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OH Vandiver 15
Vanna Elizabeth Vandiver Interviewed by Dr. Harold Paulk Henderson
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EDITED BY DR. HENDERSON

Side One

Henderson: This is an interview with Vanna Elizabeth Vandiver, better known as Beth Vandiver. The date is February 27, 1994, and this interview is taking place at Governor Vandiver's home in Lavonia. My name is Dr. Hal Henderson. Good afternoon, Beth.

Vandiver: Good afternoon.

Henderson: I appreciate you granting me this interview.

Vandiver: You're certainly welcome.

Henderson: Let me begin by asking you a question pertaining to your father [Samuel Ernest Vandiver, Jr.]. How would you describe your father as a person and as a parent?

Vandiver: I think he's always been a wonderful guide in that he will show you the correct way to be through his actions, and that is [unintelligible]--he's probably the most honest person I've ever known. He will not tell a falsehood, and he's always taught me to be real straightforward in how I deal with people, and honest too. And, sure enough, it has turned out for the best. I mean, it's turned out to be a real good way to live my life, I've found. It's been helpful 'cause you don't have to worry about what you did. [Laughter] You know, you always know what you did.

Henderson: Okay. Let me ask you the same question relative to your mother [Sybil Elizabeth Russell Vandiver]. How would you describe her as a person and as a parent?

Vandiver: That's hard. Well, we're very similar in personality. She has always shown me-- she's been a wonderful parent. [She's] been a very loving mother. I can't speak highly enough of her. She's always there to help you out, and I try to be like her because, you know, I know how much she's meant to me and other people that she's known. You know, I try to be a lot like my mother. She always knows how to have lots of fun, [laughter] and she finds the fun things in almost everything, and that's also something I like to try to do.

Henderson: What influence do you think your father has had on your life?

Vandiver: Well, it's like I said before, you know, just by watching how he acts. I find myself wanting to say how they act because I almost think of them as a unit together because how they act, you know, they show you how you should be, and they've always been a good example. I mean, you know, we've had our disagreements in the past, but it's turned out that they were right. They really did know [laughter] a lot more than I did when we disagreed. They're just a good influence. I mean, they show you how to do, and if you do make a mistake, they're always there to pick you up, and, you know, and just say, "Well, let's go on from here. Now what are we going to do now?" And it's been a help. [Laughter] It's always been nice to know you have that support behind you.

Henderson: What were some of the most supporting values that your father passed on to you? You mentioned honesty and [being] forthright. What are some other values that he passed on to you?

Vandiver: Well, I think it sort of all goes together, you know. A lot of them sound like clichés these days, but, you know, a man's word is his bond. You treat people right. I get this from my mother too. I always say, "Well, my life's motto is the Golden Rule: Do unto others

as you would. . . ." [Laughter] Oh, Hal, I can't think of it, but we know what it is: "As you would have them do unto you." I just, you know, I try to go like that.

Mama and I are conservative money-wise. We're [laughter] penny pinchers, and Daddy has tried to teach me--it's kind of like penny-wise, pound-foolish, that in the long run, you know, you would do better to get good value from the start than have to get, like, I mean, it's just, he's helped me a lot to not be such a penny-pincher [laughter]. And I have seen it's true. You do better that way. I told you. I'm getting Betty disease. [Laughter]

Henderson: That's all right.

Vandiver: No it's not. [Laughter]

Henderson: Well, you mentioned your mother. What were the most important values that you think your mother passed on to you, tried to instill in you?

Vandiver: Always be kind to other people and really sort of put yourself in other people's shoes. Don't be judgmental. I was laughing about this yesterday, that words we couldn't say in our home, you know, when we were little, the words that we couldn't say were "stupid" and "shut-up." And that basically, I mean, I think it sort of sums it all up. You don't call somebody else stupid. That's unkind, it's mean, and you don't say shut-up, that everybody's going to have their say-so, and all like that. [Laughter]

Henderson: When your father was the governor, the Vandivers had a three children family. Who was the disciplinarian in the family? Was it your mother, or was it your father, or was it a combination of the two?

Vandiver: It was a combination. [Laughter] Well, he was gone a lot. He was so busy working, but he came home every night, but he was gone a lot, and so the little day-to-day

discipline--Mama did a lot of it, but also, we had Fanny Smith who worked at the mansion at that time, and she was our babysitter and the housekeeper. And she was a strong disciplinarian too. So there was always somebody around [laughter] to discipline us.

Henderson: Did your mother or father ever [unintelligible] or take a switch to a child who did something that they really shouldn't do?

Vandiver: I have gotten a spanking or two in my time. [Laughter]

Henderson: How would you describe the marriage of your parents?

Vandiver: I can't imagine them without each other. I mean, they have a wonderful marriage. It's very traditional like in the old sense. You think: the wife stays at home and the husband goes out at work and works. But they're real happy, and I can't imagine either one of them without the other one, you know. They're so complimentary. They go together real well.

Henderson: Let's go back to the time you were in the governor's mansion. Describe how it is growing up in the governor's mansion.

Vandiver: Well, [laughter] we just treated it like any house. I mean, you notice not too long after that they had to build a new mansion, and I say, " Well, we had something [laughter] to do with it." It was all right. I liked it. 'Course, I always loved Lavonia. I loved over here too, and so it was okay. When you're a child, so often you just take things as they come. You don't really sit down and think about it. We had, like I was saying, we had our little friends over, and we would play. We were just basically a normal family. That's another thing that I have always, well, admired when I look back. At the time I didn't think about it, but how our family has always--we just take our unit as we go, and then we just fit in wherever we are. We don't change our circumstances according to where we are, and so to me it was just like a big

upheaval. Now Jane [Brevard Vandiver Kidd] wasn't in school when we first got up there, so she would go out back to the little office where the troopers were, and she got to be good friends with the little troopers, and she'd put on shows for them [laughter] and everything. But I was in third grade. I was too old for that, so I just went on to school. It was just like another house. It was just in Atlanta.

Henderson: Describe the house for us. Was it a large house?

Vandiver: It was a big stone house, and it was--it wasn't bigger than this house, but it was a big stone house. It had beautiful chandeliers. It had some elaborate things. It had two staircases. I remember we were real impressed with that. It had a back staircase and a front staircase. At the top of the house there was a long hall, you know, and the bedrooms went off to the side of the long hall. Now, I don't know if I should tell you this, but I will. When I think of that long hall, when I was, oh, I guess, ten or eleven, I fell in love with horses. And so we used to set up suitcases. We would put all the luggage out in the hall, and we would run from one end of the hall to the other and jump over the suitcases. [Laughter] It was crazy.

Then one time--they did have these lovely satin quilts, and we were rough on the quilts. We would sit at the top of the steps. One person would sit on the quilt and the other person would pull the quilt down the steps. It was something like a circus ride, a joy ride, something like that. We had a great time. [Laughter]

Henderson: Did you realize that your father was governor, and did that influence your childhood in any way, the fact that Ernest Vandiver, your father, was governor of the state of Georgia?

Vandiver: Well, it did in some ways in that it made me more determined. I always just sort of wanted to fit in with everybody else, and it made me more determined not to let it influence me. As a matter of fact, I would get resentful if anybody brought it up and tried to make a big deal over me. I mean, it was kind of bad [laughter] there for a while. I would almost say, "Nope, he's not my father. I'm not related to him except maybe distantly." [Laughter] I was almost to the verge of doing that just because I was shy in those days. I was shy up 'til about tenth grade, and then I got more outgoing. But it would make me embarrassed if anybody singled me out from my other classmates in the school.

Henderson: What did the Vandiver family do for rest and relaxation?

Vandiver: We went up to Lake Lanier. We had a houseboat, and we would go up there on the weekends, and, oh, we had the best time. We'd go fishing. We had a little speedboat too. We'd go fishing. Well, I remember going out on the weekend, and we'd go out to the lake, and we would anchor out in the middle of the lake sometimes, and it was so calm and quiet and peaceful out there. The water was just like glass, and we'd have a barbecue and a picnic. We'd have fried chicken and potato salad and [laughter] pimento cheese. We had a great time. We'd go swimming out there. It was so much fun.

Henderson: Did the governor's mansion have any of the amenities like a tennis court, or a swimming pool, or an indoor gymnasium?

Vandiver: Well, it had overgrown tennis courts. We never played on [laughter] them. I used to think, when I was in my horse loving period, I used think I would put my horse down at the tennis courts, you know, 'cause had the big high fence. I thought, "Now, they could stay down there. That would be okay." We didn't have a gym; we didn't have a swimming pool, but

we did have a long, curvy driveway that we would ride our bicycles up and down. The only problem was [that] it was so steep it was real high from the top of the big hill. It was kind of hard to go up and down.

Henderson: Now, is this where you kept your horse? I mean, did you keep the horse at the governor's mansion?

Vandiver: No, I didn't get my horse 'til we moved back over here. Then I did get him. We were the same age, and he lived 'til he was thirty. I was twelve and he was twelve, and he lived that much longer. He liked the country life [laughter].

Henderson: Your father was a politician. What did you like most about politics, and what did you like least about politics?

Vandiver: Oh, gosh. Well, I always say now I would never want to be a politician because there's always somebody that's mad at you. You can do the best you know to do, and there's always a certain segment of the population that's mad. They don't like it; they think you're utterly wrong, and how could you have made such a dumb decision? At the time what I didn't like about it is that he would always talk about crooked politicians, and I'd want to say, "No! They're not all crooked. My daddy's not a crook!"

What I liked best about it. . . . I wasn't wild about politics. It was sort of exciting to go to rallies, but I always hated when they made the family stand up. Oh, that was the worst, and I remember one time I crossed arms and sighed real big like I was so put upon having to stand up. That's one time. You know, it didn't enter in. . . . There were lots of important happenings during those times, but to me it didn't sink in until after, until I got a little bit more grown-up. I

guess I was so intent on just, you know, being one of the guys that I just didn't pay attention to it.

We got to meet a lot of people with politics. You know, they had a lot of good friends, and people would come over to the house. That was sort of nice, but still, thinking back, one thing I always didn't like is I was so afraid that people would treat me differently because of who my father was that they wouldn't just see me, or they would, you know, always--I don't like insincerity. So I always afraid somebody would, you know, just sort of--well, grown-ups would do it. Children wouldn't do it more, but I was always afraid somebody would be nice to me because of that.

Henderson: Your father being governor, did you ever resent the fact that he was dealing with state affairs so much that he didn't have time to spend with his children, or did he make time to spend with his children?

Vandiver: Oh, I would say he made time to spend with us. I mean, he was gone a lot, but I don't remember anytime that I felt like he was neglecting us. I never felt that because he did . . . we all ate dinner every night, you know, together, and I'm sure there were some nights that he wasn't there. When I think back I think, oh, we all ate dinner every night, so I didn't feel that at all.

Henderson: Do you recall the happiest occasion while you were living in the governor's mansion that you had?

Vandiver: Hmm. No, we were pretty happy all the time. I was glad when we got to come back [to Lavonia] 'cause I always liked it out here, you know, but we did have a good time when we went to the presidential inauguration. That was fun when we got to ride up on the

train. We were all up there. My cousin Ann [Campbell Russell Parker] is close to my age. She was there too, and it was just like a big party in Washington. But I wouldn't say that was the happiest time. It was just one that stands out in my mind.

Henderson: How would you describe your father's personality? Was he a person easy to be around, jovial, was he a happy person?

Vandiver: Well, he is happy, but I would say he's reserved, and he's lots of fun once you get to know him and he eases up with you, but he's very reserved. He doesn't open up right at first when you get to know him. I mean, of course, I've known him forever, so it's hard for me to say, but I just watch with other people. He's a lot more--he's real cautious in his dealings with people in that, you know, I guess he just wants to wait and see, to make sure everything's all right. He's very careful. Like I said, he's very honest. If he gives you his word, it's gone. I mean, you know, you've got it, but he's the opposite from my mother in that she's real lively, you know, and outgoing right from the first, and he's more cautious. He's more conservative and reserved, and so they're just two sides of the coin, I always think.

Henderson: Do you ever recall him getting angry with a politician or a state official about anything?

Vandiver: I just didn't pay attention. He is a tease, I will say that. He used to tease me, and it took me a while. He would always tease me 'cause I'd get upset. Sometimes I thought he carried it too far, but now I think that. . . I do it myself [laughter].

Henderson: Do you remember grandparents?

Vandiver: I remember my mother's mother real well. She just died a few years ago. I remember my mother's father barely. He had cancer when I was young, and he died when I was

four. And I do remember he used to give us coffee with milk in it. Oh, we would love to go stand by Papa's chair and have that coffee and milk. We thought we were grown-up [laughter].

Henderson: Your mother is a member of one of the most influential families in Georgia politics in history. What is it like being a member of the Russell family?

Vandiver: There's a bunch of us [laughter]. It's like there's a mob every year at the reunion. Well, this is something else with Uncle Dick [Richard Brevard Russell, Jr.]. I didn't pay any attention to him 'til just recently. I was going back and reading--we got this book that was called *Colleagues* that was about Uncle Dick's years in Washington. And I went back and read it, and it was really interesting to read it as a grown-up and say, "Oh, so that's what was going on," because I didn't know, in those days. I just didn't pay attention, just like with Daddy. Being a member of the Russell family [laughter], well, we always had sometimes, since our last name isn't Russell, we would play with our cousins, you know, and some people would be the cheerleaders, and they would always say, "Russells have muscles." Well, we couldn't say that since we were Vandivers. So we said, "Vandivers have stamina," [laughter] and I just think, "Well, that about sums it up right there."

Henderson: Did you ever help your father campaign in any way when he was running for office?

Vandiver: No, I think I probably was a hindrance [laughter]. I probably was because I stood up, you know, and I was not real fond of politics my whole life. And it's not because I felt like they were taking away. The race I can remember, I remember I intentionally didn't campaign 'cause I didn't want them to move to Washington. The senate race, the last time? Now Jane was all in it, and other friends, you know, that I have, they were in it, but I just am not one that--

that has not been my main interest, although it is funny because I love history. You know, I love to read about it as long it's at one removed. I don't like to be right--I don't like to live it, but I like to read about it [laughter].

Henderson: Now, let's see. How old were you when your father ran for governor in 1958?

Vandiver: I was eight--seven, turned eight in October.

Henderson: So you probably didn't spend too much time reading about the campaign?

Vandiver: Oh, no. We used to have, um . . . sing that little theme song, the campaign theme song. I forget. What was that man's name . . . [William Turner] Bodenhamer [Sr.]?

Henderson: Bodenhamer.

Vandiver: He was sort of the villain of that year, I think, in that it was such an unusual name. I mean, I still say, "Who's ever heard of anyone named that?" Even to this day that's the only person I've ever heard with that name.

Henderson: Now let me ask you: Is there anything else you'd like to say about your father or your mother?

Vandiver: I love them both. You know, I appreciate them so much recently. I work in the middle school and I see children who don't have what I've always had, and I wish, you know, I could just let them have it. I try to note that there are people that they could come to and they can depend on, but seeing people who don't have it, it makes me appreciate the fact that I did have it even more.

Henderson: Well, Beth, I want to thank you for this interview. It's been most delightful.

Vandiver: Well, thank you [laughter]. I've enjoyed it, and I did do a little bit of rambling. I said I wasn't going to, but I did [laughter]. But you sort of have to . . .

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