



THE VIEW

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IS SOMETHING MISSING IN POLITICS?

BY

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In the lazy days of a sweltering Mississippi summer nostalgia seems to be a particularly infectious disease. I caught a good case of nostalgia just the other day as I hosted what was labeled “An Old Fashion Political Stump Speaking” at the annual conference of the Mississippi Municipal League. This event only mildly resembled those of yesteryear in that it was held in an air conditioned auditorium in the Gulf Coast Coliseum. And most of all there was no grazing on the variety of “homemade” cooking that was always a part of these election summer events.

It’s fun to remember what they were like. In an outdoor area adjacent to a church, a rural community center, a fire department, or a park, a makeshift stage was erected. A sound system that may or may not work was installed and, most importantly of all, tables were scattered around the grounds where all sorts of good things to eat were assembled. It was usually important to have this in an area of large old oak trees for shade and ample space to place the lawn chairs you brought from home. And by all means the local funeral home would provide an ample supply of fans with its name on one side and a picture of the last supper on the other. The best, however, was the food. Most of it was carefully made from scratch in the kitchens of the community and no one who called herself a good cook was going to be represented by anything but her best effort at such a once in a quadrennial event. There were pies. My favorite was always buttermilk pie, or egg custard or chess. The cakes were scrumptious and almost too beautiful to cut. Usually there was homemade, hand cranked ice cream in a variety of flavors. Of course there was an endless supply of watermelons and if it was near the 4th of July it was politically correct to advertise them as “Smith County melons”. This meant that they were the freshest and sweetest possible. Often this eating spectacular was topped of by fried or barbecued chicken or pork and a big pile of baked beans. The last

barbecued goat I've had was at the last political speaking I attended some four elections ago. I can still remember how good it was. But, I digress. This is a column about politics.

The speeches and the handshaking – many called it “electioneering”—were almost as rich as the food. It is important to note that you had to be face to face with the candidates for this to mean anything. For example, when the late Governor Cliff Finch worked a crowd at a political rally during the 1975 gubernatorial campaign he would extend his left hand for shaking purposes rather than his right because, he said, “This is the hand closest to my heart.” I can also remember as a college student sitting on the courthouse square in my hometown of Kosciusko and listening to a speech by gubernatorial candidate and one of the last avowed segregationists “Little” Jimmy Swan. His speech was so laced with racial invective that I arose before it was over and departed the square in a fast trot for fear that he would incite a riot. In a more pleasant vein, I remember Lieutenant Governor Brad Dye making a speech at the “political speaking” in Sturgis while eating a bowl of homemade ice cream. He proclaimed it the absolute best he had ever had. That got him the votes of the families of all ten women who had brought churns of ice cream to the event because each could claim it was hers. It didn't necessarily matter that a speaker was on the platform or not. The political talk among the spectators was reason enough for being there. Besides, there was always the day long wait and speculation as to whether some major statewide candidate was indeed going to bless the rural political rally with his or her presence.

Soon, however, it became noticeable that most of those attending these political speakings were the candidates themselves. Candidates for sheriff, tax assessor-collector, chancery clerk, constable, coroner and ranger and others discovered that on too many weekends they were speaking to each other. The long summer Saturdays of gorging yourself on politics and Southern cooking have just about gone. The Neshoba County Fair and the political speaking at the old courthouse in Jacinto in Alcorn County are two of the few that remain. The art of “pressing the flesh” and the grading of the “stump speaking” ability of a political hopeful have given way to the sound bite and the work of the image builders. There was a sense of community built into each of these events. In those days they were populated by virtually all white Democrats. In this day of multi-racial candidates and two party politics such a sense of community reaching across party and racial lines in the public square may be more important than ever. Sadly, I am afraid that these wonderful events have been exchanged for fifteen second sound bites and TV dinners.



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