

OH Vandiver 01D

Samuel Ernest Vandiver, Jr. interviewed by Mel Steeley and Ted Fitzsimmons

Date: 6/25/86

Cassette #440 (21 minutes)

**COPY OF ORIGINAL INTERVIEW
ORIGINAL AT WEST GEORGIA UNIVERSITY**

Side One

Fitzsimmons: Well, you can go ahead with [Richard Brevard] Russell [Jr.]. You've got the question.

Steeley: Governor, you were talking about Senator Russell. What do you think his greatest impact was insofar as the people of Georgia are concerned? How would he want to be remembered? As a statesman or what?

Vandiver: I think that certainly would be what he would prefer to be remembered as, a statesman; he was a statesman. There's no doubt about it, and he was so considered by all who knew him. I think he started out as a politician like we all do, but he became a statesman.

Those people who had the opportunity to know him and to be associated with him realized what a great man he was. And I think that that is what he would like to be remembered as, as a man who loved Georgia, who represented Georgia in Washington. I know Harry [S] Truman one time made the statement that if Dick Russell had been born in another part of the country, he would have been president of the United States. And I heard Senator Russell say on several occasions that he wouldn't exchange his southern heritage for the presidency of the United States. And I think he truly felt that way.

Steeley: In fact, after his first election, did he ever have any opposition, any serious opposition? Election to the Senate.

Vandiver: Well, the race in 1936, the [Eugene] Talmadge race, was a difficult race. But other than that one, he didn't have any.

Steeley: The only other time anybody even talked about it was when Governor [Carl Edward] Sanders floated that he was considering it.

Vandiver: He did discuss it, yes.

Steeley: And then there was enough opposition that he never actually even entered the race.

Vandiver: I think when Governor Sanders saw the results of the polls that he realized that he couldn't contest the seat for the Senate.

Steeley: And then, of course, Governor Sanders ran for reelection later on.

Vandiver: Right.

Steeley: What is your life like now, since being out of office? What do you do with yourself? Do you miss the spotlight, for instance?

Vandiver: I've stopped practicing law. I've been interested in banking. I had an interest in the bank there in Lavonia. My father was a stockholder, and I bought some additional stock. When the old president of the bank decided to retire--he had been a friend of my father's--and I was able to buy some of that stock. And I was chairman of the board for about sixteen years, the last sixteen years. I've been interested in independent banks. I've served on the executive committee and as vice president and president of the Independent Bankers Association in Georgia. I've been a farmer. I had an interest in a couple of Stuckey stores. Betty [Sybil Elizabeth Vandiver] and I have been able to travel a little bit more than we were able to before. We're able to be with our children more than we were during the active political years. It's been a good life. I've enjoyed it. It's been a challenge. I've done some church work. I've been

chairman of the deacons at my church. I've been on the board of the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, for the last six years. I've been reelected for another five years.

Steeley: Did you get involved in the big fight in Atlanta the other day?

Vandiver: No, I didn't get involved in that fight, but as a trustee I've been aware of the fight. I get letters every day almost about it.

Steeley: I don't know how much of that noise is getting picked up on our mikes. They tell me very little of it, so hopefully it won't drive us to distraction. [Construction noise in background; laughter] I'm not sure whether we can handle that. You want to just stop a minute and let them finish this up? The war, college graduate, a lawyer, banker, farmer, adjutant general, lieutenant governor, governor, senatorial candidate, kingmaker, leader in your church-- you've got a wide variety of things, that when you look back on all of this, of what achievement are you the proudest? What do you want them to say about you when you're gone?

Vandiver: I think if they say that I earned my place in my little part of the society, that I deserved it, that I was a pretty good man and tried to do my job right, that's all I'd want them to say. It's been a great challenge. I've enjoyed it. It's been difficult at times, but never so difficult that we couldn't handle it.

Steeley: Do you use religion a lot? Would you call yourself a religious man?

Vandiver: I don't like to mix religion with politics much. I never did, but I do feel very deeply. Betty and I both do. And certainly we needed His help a lot of times, and we've always gotten it.

Fitzsimmons: Are there any political aspirations, Governor, that you had that you felt or feel now were unfulfilled, that should have been?

Vandiver: Well, whether they should have been or not I don't know [unintelligible]. I would have liked to have served in the Senate of the United States. It's a great body. Nobody could have taken Senator Russell's place. I know that. But he was nice enough to say one time that he thought I had earned a shot at it anyway.

Fitzsimmons: Is there anything, if it were possible, anything that you would do differently if you could now, if you could go back and change anything? Is there anything you would do differently?

Vandiver: Well, Ted, there are a lot of things you'd do differently.

Fitzsimmons: Yeah, well, yes.

Vandiver: But, all in all I'm not overjoyed with all my decisions, but most of them I think I would make the same way. I know I have never lost any sleep because of the decision I had to make about the schools because I think I did the right thing. It wasn't the politically popular thing, I don't think. I think you can look at George [Corley] Wallace and see what kind of popularity he had by doing it another way. And yet I feel satisfied that I did it the right way for me, and, I think, for the state.

Fitzsimmons: Well, I think history will recognize it as such, too.

Vandiver: I hope so.

Steeley: You had pretty good press support in that decision, too, didn't you?

Vandiver: Yes, I have. Gene [Eugene] Patterson, who's been a friend of mine for a long time, was very helpful to me in that situation. Charlie [Charles] Pou, who was a political writer and editor of *The Atlanta Journal*, Charlie was extremely helpful. Reg Murphy . . . all of those boys have been my friends. We got to be friends while I was adjutant general, lieutenant

governor, and they knew me. And I think they were sympathetic to the situation we found ourselves in.

Steeley: Let me ask you kind of a loaded question here. You went out of office in, what, '63. Since that time we've had what, five governors. Would you be willing to pick the one you think was the most successful and the least successful and tell us why?

Vandiver: Well, I'd rather not do that. I think all of them have made an effort to be a good governor. I think--George [Dekle] Busbee was a close friend of mine. When he was in the legislature, he was a freshman, and we put him on the Sibley Commission that heard this problem, as a freshman legislator. And I think he came through brilliantly in that situation, and he's been a fine governor. Carl Sanders has been a good governor. We haven't always agreed. We've had some--our opinions have not always been the same, but I think generally Carl made a good governor. Lester [Garfield] Maddox tried real hard. I think he gave it everything he had. I don't think he was prepared to be governor. I think he was thrust into a situation that he was very ill prepared to serve in, but I think he tried hard. I really don't know Joe Frank [Harris] very well because he came in after I left office. I think he's made a creditable showing, and I'm sure that he'll be a good governor. I just don't know him that well.

Steeley: Well, I've had people comment and say that they felt on the one hand [James Earl] Carter [Jr.] was the best governor, most successful, because he ends up going from there to the presidency. On the other hand, he was possibly the least successful because he couldn't possibly have gotten reelected in Georgia had he not run for the presidency, had he not been leaving the state and getting popular support because he was a native son, he wouldn't have been elected in that area, from Georgia itself. Do you have any feelings about that one way or the other?

Vandiver: No, I don't have any comment about his administration.

Steeley: Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you'd like to cover?

Vandiver: I think you've pretty well covered the waterfront, Mel and Ted. You had some good questions. Hell, you even had some that concerned Gum Log district. [Laughter]

Fitzsimmons: Fascinating, fascinating. Social history.

Steeley: All right, sir. Yours was one of the more interesting periods that we've covered, certainly one of the more crucial for the state of Georgia. We certainly appreciate your taking your time to come and discuss it with us.

Vandiver: It was a challenging time, Mel, and I appreciated the opportunity that the people of Georgia gave me to be in office at that time and I hope that I fulfilled my obligations and my duties.

Fitzsimmons: I don't think there's any doubt about that. Yes, I really don't. As I said, I think this difficult transition that you made will be viewed very positively in Georgia history. It already is, I'm sure.

Vandiver: Coming from a historian, I'm grateful for that. Thank you, Ted.

Steeley: Thank you, Governor. We appreciate it. [Cut off]

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