

## INTRODUCTION

**P. C. (Mac) McLaurin, Jr.**

Fifty years ago, the major (and only) book on Mississippi government and politics described county government in Mississippi in the following manner:

County government in Mississippi, as in most states, has changed little during the past hundred years. Although certain functions of the county in earlier times have been appropriated by agencies of the state, the basic structure and features of county government remain the same. Movements for governmental reform in other jurisdictions have affected it but slightly; it is still the 'dark continent' of the state's political system.

The result of this neglect of a fundamental portion of the government is a system that is antiquated, inefficient, and devoid of the principles that make for responsible administration. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Only eleven years ago, almost forty years later, a book on Mississippi government and politics picked up the same basic theme with the following description of county government in Mississippi:

The 1954 quotation beginning this chapter, which refers to county government as the 'dark continent' of Mississippi's political system, may still be relatively accurate. A university professor in this state, familiar with the politics of county government, recently referred to one county board of supervisors as a 'banana republic.' An explanation for why county government is so reluctant to change and become more efficient lies in the state's traditionalistic political culture, which stresses the importance of preserving traditional political practices and the status quo. . . .<sup>2</sup>

From my perspective, however, Mississippi's counties have experienced considerable change during the four decades I have studied and participated in local government. Many of the counties were seeking to modernize and professionalize their organization and operation even before "Operation Pretense" and the subsequent passage by the Mississippi Legislature of the County Government Reorganization Act of 1988. Today, I find most county officials to be honest, hard-working, sincerely interested in the welfare of their citizens, and open to change which will improve the efficiency of the operation of government and the provision of services to the citizenry. I see boards of supervisors, always conscious of the tax burden carried by their citizens, getting maximum value from each dollar they spend. In my view, the continent is no longer dark.

---

<sup>1</sup>Robert B. Highsaw and Charles N. Fortenberry, *The Government and Administration of Mississippi* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1954), p. 356.

<sup>2</sup>Dale Krane and Stephen D. Shaffer, *Mississippi Government & Politics: Modernizers Versus Traditionalists*, (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), p. 232.