Harold Paulk Henderson, Sr. Oral History Collection
OH Vandiver 12
Homer Meade Rankin Interviewed by Dr. Harold Paulk Henderson
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EDITED BY DR. HENDERSON

Side One

Henderson: This is an interview with Mr. Homer M. [Meade] Rankin in my office at Abraham Baldwin College on January 13, 1994. My name is Dr. Hal Henderson. Good afternoon, Mr. Rankin.

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Rankin: Good afternoon to you.

Henderson: I appreciate you coming by for this interview. During the Vandiver administration you were editor and publisher of the *Daily Tifton Gazette*. Let me ask you some questions about the 1958 gubernatorial campaign.

Rankin: Certainly.

Henderson: In 1958 Mr. Vandiver has a candidate to run against him by the name of William T. [Turner] Bodenhamer [Sr.], one of your neighbors in Tift County. Could you discuss Mr. Bodenhamer for me, and why do you think he wanted to run against Mr. Vandiver?

Rankin: I never really knew why Bill wanted to run against him [Vandiver]. I knew Bill a long time. We were on the school board together. And when the Tift County School Board and the Tifton School Board were merged into one, together we wrote the legislation to accomplish that. I think everyone felt that Ernie Vandiver was a shoo-in for governor, and it was frankly quite a surprise to the Tifton people when he [Bodenhamer] announced. But, Hal, I think it became evident that--Bill had been in the legislature, had run for office before successfully, and had successfully served in the legislature and represented Tift county in the

legislature. I'm sorry that I can't remember the name, but there was a gentleman, I think his name was Harris, in Augusta, Georgia?

Henderson: Roy V. [Vincent] Harris.

Rankin: Roy, good old Roy Harris, that had a scandal sheet that wouldn't keep a lot of red ink in it that he published regularly. It was a die-hard segregationist type of publication. It soon appeared obvious to us here in Tifton that Bill Bodenhamer was being sponsored a great deal by Roy Harris and his associates. I just assumed that, with their very strong feelings, that they had taken a candidate that they felt would be a voice for them. And as I remember this was a political campaign that had to do with sort of reform candidates running, because of the so-called scandals of the Griffin administration.

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And, of course, Ernie was known as a good clean-cut attorney and legislator [*sic*], and Bill, as a pastor, had an impeccable reputation in this area. So it seemed as if it were natural to try to use him. Then, of course, when the campaign got under way and all of the television time was purchased, it depended, of course, on your point of view, but it was quite a shock to many of us in the newspaper business to see the strong die-hard segregationist--what we would call propaganda--coming out over the airwaves from Bill Bodenhamer. And therein the die was cast for the election.

Henderson: In that campaign Ernest Vandiver makes the statement "No, not one." Why do you think he made that statement?

Rankin: None of us ever knew down here. In our newspaper discussions I heard many opinions voiced by other publishers saying that a great deal had been said to Ernie not to use that phrase, that he didn't need to use it to be elected. You know, that was an era when most

legislators felt, legislators running for office felt that they had to scream "nigger, nigger" to get elected. Apparently Ernie felt he had to, and therefore . . . . [Phone rings] [Cut off] I think the vast majority of Ernie's supporters felt that it was totally unnecessary, that the trend was toward facing an issue such as he was going to have to face, and he didn't have to put himself out on a limb like that. He would go into office and, of course, as you see, he went in with--what was it? 157 out of 159 counties?

Henderson: I believe it was 156. He carried all but three.

Rankin: Tift county, Worth, and. . . .

Henderson: There was one other. The name slips me right off, but. . . . The 1960 legislature created the General Assembly Committee on Schools, better known as the Sibley committee. What was the purpose of that committee?

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Rankin: Well, you know, from the resolution which created it, it was a formal statement of it, but my understanding was that Judge [Frank Arthur] Hooper in late '59 had ruled in favor of the program agreed upon by the Atlanta School Board and those who were seeking to integrate it [the Atlanta school system]. An agreed upon program of integration of the schools had been arrived at. They had agreed upon it and he approved it, but he knew that if he were to order it put into effect immediately that the laws already on the books would require the governor to close the schools in that district, Atlanta, and based upon what happened in the state of Virginia, once one school system was closed, that the proper appeal to the courts would bring forth a verdict that the governor would have to close all the schools in the state, and Hooper said he didn't want responsibility of seeing the children of Georgia out on the streets. I think it was recognized that even if they were out on the streets that within two, three weeks, or

possibly a month the actions brought before the federal courts would reopen all those schools. But he didn't want them out on the streets even for a week, and so he was deferring the execution of his order until the legislature could meet, which it was January and February, and to take the extreme position, take the action of wiping all the segregation laws off the books and open the door for the schools to be integrated. I was told [this] by John [Adams] Sibley that Griffin [Boyette] Bell, whom I believe was the executive secretary of Vandiver?

Henderson: Chief of staff.

Rankin: Chief of staff, and Griffin Bell was the one who came up with this plan for setting up a study committee. And as long as the quality of person placed on it was above reproach, that Hooper would probably accept it and this would mean a year's delay, but it would pave the way for a peaceful solution to the desegregation problem. The initial acts of the legislature created a committee that had a limited number of legislators on it, but the General Assembly insisted that there be more representatives and more senators on it. If my memory serves me right, they added four representatives and two senators to the committee, and therefore we ended up with nineteen people on the committee. The rest of us were presidents of organizations within the state of Georgia, mine, of course, being the Georgia Press Association. And I was also told that the main thrust of the plan was to enable John Sibley, noted for his marvelous ability to chair a meeting and to work with the questioning of people, the plan was devised to place him on it. And therefore, since he at that time was president of the alumni association of the University of Georgia, they went with the presidents of organizations.

Henderson: Who approached you about being on the committee?

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Rankin: Nobody. [Laughter] I woke up one morning and found myself walking on eggshells as the [Atlanta] *Journal-Constitution* said. I picked up the paper and there in the paper was the article saying that we were on the committee. Oh, I need to back up, Hal. The day before I had a telephone call from Margaret, and I can't remember Margaret's last name [Shannon], then the stellar reporter for the *Journal*, calling to ask. . . .

Henderson: Was it Shannon?

Rankin: Pardon?

Henderson: Shannon?

Rankin: Probably, that was probably it. I'm sorry I can't remember it. Calling to get a small biographical sketch of me.

Henderson: Now what position did you hold with the Georgia Press Association?

Rankin: I was president of the Georgia Press Association.

Henderson: Okay. Now, Mr. Sibley serves as chairman of that committee. Discuss for me Mr. Sibley. What was your impression of him as he presided? What's just your impression of him as a person?

Rankin: John Sibley was an outstanding gentleman and an outstanding attorney and an outstanding presiding officer with a remarkable ability to deal with and converse with people. The committee met without me because I was ill with the flu, and during the organizational meeting he, of course, was named as chairman. I had a call from John Sibley asking me to, now that I was over the flu, a few days later could I please come to Atlanta to meet with him? That's the first time I'd ever met John Sibley. Of course, he was noted as a banker, an attorney, churchman, philanthropist. He thought everything through before he opened his mouth, and

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when he was in the chair talking with people, no matter how antagonistic they were, he was always a warm, friendly figure that always had the good feeling of the person who was taking a strong position against his.

Henderson: The committee holds hearings in each of the congressional districts. Did you go to any of those committee hearings?

Rankin: Yes, I went to all of them. John Sibley asked me if I would please come to Atlanta and manage the office of the Sibley Committee during the entirety of its period in existence. They set up a small office room over in the state capitol, and, I think primarily I was selected for that because I was the newspaper man and could deal with the press and prepare news releases for the media, to keep them up-to-date on what the committee was doing. But it required me to be in Atlanta five days a week during the entire period of the committee. And I was fortunate; my wife [Lutrelle "Weetie" Tift Rankin] was a newspaperwoman, and she ran *The Gazette* for me while I was gone. And, of course, five days a week with the committee work, I attended each one of the committee's [hearings] in each of its ten locations. There were then ten congressional districts in Georgia.

Henderson: At these meetings you are dealing with a very controversial issue. What was the feeling at the committee hearings? Filled with tension? I mean, was there the potential for some kind of explosion there, or what was just the mood of when you had these committee hearings?

Rankin: Well, it varied a little bit with the area in which you were located. I am having a little trouble remembering where we went first and so forth, but I know it seemed to me that the first place that we went was up into northeast Georgia, up above Cartersville somewhere.

That's an area in which there is not that much of a problem because there are very few blacks in the area and, of course, that did not mean that the feeling was totally one-sided.

But there was not much tension at that meeting, and I remember one country lady who was called to the stand and--Mr. Sibley did a marvelous job in explaining that with all of the complications of the issue it really narrowed down to one thing: Were you willing to close down the public schools of Georgia and set up private schools across the state? Or were you willing to allow the public schools to be open even if there was some token integration of one or two schools here or there? And her reply was, "Are you crazy? Do you think for one minute I'm going to let you close down my public schools and I'm going to have those three children at home five days a week?" [Laughter] That was probably the strongest of the attitudes expressed, but the whole of that meeting in those areas was one of quiet restraint but strong differences of opinion.

We held meetings in the smaller communities. I think Atlanta was the only large city in which we held one. We held one in Sandersville, Georgia, and we held one in Americus, Georgia. And, of course, Americus is in what I guess is referred to as the Bible Belt or perhaps the Black Belt, and while there were never any outbursts or any misconduct, but there were some very, very strong statements made, not just by rank and file citizens, but by leaders of the community. For example, a Mr. [Charles Frederick] Crisp in Americus was an outstanding attorney and he, I found out [unintelligible], was a third generation member of the General Assembly. And he was strongly outspoken in terms of segregation and that type of life to which he and his family in the past had been accustomed.

I must say that all of these meetings were adequately attended by law enforcement personnel, so you never had any concern there would be a riot or a demonstration, and there were no demonstrations. It was kept in that way, and I think partially by Mr. Sibley's statement at the beginning of each meeting, putting on a basis that we want to together to reach a conclusion. We want each of you to have a right to say what you have. But I did, yes, I did attend all ten of the meetings. I would like to say that each individual that wanted to speak was allowed to come up to the microphone to speak, and as the day drew to a close, and these meetings running on 'til five or six or seven o'clock, in order not to just go on ad infinitum, they would ask that in order that you may be counted, that your opinion would count, we ask that all of those who are in favor of the first proposition, would you mind standing on the left side of the room, and all those favoring the other standing on the right side of the room. And then committee members went down the line and wrote down the name of each individual, and in some instances it was an individual for himself; in other instances it was an individual who was speaking on behalf of a civic club, who would say, "We have seventy-three members and forty of these members are for one proposition and thirty-two are for another." So that not only were names but also volumes of representation were recorded. At the end of the day he would always ask, "Now, is there anyone here who does not feel that his opinion has been placed before the committee?" And there being no further hands raised, we would adjourn.

Henderson: A typical hearing, what time would it begin and what time would you normally end?

Rankin: A typical hearing would begin at nine in the morning. It would run until the lunch hour, and it would be one hour lunch, back again and then we'd run on 'til five or six

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o'clock, depending on how the--never got out before five, and sometimes we'd stay on 'til six. It seems to me we might have stayed one time a little beyond, but not much more because of his ability, Mr. Sibley's ability, to get people's voices heard and counted and have them feel that there trip had been worthwhile.

Now, Hal, these people just didn't happen to be there. I think one of the most valuable men on the committee was Senator John [Wesley] Greer, whom I might add is the only politician on that committee who voted with the majority. John had his own office there in the state capital, and he knew the state very, very well because in the past he had been affiliated with other state level officials. John was therefore able to call into every county in the state and put his pulse on the person there who knew how to get out the people. In some instances he would have a runner sent into a county to do the legwork for him.

What he would do would be to contact the heads of the city and county commissions, heads of the school boards, the heads of the garden clubs, all of the presidents of the civic organizations in town, the legion [The American Legion], the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars], the [unintelligible] Rotary Club, what have you, telling them that this hearing was going to be held and they were invited to come. If they couldn't get there personally they were invited to send a representative so that their voice could be heard. So it was a lot of legwork done to get the word out ahead of time impartially across the entire county, to alert them that the hearing was coming and that they would have a chance to have their voice counted.

Henderson: Serving as a member of the committee, were you compensated in any way, or is this public service?

Rankin: No. Public service. The only thing we were compensated for was out of pocket expenses, which in my case was simply travel to and from Atlanta, or travel to and from the hearings, and, of course, our hotel bills at the hearings. 'Course, unlike most of the members of the committee, I was in Atlanta, you know, four nights a week, and so my out of pocket expenses were covered.

Henderson: Going back to the committee hearings, when a person speaks is there a time limit on how long he or she may speak, or was it relatively unlimited?

Rankin: There was a time limit set, and it was in most instances . . . for example, it seemed to me like there was a two-minute limit. Most people would complete what they have to say in thirty seconds, and some others would have a reason for wanting to speak a few minutes longer, one of those things, and Mr. Sibley's judgment was excellent. And he would in that way control the [the audience.] If there was one running over and he thought it was worthwhile to hear what was being said, he'd allow it to happen. I never heard the whole time of a criticism of his conduct of the meeting or the cut-off time or what have you.

I remember one thing in particular. A preacher came to the witness chair to speak, and he said, "May we pray?" And then he started a prayer asking that segregation be continued forever, and Mr. Sibley, when he got through--he didn't stop him, but when he got through, he said, "Sir, for the benefit of those who follow you, I would not have permitted the prayer if I had known that it was an opinionated prayer." He said, "I have no objection to the prayer as long as we ask for God's guidance in reaching the best decision, but we don't want to tell God what decision we want him to reach." [Laughter]

Henderson: There were nineteen members on the committee, as you pointed out. Eleven of the members adopted recommendations which were known as the majority report, and you voted, I understand, with the majority report.

Rankin: I did.

Henderson: Could you tell me what that recommendation was?

Rankin: Let me say something first. As a newspaper publisher in south Georgia, I always tried to work for the benefit of Tift County, and attempted to back and persuade the readers in Tift County to take steps that were advancements for Tift County, that moved Tift County forward. Always they were not the most popular side that I might have been pushing. I also, for example, knew that segregation was one day going to be a thing of the past, and we always dealt with our readers and our people on a basis of equality, but you know it's, Hal, sort of like taking a hose and watering a garden. You pull the hose out and you've got a great big stream of water coming out the end, and you find that your stream of water is about four feet short of reaching a patch of amaryllis over there. So you pull on the hose and stretch it some to get a little closer. You might get two feet closer and get the amaryllis, but as you pull the hose, the hose as it stretches narrows in circumference and less water comes through. And if a publisher or a newspaper editor gets too far out in front of his audience, the communication doesn't go through, like the water doesn't go through the hose.

So you will find some statements in the majority committee that are in my opinion expressing really what had been existing for years, but I always felt that those things were sort of intended to pacify--that might not be the right word--or soothe the feelings of the whole state of Georgia, to make what we were recommending, shall we say, somewhat more palatable.

But, as you know, we, the committee, recommended that the General Assembly prepare an amendment to the [Georgia] Constitution. This was necessary if some of the legislation was going to be made effective. In the paragraph in which we stated that we wanted this amendment put forth by the legislature it went on to say that no child in the state should be compelled against his will or the will of his parents to attend public schools with a child of the opposite race.

Now that certainly is not the case today, but this was to let the people out there know that we were not trying to force any two people together. The biggest thing about the *Brown [v. Board of Education]* decision in 1954 was it never said that you had to integrate. It simply said you could not segregate. If a school voluntarily wanted to accept blacks in with whites they had that right to do it. Then *Brown* was not saying you've got to do it; it simply says you can't keep the black out. You're not required to force him in, which gives you a lead in into something known as freedom of choice.

But we recommended that they not be forced to go to a school that they didn't want to go to. This was either the child or the parents, and as a alternative, if practical, we said, and that's a catchy phrase because frankly it would hardly be practical, but, if practical, that grants and aids would be made available to the student who accomplished this. We also suggested a further amendment to the Constitution saying that a uniform system be provided for local units, local school administration units, to make their own decisions with regard to their schools. We asked that they set up the legislation which would provide for tuition grants or scholarships for the benefit of the child whose parents wanted him to be in a different school. We asked that

they forthwith enact legislation allowing teachers of private schools to participate in a retirement fund on the same basis that public school teachers were having.

And then I would say that the summation of it was that we were saying that we wanted them to erase the segregation from the books. Either through legislation or constitutional amendment, we wanted the legislature to make it possible for freedom of choice to enter into the attendance pattern of children at school, meaning that if blacks wanted to enter a white school they would have the opportunity to do that. They would not be discriminated against because of color, and there would be no requirement that the schools close down in the event this act did take place.

Henderson: Now, eight members of the committee did not vote with the majority; they had a minority report. How did their report differ from what the majority had recommended?

Rankin: Well, the minority report is one in which it is stated that--in effect, it said we want the status quo. We want to keep schools segregated forever. So they really had four points. One was that they wanted a guarantee that no Georgia child would ever be forced against his or his parents' desire to attend any public school wherein a child of the opposite race was attending. Secondly, they wanted the General Assembly to enact appropriate enabling legislation to further effectuate grants-in-aid legislation that had been set up under the Herman [Eugene] Talmadge administration, sort of Talmadge looking down the line to the future.

They also said they wanted the public school system to be preserved on a segregated basis as far as it is possible to do so, and they used the phrase "as far as possible unless closed by unprecedented federal action." So even there they were recognizing that it might happen, but they wanted it to be totally segregated unless federal action came in. They put a catch-all at the

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bottom which said that they wanted the governor and the General Assembly to take such action and enact such measures as may be required from time to time consistent with the welfare and the best interests of the children of Georgia, which to me is a loophole put in there saying that someday you may have to face up to it after all. In effect, that was the position of the minority committee. They did not offer a solution to the problem which Atlanta faced.

Henderson: The committee, when it met, was it a congenial group of people getting together, or was there some dissention there? Is there vigorous give and take? What was the mood of the committee meetings?

Rankin: Everybody on that committee was a gentleman, and we all met around the same table. And I would say that, from my memory, almost everybody was present at every meeting we held. Socially we were friendly and congenial. When we had dinner together, when we had a cocktail together before the meetings and afterward, everyone was friendly with the other person. We talked a lot about their personal lives and where they lived. You began to see certain lines beginning to form as questions were asked and challenges were made, and at the meetings themselves it never got out of hand. There was never any anger. I think each person knew that we were working toward a solution and that at the end there was going to be a majority report and a minority report.

I think it was clear from the beginning that many of these people were not going to vote to desegregate the schools. And they kept asking questions trying to find some way to solve the problem without having to commit themselves to that step. I would say that occasionally there was some sharpness within the committee, but it was always able to be answered by some other committee member saying, "Well, Harold, we're all aiming at the same answer one way or the

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other, the same solution. Whether we can accomplish it, we don't know, but I'm not upset with you for your viewpoint, and I just don't want you to be upset with me and mine." And that's as far as it ever went.

Henderson: Was there any one person in the minority who stands out as being a leader of the minority?

Rankin: I wouldn't say there was anyone that you'd look to as the leader of the group. I think that there were people on there on the minority group that were a whole lot more thoughtful in what they were saying and what they were doing, just not already close-minded. They were trying to search out every solution, but I never looked at one person as sort of being the one that everybody looked to for an answer when there was something that was going to come from a segregation-minded individual.

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Hal, on the group, if you look at the ones that're on there, you have John [Paul] Duncan [Jr.]. He was the vice-chairman of the committee. Now John was the president of the Farm Bureau, Georgia Farm Bureau, and I always felt in my heart John wanted to be a part of the majority committee, but he said, "I'm representing. I'm not here for John Duncan; I'm here representing the farm federation, and it's clear to me how the farm federation feels and that's the way I'm going to cast my vote."

There was [James] Battle Hall, if I remember correctly, he was the head of the education committee in the House. He handled a lot of lumber up in north Georgia, as I remember it, and Battle was a distinguished person. I never felt that he was pushing anything within the committee. [James] Render Hill was a delightful fellow, [who] loved growing peaches, from somewhere in the area on the west side of the state above Atlanta, but on the west side of the

state. Render Hill's the one who was a part of the minority, but he also added his statement. I think it was ineffectual. I don't think there was any real difference. He thinks he's covering his act, covering his bases.

I'll tell you, Hal, the only redneck on that group was a representative named [Horace] Euland Clary, from somewhere down around the Savannah area. All of those men, now, were members of the legislature with the exception of Jim Keat from Thomasville, and he was the head of the county commissioners association, but he was an elected official. And I'm just pointing out that all of the members of that committee were elected to their positions. They were all politicians with the exception of John Duncan, and I still feel John's heart went with the majority, but he voted with his organization.

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Henderson: Now, during your committee deliberations, was there any effort coming from outside forces to try to influence the decision one way or the other.

Rankin: Absolutely. I can't speak for the other men, but, uh . . . . Gosh, what was the name of the lieutenant governor at that time? Van Geer? Geer?

Henderson: Peter Zack Geer [Jr.].

Rankin: Peter Zack Geer. Well, you know what a segregationist Peter Zack is, and all I know is that the city manager of the city of Tifton, Shell Hartley. . . . The existence of the committee was almost over, and we were together one Saturday when I was home. He [Shell Hartley] had some city business to talk with the paper about. And he said, "By the way, Homer, Peter Zack Geer's been over here, putting all kind of pressure on me to get to you to get be sure you go with the minority on this vote." And he said, "I just told him that Whoo! I didn't have the nerve to tell Homer Rankin that. He'd throw me out of the office." [Laughter] And so I

passed it on to John Sibley, and when Griffin Bell came in the office one day--this is John's private office--I never had met Griffin, and John introduced me to him. He said, "Homer, tell Griffin about Peter Zack," and so I told him. Griffin looked at me, and then a little smile came on his face, and he never said a word. But I was led to believe that Peter Zack was active throughout the area, exerting pressure on these people.

Henderson: Did you ever hear of any other member indicating that there was some pressure being applied?

Rankin: No, I didn't, other than what John Duncan said about the strong feeling within his Georgia Farm Bureau group.

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Henderson: Did Governor Vandiver in any way, either directly or indirectly, try to influence the direction of the committee?

Rankin: I'll tell you what, exactly the opposite. He went into hibernation. You know, he claimed, and I never did know whether he did or not, to have had a little heart flare-up. I know that something came up that--and I can't even remember what it was, Hal. Something came up that Mr. Sibley said, "Well, we need to call, we need to get through to Ernie and ask him about this." And he tried his best through Griffin Bell and Ernie's office and all of John Sibley's contacts. He never could get through to Ernie. So Ernie, as far as I know, he stayed completely out of it.

End of Side One

Side Two

Henderson: Looking back on it now, what do you see as the importance of this committee to the history of the state of Georgia?

Rankin: Well, I think that the idea of having it was brilliant, in that it brought about a year's delay on Judge Hooper implementing his desegregation orders. He was perfectly happy to do it. I think he had indicated that he was going to give the legislature a chance to act, and if they showed good faith that he would work along with them. And I think when they came up with this plan and put the quality of person on it that they did, particularly John Sibley, but, you know, Harmon [White] Caldwell was on there and Bob [Robert O.] Arnold and Claude [Lamar] Purcell, the state school superintendent. When you put these people on there . . . and the heads of these organizations were well respected in their organizations, John Duncan and [unintelligible], the PTA [Parent/Teacher Association] groups. At any rate, when they were placed on there, I think he was satisfied that the legislature had done everything he wanted of them, and then to give the people a chance to speak out, and it gave the legislature a chance to find out.

Now, you know, all of the hearings were recorded, and when the hearings were over, the recordings were turned over to a research firm in Atlanta, who then recorded them statistically. And while it turned out that about 60 percent of the voices spoke in favor of total segregation, it was a shock to many politicians to find that there were 40 percent out there like that lady who spoke up about her children. So then the women came out of the woodwork and the closets and came to those meetings and were almost unanimous in favor of saying we're going to keep our schools open. Public education is the way to go. You can't do it with private schools, so that the creation of the committee was brilliantly conceived. The legislature came through by putting it into resolution and selecting people that would satisfy Judge Hooper. They went out into the world of Georgia and they found out what the public thought. They found out the give

and take that was out there, the wide group of people that were willing to do something. Even those who were dead set against integration realized that something had to be done, and many of them showed that they could live with some degree of integration, if it was done properly.

So the result was that after that day I never felt that a politician ever had to run for office screaming "nigger, nigger" again. He was able to run without making that bland and very stupid statement to try to gain votes. He could do it without that, and to my recollection most of them did. It was not a part of a campaign thereafter. It also gave the people of Georgia a feeling that they had been given an opportunity to participate and to have their voices heard. And when the majority and minority opinions were published, that they had an opportunity to realize that what they said actually went into the decisions that were made.

I think you always find that you have a certain amount of leadership in every area, whether it be a city or a county or a district or a state. And the leadership usually is leading the others along, and certainly in this case the majority of the committee did not speak with what the majority of Georgians said, but they spoke with what they felt was best for the school system and the education of the children and the future of the state. Of course, there was a shotgun pointed at them to boot.

And then the last benefit from it was that Georgia was able to set about on a desegregation course without the riots and the alarm that other states experienced. I think Georgia had a beautiful record of desegregation. I think Tift County had a beautiful record of desegregation, you know, after the first handful of students entered the high school. I remember, Hal, there was a little disturbance over there, minor disturbance one morning. My wife usurped my editorial privileges that day. She was managing editor, but she said, "I'm

going to write the editorial for tomorrow, and I'm going to put it on page one." And she told those youngsters off--I don't mean the editorial did it, but there was never any other squabble the whole rest of the year. I think we ended up with a very peaceable and harmonious growth toward more and more desegregation in Tift County. We never had to have court orders telling us what to do, and I think that Georgia, almost Georgia as a whole, benefited from this course having been taken.

Henderson: You are from a rural county in south Georgia. Do you receive any criticism or flak because of your position on the committee?

Rankin: I never had anybody had enough guts to tell me to my face, but I heard some reports about that "nigger-loving son of a bitch." But when I heard who said it I considered it a compliment. I had one friend of mine on the street make a friendly remark to me that did not criticize me but indicated he possibly was a little concerned about what lay ahead. But I never had anyone confront me or call me to task on it, and that's what I appreciated from my people here in Tift County.

Henderson: Why do you think Ernest Vandiver, who campaigned as a strong segregationist, who promised "no, not one," when it finally comes down to it, he goes before the legislature and he says we will go along with, in effect, the Sibley report recommendation. Why do you think he changed?

Rankin: Well, Hal, I have to tell you first that I never knew Ernie personally. I have no idea what his own personal down deep belief was. You know, there're many people who've lived in a rural area for a long time like Ernie did that never got over totally accepting the, you know, the black. My own wife's father called them niggers up 'til the last day of his death and

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didn't mind if they were in the room. He never thought it was an insult; it just was language. I think Ernie ran under that phrase, I always thought it was "not now, no, never" or "never one" or whatever the phrase was, because he felt he had to do it to get elected, is what I thought. I think he thought all the remarks being made by the opposition made it necessary, but I think he was wrong and I think his people felt he was wrong.

So number one, I don't think that fully stated his position as such, but coming down to when he faced up to the lick-log and went before the legislature, I think he knew that if he didn't, all hell would break loose in Georgia, that it was the only way that Georgia could go. And I think he had the respect for John Sibley that he could see the wisdom of it, and in addition to that I think the Sibley Committee report gave him another leg to stand on. You know, one of the things that made our studies possible was that John Sibley said that he wanted to know about what the other states had done who had faced this problem. All of a sudden Atlanta's facing it. What did Arkansas do? What did Virginia do?

And so I suggested that I could prevail upon former FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] agents, now retired, to possibly offer their services to go into those areas. I said we have an organization of ex-agents that often do services for one another, sometimes gratuitously and sometimes for pay. And back in those days a fellow who did something for somebody else where he was going to charge for it charged about fifty dollars a day plus expenses.

And so he gave the go-ahead on it, and I was able to line up former FBI agents who were residents of the state of Georgia, who were gracious enough to agree to give their time to go. I tell you one of them who did it was Billy Lee of Albany, an attorney over there, a former

member of the legislature who was at that time practicing law, and I think he also was the solicitor general of Dougherty county at one time. Billy went to Arkansas. Another gentleman from north of Atlanta went up to Virginia, and one of the men from Valdosta, a fellow named Homer Franklin, went to another state for us.

Anyway, these agents went out and they submitted beautiful reports on exactly what transpired in that state. They talked to the politicians; they talked to the school board members; they talked to bankers; they talked to individual teachers; they talked to students, some of those who had gone through the actual integration process. And their reports were, I thought, masterpieces on exactly what happened in every state, and the committee was able to see the way it was handled. What began to come out of it was that of all things that had been tried in various states, resistance was not it, and that freedom of choice seemed to bring about a solution.

One of the problems up in Virginia was devastating where they simply closed down the schools, and the rich kids went to private schools and the poor kids were without education. I don't remember for what period, but if it was for a month it was too long. But it seemed to me like it was somewhere between six months and a year. But it was of the greatest benefit to the committee.

Henderson: You were a newspaperman during the Vandiver administration. What was your impression of the Vandiver administration and Ernest Vandiver as a governor?

Rankin: You know, I didn't know him personally. My wife had known him at Georgia--incidentally, Calhoun [Austin] Bowen [Sr.], who died here a little while ago, I think was a roommate of his at one time, and his wife, Helen Dee [Bateman Calhoun], might, Hal, know a

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lot of personal information, Helen D. Bowen, Mrs. Calhoun Bowen. I didn't know Ernie, but my impression of his administration was that he was working as hard and fast as he could to clean up the mess. The investigations were begun as to the wrong ways of the Griffin administration. There were investigations. As you know, there were prosecutions. There were convictions obtained. And he set out as best he could to clean out the bad spots and put the state on an honest basis where integrity ruled instead of greed. That's the feeling I had with him all the way through, what little contact I had with him.

Henderson: Let me go back to Governor [Samuel Ernest] Griffin [Sr.]. While he was governor, there was an adversarial relationship between the press and the governor. Did that adversarial relationship improve, or did it not exist in the Vandiver administration?

Rankin: Well, Hal, number one, our relationship with the Vandiver administration, that which I knew, was very open and aboveboard. If we wanted information, we got it. You know, Governor Griffin was a newspaperman, the glad-handedness man you ever saw, the most likable cuss in the world. His son [Samuel Marvin Griffin, Jr.], incidentally, right now is one of the outstanding small town newspapermen in the country. He's the president of what used to be known as the National Editorial Association. I forget what it's called now, but it's the national association of small newspapers. He's still publishing *The Bainbridge [Post-]Searchlight* down there, a young man of tremendous integrity and past president of the Georgia Press Association.

I never felt an adversarial relationship with the Griffin administration. I don't know what the *Atlanta Journal* and that group felt. I really can't answer that. I know that we didn't feel an adversarial relationship. I never had that much occasion to try to get through the walls

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of Atlanta, but when I did I was always able to do it either with a call or through our own representative, Henry [W.] Bostick.

Henderson: In your opinion, what were the major accomplishments of the Vandiver administration?

Rankin: I would say that the major accomplishment was to put the government of the state back on a totally respectful basis. It appeared to me that the monies of the state were being used wisely, that Governor Vandiver had taken strong steps to make sure there was nothing being siphoned off in those ways that sometimes happen in state government. I felt that he was doing what he thought was best for the state. To give one example of it, and that is that the second district highway department. . . . Tifton was not the geographical center of it, but it was the logical place for the headquarters of the second district. Tift county was one of three counties that voted against him, but he still okayed the building of a district headquarters here in Tifton, because it was the logical place to put it due to the transportation facilities for the department of transportation. It's now called the highway second district headquarters.

He established a good, clean, workable relationship with his legislature. I remember him as working through this desegregation period very calmly and enabling the changes to be made by getting cooperation in every way that he could, which to me was one of the real critical times in the state, and it was brought about very smoothly.

Henderson: Were you ever around him on a personal basis or where you could carry on a conversation with him? And if you did, what was your impression with him? Is he an open type person, a friendly personality? Could you speak to that?

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Rankin: Well, I think--yes, I had some occasion, not a lot. The governor always came to the meeting of the press association to give a state of the state address. It was usually the president's job to pick him up at the airport and drive him to the hotel and sort of be his chaperon, if you can call it that, until he's placed back on the plane heading for Atlanta. Of course, my wife knew him, and so during that period of time when we would pick him up and take him to the plane, [he was] very open and warm and friendly, congenial, and interested in your organization while he was here. When he spoke he was always very impressive in speaking to the press association. He spoke to them every year.

We were hoping to bring the national editorial association to Georgia for its seventy-fifth anniversary. Ernie flew to Chicago to issue the invitation personally to the previous meeting, and [he was] very, very popular with the editors that were there, and he was accorded the principal address at one of the meetings, at which time he extended this invitation. [He] drew a lot of laughter for his humor and a lot of comment for his warmth and a lot of applause when he was over with, a very personable person.

Henderson: In 1972 he runs for the U.S. Senate and he's unsuccessful. What do you think happened there?

Rankin: Hal, I don't remember what could have happened. I just have no recollection of what happened to him there. Who beat him?

Henderson: Well, eventually Sam Nunn went on to the Senate.

Rankin: Yeah.

Henderson: I want to thank you for this interview. It has been most enlightening. Thank you very much.

Rankin: I enjoyed it, Hal. Thank you.

End of Side Two

END OF INTERVIEW

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