

Jerry De Muth
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Mississippi's Lonely Black Legislator

by Jerry De Muth

Robert Clark has been a lonely figure. For the past six years he has been the only black representative in the state, fighting to gain acceptance and support from his white colleagues and from white constituents.

This battle also has been a lonely one. While such southern black politicians as Fayette, Miss., Mayor Charles Evers and Georgia State Rep. Julian Bond receive much attention and national support, Clark has gotten no such attention. As a result he has gotten few volunteers and little money from outside the state. Yet he is paid only a small amount for daily expenses when the legislature is in session.

Clark, however, is an important black figure in the state. And representing whites as well as blacks, he can help foster change. In fact he now finds that both white constituents and white fellow legislators have begun to accept him.

"I now have as many white calls for help as black calls," explained Clark in a rare personal interview. "It was not this way at the start. There was just a few brave whites at the start."

"The first whites to call were the wealthy whites," he noted.

"Now a poor class of whites as well as wealthy whites call on me.

"Whites realize I've been elected and there's nothing they can do about it," he added. "Rather than to have my followers and me fighting them, they just joined up with me. Then if there are any dividends, they'll reap them too."

Clark also feels that many poor whites contact him because the sophistication of their white representatives embarrasses them.

Some representatives are also coming around to the point where they support some of Clark's efforts.

"At first there was total rejection of Bob for being black," commented an associate, Ed Cole, who has worked with Clark and Evers. "Now there are four or five representatives who will support and work with him on bills. But no major bills Bob has supported have passed."

Clark, however, thinks that next year some bills he has introduced will be approved. They include a measure that would allow a city judge to live outside the city limits and a provision that would permit family members to help an illiterate vote, replacing the whites who are usually at their sides in the polling booths. Clark also hopes that school attendance will become compulsory. He introduced such a measure his first year in office but got no support.

"I was able to get publicity though," he explained. "I would explain that we had many white kids as well as black kids out of school.

"After I talked about a compulsory school attendance bill, the Gulf Coast representatives were the first group in the legislature to support me. They were followed by the Greenville representatives and then northeastern Mississippi.

"But I never have had a co-sponsor," he emphasized. "They'd rather support it than co-sponsor it with me.

"Another representative introduced a similar bill my second year. Now it's reached a point where there are eight or ten other bills. Last year even the governor supported compulsory school attendance."

Mississippi did have a compulsory school attendance law but it was abolished in the belief that no education is better than integrated education after the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court school desegregation decision.

"Bob Clark works up to the limits of what can be done," commented Rev. Ed King, a white Mississippian long active in the civil rights movement. "He is sometimes able to keep up with what's going on. Whites have to sit down with him and deal with him as a person."

Clark, a former teacher who now owns a furniture store in Lexington, said the greatest change toward him occurred last year when he began being invited to evening social gatherings at which legislative matters are informally discussed.

"These meetings are where you really find out what's happening," he explained. "That's how you know what is and what isn't coming up on the floor the next day.

"I used to hear other representatives talking about them at first but I didn't start getting invited to them until last year. The meetings are at their apartments in Jackson.

"Once you start getting invited, you don't have to attend all of them. You can ask someone what was talked about.

"They're significant not just because you find out what's going on," Clark noted. "They're significant because now when you take the floor of the house you're not going to have people opposing you just for the sake of opposing you.

"That used to happen to me a lot. But now no one is going to oppose me unless he really opposes the legislation."

Clark doesn't want to sacrifice too much in order to gain some strength and support. He doesn't want to be too beholden to others.

"There's a certain amount you can give up to achieve your goals," he said, "but you can't give up any of your basic principles of dignity. You have to stand up for them. In the long run you gain more respect from your people and from your colleagues."

With a chuckle Clark told of the one time he did defer to his white colleagues, but only after he had tricked one of them.

After Lyndon Baines Johnson's death, Clark introduced a resolution commending the former president and got someone to co-sponsor it with him.

"He couldn't have read it all the way through because it was commending Johnson for his civil rights activities," Clark smiled. "Then he asked me if I minded referring it to committee. I knew what he wanted to do but I said I didn't mind. This gave him a chance to delete the civil rights reference."

The resolution was finally approved--without the praise for LBJ's civil rights actions.

As the state's only black representative, Clark has been going beyond what other representatives are doing for their constituents. And he has been doing this for whites as well as blacks, sometimes even helping people outside his district. He said he has helped whites as well as blacks with disability, welfare, state taxes, highway encroachment, state jobs and other matters.

"A black person has to go far beyond what the law says is his duty in order to serve the needs of the black community," Clark explained.

"I've encouraged blacks throughout the state to take advantage of their elected officials and call on them. And I've encouraged white representatives to make themselves available to the black community. But lines between whites and blacks have not yet opened up."

Still all has not gotten better for Clark. Before he ran for a second term in 1971, his district was changed in what he feels was an obvious attempt "to destroy me." Federal action extended from one month to two the time in which his supporters had to register new voters in the county that was added to his district. He won re-election by only a slim margin.

This redistricting is one of many attempts throughout Mississippi to weaken black political strength and weaken the power of elected black officials.

Clark feels that the black community--which has been strongly oriented toward civil rights organizations--must look toward individuals more often if it is to gain political strength. If blacks don't, he said, they will be satisfied with whatever white officials do and never see a need for black politicians.

"Blacks have to face up to whether they want to move from the civil rights organization stage to the political stage, shifting their means and methods of achieving change," he said.

Clark is moving in a political direction. Significantly his district base of Holmes County on the edge of the Delta has had one of the best, longest lasting, grass roots oriented civil rights organizations in the state. It was well organized by the civil rights movement in 1964 and 1965.

The transition from civil rights organization to political organization worked in Holmes County and 42-year-old Robert Clark wants to see it work elsewhere.

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