenged the power structure of rural southern counties. Nevertheless, in the context of the simultaneous decline of the cotton industry, the powerful maintained the status quo in states such as Mississippi by other means: exacerbating the conditions of poverty; providing inferior education, inadequate health care, and precarious housing; and ignoring high unemployment and the lack of access to healthy food. Illustrating their blatant racial hostility and greed, members of the regional and local white power structure obstructed federal efforts to respond to the severe conditions of poverty. They used these conditions of deprivation as strategies of oppression to maintain their political, economic, and social control and to keep the black majority from mobilizing politically.

As an organic intellectual, Fannie Lou Hamer identified the shift in tactics to keep black Mississippians politically and economically disenfranchised, and she responded to it with efforts to provide a basic quality of life. As the leaders of FFC formed a cooperative intentional community—with housing, employment, educational opportunities, health care, and access to healthy food—they enacted a strategy of commons as praxis. In insisting on self-governance and collaborative decision-making, FFC implemented a prefigurative politics. And through community gardens, the pig

bank, and many other projects, FFC developed the kinds of economic autonomy that were a critical foundation for this self-determined, politically engaged, liberated community.

Many civil rights historians, biographers, and journalists have often ignored, missed, or dismissed the contributions of Freedom Farm Cooperative, or they have concentrated on its failures. FFC created an oasis of self-reliance and self-determination in a landscape of oppression maintained in part by deprivation. While it is important to analyze the problems that ultimately led to the demise of the organization in 1975, we should not undervalue its successes. Given its time, scope, intention, and liberatory vision, as well as the fact that this vision was enacted within a pervasively oppressive and racially hostile environment, the movement—while relatively short lived—was a manifestation of self-reliance and the capacity of a community to come together for the provision of food, housing, shelter, education, health care, and employment. This radical experiment constituted an important chapter in the black freedom movement. The organizing strategies of black farmworkers in the 1960s offer lessons that are important today for families displaced by the automobile industry and for others in urban areas currently struggling to access healthy food, adequate and affordable housing, clean water, quality education, health care, and employment. FFC developed a model of community resilience and collective agency as a foundation for political action that speaks to those who live in food-insecure communities such as in Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago, and New Orleans. It offers a new way for those who have historically been excluded to build sustainable communities.