

For Freedom's Sake



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著者:Lee, Chana Kai

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The youngest of twenty children of sharecroppers in rural Mississippi, Fannie Lou Hamer witnessed throughout her childhood the white cruelty, political exclusion, and relentless economic exploitation that defined black existence in the Delta. In this intimate biography, Chana Kai Lee documents Hamer's lifelong crusade to empower the poor through collective action, her rise to national prominence as a civil rights activist, and the personal costs of her ongoing struggle to win a political voice and economic self-sufficiency for blacks in the segregated South. Lee traces Hamer's early work as a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in rural Mississippi, documenting the partial blindness she suffered after being arrested and beaten by local officials for leading a group of blacks to register for the vote. Hamer's dramatic appearance at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, where she led a group from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in a bid to unseat the all-white Mississippi delegation, brought both Hamer and the virtual powerlessness of black Mississippians to the nation's attention; but the convention also marked her first debilitating encounter with the middle class of the national civil rights movement. Despite her national visibility, Hamer remained a militant grassroots leader who never stopped working for the betterment of her own community in Sunflower County, Mississippi. Among many local initiatives, she established the Freedom Farm

Corporation, a revolutionary cooperative venture aimed at facilitating economic self-sufficiency for the rural poor. Lee renders Hamer's acute political instincts, her rhetorical prowess, and her skill in retooling her past to serve strategic political purposes, as well as her deep frustration with a society that was willing to hold her up as an example of individual heroism but resisted her efforts at collective transformation. Offering a complex understanding of how racism, sexism, violence, and economic injustice intersected to spur the civil rights movement and to shape, and sometimes restrict, the role of women and poor people within it, Lee illuminates the abiding links between political activism and economic transformation. The definitive biography of one of the most important civil rights activists of the twentieth century, "For Freedom's Sake" documents Fannie Lou Hamer's lifelong crusade to empower the poor through collective action, her rise to national prominence as a civil rights activist, and the personal costs of her ongoing struggle to win a political voice and economic self-sufficiency for blacks in the segregated South.

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