

Harold Paulk Henderson, Sr. Oral History Collection

Series I: Ellis Arnall

OH ARN 21

Herman E. Talmadge speaking at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College Governor's Symposium on History and Government. Also edited and published in *Georgia Governors in an Age of Change*, Harold P. Henderson and Gary L. Roberts, editors. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988.

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Cassette: OH ARN 21 (15:09 Minutes, Side One Only)

CD: OH ARN 21, 15:09 Minutes, Tracks 1-3

[CD: Track 1]

TALMADGE: [applause] Thank you. Dr. [James K.] Russell, Dr. [Roger Nelson] Pajari, ladies and gentlemen. From 1937 to 1941, Ed [Eurith Dickinson] Rivers served as governor of Georgia. In those days it was before inflation. There were hotels all over the state; bellboys in great abundance. A dime was considered a great tip. Right after Ed Rivers went out of office, he said former governors couldn't even get a bellboy to carry his bag to his car. [laughter] And that's substantially correct. [laughter]

One of my friends had a son. He suggested that he go out and listen to a former governor speak. The son got back and he said, "What did the governor say?" [He] said, "He recommended himself most highly." [laughter]

I assume now that we would be classified as elder statesmen. I don't see any of the former governors here yet, but Governor [Samuel Ernest] Vandiver [Jr.], but others will be here during the course of the day and in the course of this symposium. An elder statesman, you know, is an unemployed politician. [laughter] That's the way they get that title. Anyway, I have found that there is life after leaving office. Most politicians when they're in office don't realize that fact. You know, people fawn over governors. They fawn over

senators. They're looking for favors. When I was governor of Georgia, I would have hundreds and hundreds of people pass through my office everyday. They wanted appointments as judges or solicitors or some member of the family on the payroll or a road or a health center or a bridge, something like that. And of course the first thing they do is start off running you for president of the United States, or president of the United—or, I mean, United States Senator, or president of the World Court [International Court of Justice] or some highly laudatory office of that nature. And then as soon as they get through with that, they bring up the business at hand, which is a road or a bridge or a schoolhouse, a job, a pension or something of that nature. So, it got to the point where I wouldn't even talk politics with people that came through my office, particularly if I knew that they were in the business of doing things like that. The same people pass through every governor's office as long as they live, regardless of their political preferment. And they come there for the same reason. But now and then someone would come in with corns in his hand that worked for a living, and you knew you could ask him a question and he'd give you an honest answer. He didn't think there was any political preferment that you could give to him. There was no rewards that you could give him and no punishment that you could give him. And I have long since learned that you'll get fights primarily from those sources rather than the influential and the affluential who represent counties, municipalities, congressional districts and things of that nature. Do you know one of the greatest blessings about being out of office? A lot of people want to test your memory, you know, and you met some fellow at Moultrie, Georgia, twenty years ago when you were campaigning and there were 10,000 people there. And he'll walk up to you and say, "Hello, Herman. I bet you don't remember

my name, do you?" [laughter] And now you can answer, "Frankly, no, and I don't give a damn." [laughter and applause]

[CD: Track 2]

You know, I served as governor for a little over six years, United States senator for twenty-four years. During all that period of time I had an abundance of secretaries and they would answer my mail. Some of it I'd have to sign. Deposits were made in the banks and then they'd give me the bank balances occasionally and particularly when they were running low. And bills would come in, and they'd prepare the checks and put them on my desk for my signature. And then right after I left the Senate, I came back to Lovejoy [Georgia] and I didn't have any secretary there, and my secretary hadn't sent me my bank records. And I started getting some bills. And I figured, well, I better pay these bills, I don't want to ruin my credit rating. And so I'd been banking with the Trust Company of Georgia [Atlanta; now SunTrust Banks, Inc.] for some forty years and they'd started branch banking, you know, throughout the state. And the Trust Company bought a bank in Clayton County, and they expanded faster than hotdogs and hamburger stands. And they had a little bank up there about six miles north of my farm by the side of the road. And I went in there one morning in my fatigue clothes that I use on the farm and a couple of young ladies at the counter. And they recognized me and said, "What can we do for you, Senator?" I says, "I want some blank checks." You'd have thought I'd held up a gun and says, "Give me your money!" [laughter] [I] says, "What?" I says, "I want some blank checks." [I] says, "What sort of checks you want?" I said, "Some counter checks so I can pay some bills." She said, "Do

you do business with us?” I says, “I’ve been banking at the Trust Company of Georgia--your main office in Atlanta--for more than forty years.” She said, “What is your number?”

[laughter] I said, “I don’t know. I didn’t know I had a number. Why?” [laughter] So, she got on the telephone to call the Trust Company in Atlanta and apparently trying to get my number. And she evidently got some young lady as inexperienced as she was on the phone. And meanwhile my blood pressure was rising. [laughter] I knew I could write a check on a gunnysack and if I had money in the bank to pay it, they had to honor it. So I finally said, “If you’ll get Mr. [Robert] Strickland, the chairman of the board of that bank [*sic*, bank president], on the phone I believe he and I can handle that matter right quick.” So she finally got my number. And then she says, “How many checks you want, Senator?” I says, “A dozen or so.” So, she got the checks and then I saw her go back to her machine and stamp numbers on it. I found out why about three months later when they cashed one of my checks I hadn’t even signed. They do everything by machinery now.

So, after you go out of office there’s a lot of those little simple things you have to relearn. And I have been enjoying doing it. I enjoyed Dr. Pajari’s speech. He visited with me at Lovejoy several weeks ago and spent two or three hours reviewing it. I have long since found that history depends on who writes it. I’ve got no complaint with Dr. Pajari. He did one of the most astounding jobs of research I have ever seen. He sent me [an] advance copy of one of his texts, I think he’d revised it a time or two. And I was amazed that he gave his source of practically every statement that he made in his paper. I looked at the source. If there was something favorable in the paper it was usually someone that I can—I mean in his paper—it was usually someone that I considered a fair-minded reporter. [laughter]

[CD: Track 3]

If there was something unfavorable, I knew it was written by some villain that had been denouncing me for twenty-five years. [laughter] And that's the way history is written. It's written by the source.

We live in a diverse society. Over five million people in Georgia now and thank God not all of us have the same opinion like they had in Germany under Adolf Hitler and Italy under Benito Mussolini. It's a diverse society and unfortunately, the papers that are left largely are the comments of columnists of newspapers. When I left the office as governor, I foolishly threw my papers away. I had no idea of their historical significance. I had no place to store them. I think every modern governor of Georgia except Dick Russell has done the same thing. [Richard Brevard] Dick Russell [Jr.] kept every paper from the time he served in the Georgia legislature-- not only his, but his father's [Richard Brevard Russell, Sr.] also who was Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Now after I went to the Senate, I had sense enough to keep my papers. And when I left the Senate, I sent over 16,000 boxes to the University of Georgia Library [Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies]. So that'll be a source of information for future historians. I have long sense learned that history is written by whatever the source was. If the source is favorable, you get a good report. If the source is unfavorable, you get a bad report. That's no reflection on scholars, because scholars pursue the only leads that they have. And Dr. Pajari has done an admirable job in that respect, and I commend him for it. Now he was kind enough to make many generous remarks about my administration. I think I came along at a time when the people of Georgia and the General Assembly had reached a consensus to make progress in

this state. You know, it took us 100 years from 1860 to 1960 to get our tax digest back to what it was before the War Between the States [United States Civil War]. We were extremely poor. I was born and reared in Telfair County [Georgia] where everybody was poor and thought that was the way everybody lived. They didn't know there was any other way of life. Grown people and families going barefooted twelve months in the year because they had no shoes to wear. Overalls was the common thing that people wore. Lots of people in the state at that time had no suits of clothes whatever. Those times were poor and the people of Georgia were poor, even when I took office as governor, following the great World War II. But at that time they had reached a consensus where they were not content to brag that Georgia was the empire state of the South. They were ready to make it the empire state of the South. I served as the catalyst. I had a General Assembly that Dr. [Roger N.] Pajari told you was working with me, and we instituted programs at that time that set the pattern for the remarkable progress that Georgia has made in the past three decades. You study statistics now, and you will find Georgia not at the bottom of the list where it was in 1948, but you will find it near the top of the list in every index.

I want to give you just one example now. Dr. Pajari mentioned it casually, but he didn't go in any depth. I was born and reared on a farm. And all of our neighbors burned up the timber every year trying to get early ryegrass grazing for the cattle, trying to kill rattlesnakes and some of them setting a fire just for the hell of it to see the fire. [laughter] And when I was elected governor, the total income from forest resources in this state-- everything, raw material, fiber, and everything else--was \$300 million a year. And when I'd campaign around over the state, frequently any time from the fall of the year to the spring, you'd have to stop your car on the highways to let the smoke clear away so you could see the

roads. We were burning up the greatest natural resource that we had. We don't have petroleum. We don't have an abundance of mineral wealth except the clays, little to no gold, no lead, no zinc, no petroleum, whatever. But the great natural resource that we have in this state is our renewable trees, our soil. And having been a farm boy with some interest in forestry I recognize that. And we immediately brought Georgia from next to the last in the nation in forestry to number one. You know what the result is today? Our timber resources bring into Georgia now combined, finished and everything else more than \$7 billion. That's annually. That's a far cry from \$300 million that it was in 1948.

Now I'm very proud of those achievements. I don't take credit for all of them because I was the catalyst that precipitated the forward advancement of this state. And every governor of Georgia and every General Assembly that succeeded me since that time have followed the pattern that we set forth and improved on it. And every one of them have continued it and our progress has gone undiminished since that time.

Thank you for permitting me to make a few observations. Good luck to all of you.  
[applause]

Unidentified Voice: Please provide your note cards for the folks walking down the aisle there.

[End of speech]

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