

Harold Paulk Henderson, Sr. Oral History Collection  
OH Vandiver 06  
Robert A. "Cheney" Griffin Interviewed by Dr. Harold Paulk Henderson  
Date: 10-08-93  
Cassette #453 (32 Minutes, Side One Only)

**EDITED BY DR. HENDERSON**

Side One

Henderson: My name is Dr. Hal Henderson. I'm interviewing Mr. Robert A. [Alwyn] "Cheney" Griffin in his office in the Miller-Griffin Realty office in Bainbridge, Georgia, on October 8, 1993. Good afternoon, Mr. Griffin.

Griffin: Good afternoon, Mr. Henderson.

Henderson: I appreciate you granting me this interview.

Griffin: Glad to.

Henderson: Your brother [Samuel] Marvin Griffin [Jr.] served as governor of Georgia from 1955 to 1959. What role did you play in his administration?

Griffin: I was his aide. I was aide to Governor Marvin Griffin . . . my brother.

Henderson: Now what does an aide do?

Griffin: Well, he does everything in particular that the governor wants him to do and looks out after his interests as best he can.

Henderson: Now would it be fair to say that you were the governor's right hand man, or at least one of his close advisors?

Griffin: Well, I would say myself and the executive secretary and some other friends were, yeah.

Henderson: Now, prior to your brother becoming governor, what was the relationship that Marvin Griffin had with [Samuel] Ernest Vandiver [Jr.]?

Griffin: Well, I think, you know, I didn't have too much to do with it back during that time, but I think they were in the same political camp, otherwise [known as] the Talmadge camp.

Henderson: Now, were they close political allies prior to your brother becoming governor?

Griffin: I wouldn't think so. I wouldn't say so, no.

Henderson: All right. They were friendly, but not close political friends, is that a fair characterization?

Griffin: That is correct.

Henderson: What was your relationship prior to your brother becoming governor with Ernest Vandiver?

Griffin: Well, I didn't have much prior relationship with Ernie. I didn't know him until after he became lieutenant governor.

Henderson: When your brother becomes governor, Ernest Vandiver is lieutenant governor. What is their relationship during that period of time?

Griffin: Well, I would consider it more or less a friendly relationship. They had to work together on passage of bills and so forth and so on because he was head of the Senate, and, of course, bills have got to go through both houses.

Henderson: I know this has been over forty years ago, but let me see if I can ask you a question about a special session held in 1955. You may not recall, but let me just ask you. Your brother called a special session in 1955 to raise taxes. Lieutenant Governor Vandiver opposes him on that. Do you remember anything about that fight?

Griffin: No. I remember what he did to raise the taxes, but I don't remember the fight too much. It was a tax on cigarettes and beer and whiskey and stuff of that type which anybody can vote for.

Henderson: When your brother becomes governor, Jim [James Lester] Gillis [Sr.] is chairman of the highway department.

Griffin: That's correct.

Henderson: And your brother, as I understand, forces Mr. Jim [Gillis] out of that position. And there was some strong feelings about that. Do you remember anything about that fight?

Griffin: Oh, yes. I remember about that fight.

Henderson: Would you tell us about that fight?

Griffin: Well, it was a pretty tough fight, but it just boiled down to politics. Mr. Jim [Gillis] was a fine fellow, but he just backed somebody else for governor. After Marvin went in office, naturally he wanted a friend as chairman of the highway department. So, I never had any ill feelings toward Mr. Jim [Gillis]. In fact, later on, we became pretty good friends. [Laughter]

Henderson: Well, now, what role did Ernest Vandiver play in this fight? Was he involved in it?

Griffin: I don't think he was. I don't believe he was. Not in that fight. I didn't see his tracks nowhere much.

Henderson: Well, let me ask you about another firing. Major General George J. Hearn [Jr.] was fired as your brother's adjutant general. Do you recall that fight?

Griffin: I do.

Henderson: [Laughter] Could you tell me about that one?

Griffin: Well, that's very simple. Marvin furnished the money or helped secure the money to build some armories. I forgot what towns they were in now, but General Hearn got Mr. Vandiver at that time to come down and dedicate the armories, and it didn't sit too well with the governor.

Henderson: Did your brother ever discuss this with the lieutenant governor, express his displeasure at what was going on?

Griffin: I don't think so. He knew what was going on, the governor did. And, as I remember, recall, he was one of about two people, about the only two or three people that the governor fired the whole time he was in office.

Henderson: There was quite a controversy when Georgia Tech was given an opportunity to play in a Rose Bowl, or, I believe it was a Sugar Bowl. And they were playing against an integrated team. Do you remember anything about that controversy?

Griffin: I remember something about that, too.

Henderson: Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Griffin: Well, they had a black playing for them. Pittsburgh, I believe, was the team, if I recall, and they had a black playing for them, and Marvin didn't particularly like that too much, being a segregationist, so he didn't want Tech to play. But as it come out, everything worked out all right, and, of course, he and the courts and everybody else got to be real good friends about the matter.

Henderson: Was Lieutenant Governor Vandiver involved in that in any way?

Griffin: I don't think so. I don't recall him being involved in it, no.

Henderson: Okay. To your best recollection, he never went to the governor and said, "I'm behind you on this fight."

Griffin: I wouldn't know that, but I don't think so.

Henderson: In the 1958 legislature . . . your brother wants to extend the borrowing authority of the Rural Roads Authority. And there's a big fight between the Griffin administration and the side led by Lieutenant Governor Vandiver.

Griffin: That's correct.

Henderson: Would you discuss that fight?

Griffin: Well, it was one of the toughest fights, I think, we had the whole time Marvin was governor. Of course, Lieutenant Governor Vandiver opposed the rural roads, and, of course, my brother was trying to pass another fifty million dollars to build some more rural roads, which had been one of the most popular things in the state, but it was a lame duck session of the legislature, and all the representatives, not all of them, but some of them were looking down the road 'cause [that's] when the new governor [was going to] come in in January. So it was a tough fight, but we just lost it by a few votes. And, of course, the rural people lost a lot by not having paved roads, you know. It was one of the toughest fights I experienced while I was up there.

Henderson: Now what was your role in that fight?

Griffin: Well, I was trying to get the representatives, senators, naturally, to vote for it. That's exactly what one of my roles [was]. I wasn't the only one, but I was one of the principal ones. And I like to get sick working at it, I think.

Henderson: [Laughter] Now, how does the governor and how did you try to lobby these representatives to vote for your side? Were there any promises made?

Griffin: Well, no, there weren't exactly promises made. Of course, they were reminded of promises [that had] already been fulfilled. And, of course, that's politics, and it's here today, and it will always be here. And it was to our advantage to try to get them to support the bill which extended the rural roads authority.

Henderson: How active a role did the governor play in lobbying this?

Griffin: Well, naturally he was very much interested in it, being from a rural county, but he didn't go really all out for it. I mean, he didn't really more or less bust his britches for it, but we did. Now, that's the thing, we really worked on it now, no question, his supporters and close friends there and so forth worked on it pretty hard.

Henderson: Now, when you say "we did," who were some of the people that helped you in this fight?

Griffin: Well, it would be some senators and some representatives. And, of course, the staff there, the executive secretary and some other aides and so forth and so on, speech writers and all that kind of people.

Henderson: Now, Governor Vandiver's leading the fight against you?

Griffin: That's correct.

Henderson: How rigorously does he fight you?

Griffin: He went all out, and he beat us, 'cause like I say it was a lame duck session, and they was looking down the road.

Henderson: Now, what are some things that he's doing to sort of offset you trying to get

these people to vote on your side?

Griffin: Well, he didn't have to do too much--just tell them that he's going to be the next governor.

Henderson: Now, who are some people that are helping him? Are you aware of any people helping him?

Griffin: Well, I don't know. I'm sure his brother-in-law Bobby [Robert Lee] Russell [Jr.] was helping him and folks like that. He had some good people helping him, there's no question about that. Of course, he and Marvin have the same political philosophy as far as that's concerned. They just had some differences, but they had the same political philosophy.

Henderson: Well, why don't you tell me about your brother's political philosophy? What was it?

Griffin: Well, a lot of people thought he was a racist, but he was not a racist. He was a segregationist. There's a lot of difference between a racist and a segregationist. A racist is one that just hates the blacks on anything they try to do. A segregationist, all they want to do, is if the black is qualified, they want to see him get what he is trying to get. But they just don't want to give it to him. That's about the difference between a racist and a segregationist. But Marvin Griffin was not a racist.

Henderson: Now, prior to this fight in the legislature in '58, was the relationship between your brother and Vandiver good, cordial, or was it adversarial? How would you describe it?

Griffin: Well, [in] my opinion it was cordial, that's about the best word for it.

Henderson: Did your brother ever call Vandiver down and discuss legislation with him and talk strategy about passing legislation?

Griffin: Well, I'm sure he did because they have to work together, just like when Marvin was lieutenant governor, he and Herman [Eugene Talmadge] worked together. I'm sure they had sessions, you know, but I, of course, wasn't in on those sessions 'cause I was tending to other business, you know.

Henderson: During this fight, does Senator [Herman] Talmadge play a role either openly or behind the scenes?

Griffin: I didn't ever hear of Senator Talmadge getting into it. He could have, but I don't believe so. Vandiver and Griffin were both his friends. I believe he just let them fight it out.

Henderson: Well, let's see. I think you've answered this, but let me ask you one more time just to make sure. Why do you think the lieutenant governor was successful in this fight?

Griffin: Well, I've already answered it. It's very, very simple. He was going to be the governor in January, and that was a lame duck session, and Marvin was going out, and the man that's going out can't do too much.

Henderson: Oh, yeah.

Griffin: It's the man that's sitting in the seat that's coming in who can do something for you.

Henderson: Roger [Hugh] Lawson [Sr.] was seen in the press in 1958 as the Griffin candidate for governor. Was he the Griffin candidate for governor in '58?

Griffin: Well, he was . . . Roger Lawson was a very good friend, of course, of the Griffin administration, or he wouldn't have been on the highway board.

Henderson: Right.

Griffin: But I don't think Marvin took too big a part in it, to tell you the truth. I think he liked Roger Lawson, and he admired him--he was a smart fellow--but I don't think he took too big a part.

Henderson: So this press speculation prior to the defeat of Governor Griffin, you know, the press was saying that Roger Lawson was the Griffin candidate for governor? You don't hold much stock in that?

Griffin: Not too much.

Henderson: Okay. All right. Roger Lawson does drop out of the race. Do you know why he dropped out?

Griffin: No, I imagine because he figured he couldn't win it. That's about the reason he dropped out.

Henderson: Now, after he drops out, does your brother or you try to groom somebody to run against Vandiver in 1958?

Griffin: No. Not that I know of. I know I didn't. I might have when Vandiver was running for lieutenant governor. Some of his people, and I think Vandiver himself, thought we were trying to help another candidate get elected lieutenant governor, but we didn't have anything to do with it, wasn't taking no part in nobody's race but ours.

Henderson: Okay. All right, let's go back to that, let's see, that was in '54 when he ran for lieutenant governor.

Griffin: That's right.

Henderson: Who do you think you were supporting?

Griffin: I think it was Billy [William K.] Barrett, as I remember.

Henderson: But the Griffin people were not supporting him for lieutenant governor?

Griffin: Some of him could have been supporting them, but we wasn't taking any part in the race. Now, some of his people, I think, thought we were, but we wasn't. We had too much on our hands just trying to win the governor's race to be messing with another race.

Henderson: How about Bill [William Turner] Bodenhamer [Sr.]? He finally enters the race [in 1958] against Vandiver. Does he do so at the urging of your brother?

Griffin: No.

Henderson: Does he do so at the urging of you?

Griffin: No.

Henderson: Well, why do you think he enters the race?

Griffin: Well, I think maybe he thought he could win it. I don't know. But 'course I imagine a lot of Griffin people voted for Bodenhamer. Not a lot 'cause he didn't get too many votes, but we wasn't instrumental, I know, in getting Bodenhamer in the race.

Henderson: Now, there's a lot of talk in the press about T. V. [Truman Veran] Williams, Red Williams, getting him in the race. Do you know anything about that?

Griffin: Well, now, that could be so. That I don't know. 'Course T. V., he kind of works in mysterious ways. But he was a good revenue commissioner.

Henderson: But as far as you know, Marvin Griffin did not encourage Bodenhamer to get in the race.

Griffin: As far as I know, [unintelligible], no, I don't believe he did.

Henderson: Well, why do you think a strong candidate never got in the race against Vandiver?

Griffin: Well, I think it was because he had his political roots. He had been lieutenant governor and made a lot of friends, and he was friends with the Talmadges, and he had a lot of his own friends, too. And he had a pretty good political base, and so I don't think anybody particularly wanted to run against Ernie.

Henderson: Now, when Mr. Vandiver becomes governor, there's going to be a special unit set up in the state law department to investigate alleged corruption in the Griffin administration. Would you like to talk about that?

Griffin: Well, of course, you know they indicted me, and then, of course, the jury exonerated me. But, of course, I don't want to hold any animosity toward Ernie Vandiver. I didn't particularly like it when he didn't hardly get warm in the governor's chair [before] he sent a tax man down here to try to audit my income tax, to try to catch me on cheating, which it didn't come out 'cause they wasn't nothing to it. But he didn't get in the chair good before he had a man down here wanting to see my records.

Henderson: Now, why do you think he did that?

Griffin: Well, he wanted to embarrass me, I reckon, 'cause he knew I wasn't particularly a friend of his, you know. I had no animosity toward him; I just wasn't a particular friend of his.

Henderson: All right. Now this investigation. Do you remember the outcome of it? Was anybody in the Griffin administration found guilty of corruption? Did anyone go to prison or jail to the best of your recollection?

Griffin: I don't think so. I don't know of anybody who went to prison. They indicted me, and they tried to indict Marvin.

Henderson: Was your brother indicted?

Griffin: They tried to. I don't think they ever indicted him. They did indict me. They tried me. A country boy in the courts of Atlanta. [Laughter]

Henderson: In Governor Vandiver's inaugural address, he comes down pretty hard on your brother as far as his financial record, his budgetary policy, and he calls it irresponsible. How do you respond to those charges?

Griffin: Well, I think that was just distinctly politics at all. Because I don't think he had any reason at all to talk about that. Because some of the things that some of his, a lot of his followers did, I imagine Vandiver some of his did, too, they were just caught and uncaught.

Henderson: Now, also in that inaugural address, he accuses the Griffin administration of engaging in some corrupt practices. How do you respond to that?

Griffin: Well, I say it's political persecution, exactly what goes on with the Atlanta newspapers. That's exactly political persecution. Like I say, they tried me and they found me, exonerated me, not guilty, so that ought to prove something about Atlanta, me a country boy up there in city courts.

Henderson: Well, why do you think the press was so hard on the Griffin administration?

Griffin: Oh, everybody knows why that is. Because of his segregated stand. His segregation stand. You can tell that right now. They're on the same thing except about a hundred times worse as far as segregation is concerned.

Henderson: All right. Let's go to the desegregation crisis at the University of Georgia. Governor Vandiver has to make a decision either to keep the University open with integration or to close it. He finally decides to keep it open. Do you recall how your brother felt about that decision?

Griffin: I don't recall, but I would think he thought Vandiver made the right decision because, although just like I say, he was a segregationist and, of course, Vandiver was, too, and Vandiver also said that he wasn't going to allow an integrated schools, but he had to back up for the times. There wasn't anything else he could do. Marvin Griffin would have had to do the same thing.

Henderson: So you personally agree with what Governor Vandiver did?

Griffin: I certainly do.

Henderson: Okay. You think that was really the only way he could. . . .

Griffin: That's the only way he could handle it.

Henderson: Okay. Now, the Sibley Commission had gone around the state dealing with the question of trying to find out how the people felt about integrating the public schools. And they finally came up with a recommendation, at least the majority recommendation was local option. How did your brother feel about that recommendation?

Griffin: I don't believe he liked it too good, in my opinion. I don't remember just exactly why, but he didn't like to too good, I don't think. And as I remember, I didn't like it either.

Henderson: All right. Can you tell me why you didn't like it.

Griffin: Because I just didn't like it. I thought they could maybe stall it a little while longer.

Henderson: Okay.

Griffin: Hoping and praying they'd stall it a little while longer.

Henderson: In 1962 your brother seeks another term as governor. What was your role in

that campaign?

Griffin: I didn't have anything to do with it. I ran for [the] legislature from down here [Bainbridge, Georgia], and I was running my own race.

Henderson: Now, he runs against Carl [Edward] Sanders.

Griffin: That's true.

Henderson: To the best of your knowledge, did Governor Vandiver play a role in Carl Sanders's campaign?

Griffin: I don't know about that now 'cause, see, I wasn't up there [Atlanta]. If I had been up there, I would have known. I wasn't Marvin's campaign manager when he was elected governor. If I had been up there as campaign manager, I'd have certainly known whether he did or not.

Henderson: Did you ever hear your brother say after the election how significant Vandiver's support was for Griffin?

Griffin: I never heard him say, no.

Henderson: All right. Let's go to 1972. Vandiver runs for the Senate. Where did you and your brother stand in that race?

Griffin: Well, I don't remember too much about that. Did he finally run?

Henderson: Yes, sir. He ran.

Griffin: I don't know, but I imagine we wasn't for him. I don't imagine we supported him. I don't remember. I know I didn't vote for him. I don't know what my brother did, 'course, like I say, that was so long ago [that] I don't put it all together.

Henderson: All right. Let me ask you a couple of questions, just your opinion, what do you

think about some things. Ernest Vandiver as a politician. Was he a good politician? Bad politician?

Griffin: Well, I think Ernie was a pretty good politician until [James Earl] Carter [Jr.] come along [laughter]. I didn't think he was too much of a governor, but after Carter come along, I thought he was a jewel. That answers that question, don't it?

Henderson: All right. How about as a person? Was he easy to talk with? Did you like him, I mean when you were around him, was he personable?

Griffin: Well, he's always been personable. We just got crossed up a few times, but he was always personable. He's a nice fellow to talk to.

Henderson: Well, now, your brother has a reputation of being a good stump speaker, one of the best in the state of Georgia. How do you compare Ernest Vandiver, say, with your brother as a speaker?

Griffin: Oh, wasn't no comparison.

Henderson: Okay.

Griffin: But like you say, Marvin was the best, outside of Ed [Eurith Dickinson] Rivers, both of them, I think, were tops in the state of Georgia as stump speakers. I don't say outside of Ed Rivers, I think he'd compare favorably with Ed Rivers, but Vandiver was all right, but he wasn't the stump speaker that Marvin Griffin was.

Henderson: Looking at governors in the state of Georgia, how would you compare Ernest Vandiver as a governor?

Griffin: Well, like I said before, before [Jimmy] Carter come along I served in the legislature with four governors. Vandiver was the first one, and I come along with [Lester

Garfield] Maddox--[Carl] Sanders, then Maddox, and then Carter. And, of course, I didn't grade Vandiver too good until Carter came along. Then I found out he made a pretty good governor.

Henderson: Would you consider him . . . now, you served in the legislature with Governor Vandiver?

Griffin: That's correct.

Henderson: Would you consider him a strong governor? Or a weak governor? Moderate governor?

Griffin: Well, I'd say he wasn't exactly a weak governor, and he wasn't exactly a shown-up strong governor. He was in kind of between with me. I mean, that's my opinion, you know, but he certainly wasn't a weak governor. He wasn't what you call one of them overly bombastic governors, however you want to say.

Henderson: Well, now, how would you compare his governorship with your brother's?

Griffin: Well, I'd, naturally, you know, I think my brother's governorship was the best governorship because he had some programs. Now, you know what his program was--rural roads and all that stuff he instituted and so forth during his time.

Henderson: Well, if you had to look at Ernest Vandiver and look at some of his major accomplishments, from your perspective, what do you think were his major accomplishments?

Griffin: Well, I tell you the truth, I'm sure he accomplished something, I just don't remember any major things. I know there wasn't any major things in the legislature. For the two years I was up there under him, I didn't see nothing outstanding. It was [the] kind of routine stuff, in fact, [that] every governor has to do. I don't remember whether he raised any

taxes or not, but if he hadn't got enough money, he's got to get money from somewhere to operate the government. Sanders had to do it, and Marvin had to do it. I'm sure he had to do it, and Lester had to do it, and Carter had to do it.

Henderson: Well, what would you say were some of his major failures?

Griffin: Well, I don't remember nothing about him failing too much. 'Course he was in the know, and he knew what he was doing before he ever got there.

Henderson: Okay. What do you think is the place of Ernest Vandiver in the history of Georgia? You know, every governor thinks they have a unique place in Georgia's history. Where is Ernest Vandiver's place?

Griffin: Well, I think he'd placed pretty good in history because that's like I said, that's his general area, you know, and he was lieutenant governor and governor--he's bound to place somewhere in the history, you know. And it would be my opinion, he's all right as far as the history of Georgia is concerned.

Henderson: Let me ask you a question that has nothing to do with Ernest Vandiver. But you've been around Georgia politics a good number of years, and you've seen politicians come and go. Can you describe a political campaign back in the so-called good old days when you had the Marvin Griffins and the Ed Rivers and Ellis [Gibbs] Arnalls taking to the stump, and you had big crowds of people coming to hear them. What was it like?

Griffin: Aw, you know, [unintelligible] man, that was good doings along in that time, and, of course, you left out old man Gene [Eugene] Talmadge and Herman [Talmadge] and so forth. And we had some political rallies, now, and it was good old fighting politics. [Laughter] I remember I coordinated all these motorcades. We went to these Saturday rallies for Marvin.

And I coordinated them and had them coming in on time, you know. And this particular one in Moultrie [Georgia], when he opened his campaign, I had about forty motorcades come in from all over the state of Georgia, and they didn't miss the schedule twenty minutes, all over the state of Georgia, and they'd come in honking them horns, you know, bringing placards, and they'd have a bundle of money on a placard, you know, for a campaign contribution. And Marvin actually being [a] stump speaker, he'd put on a show for them, and they'd have a good time. An old-fashioned barbecue and fish fries and stuff of that type.

Henderson: What did all that in? That's a thing of the past now.

Griffin: Well, I think television had more to do with it than anything else. 'Course then, you know, what he'd do, he'd make a Saturday afternoon speech at a rally, and it was televised on Monday night. But it's gone now. You just don't have it. People just don't go to them like they used to.

[Break in conversation]

Griffin: Yeah, I believe the funniest thing that happened while I was in Atlanta four years was that I found out fifty people, fifty women, were working out at the highway shop as typists. They didn't have but one typewriter [laughter], and they just went out there every couple of weeks, whenever they were paid off, and got their check. So I fired them all. All fifty. And Monday morning, when I come in the capitol on the side where all them columns are, about six or seven of them called out, "Come here, Cheney, come here, man." I said, "What's the matter?" Said, well, said, "Man, you done fired my girlfriend." I said, "Man, I didn't know she was your girlfriend. What's her name?" And he give me the names, you know. And I got about seven names. Well, what had happened was Herman, see, had given the jobs

because some of these representatives and senators wanted him to give them a job, so he--he didn't have anywhere else to send them--said, well, said he just sent them out there, and, of course, some of the representatives and senators had gotten beat, you know, and wasn't back up there. Some others had lost their girlfriend, you know, and so forth, but they were still out there. And so I said, "Well, I'll just see what I can do." And what I did was I had to put about six or seven back on the payroll for them senators and representatives, and the funny thing about it was I lost about, the state gained about forty-three that [I] knocked off the payroll, see, saved the state money. But, anyhow, later on--I knew who they was, actually, you know-- Marvin said, "Cheney," said, "We got to pass House bill say so-and-so-and so. We need some help on it." I said, "Well, I'll see what I can do." So I'd go down there, and I'd see one of them representatives or senators, you know, and I'd say, "Old buddy, what do you think about House Bill [No.] 492?" or whatever it was. [He'd reply], "Man, I don't like that at all. I don't like it." I'd say, "Yeah, but the man wants it passed." I said, "You know, we'll have to do something about that highway shop deal out yonder." [He'd reply], "Man," said, "you ain't nothing but a blackmailer." [Laughter]

Henderson: Did they vote for it?

Griffin: Oh, yeah. [Laughter] It passed. But that's one of the funniest stories. The funniest thing that happened up there to me the whole time that I was up there. In fact, I had a newspaper reporter from Atlanta that heard about it. It's been twenty years ago, fifteen. And he called me and wanted to know just how, and he wrote it up, you know? And that was the funniest thing that happened the whole time that I was up there.

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*Richard D. Pinner*  
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