

Harold Paulk Henderson, Sr. Oral History Collection  
OH Vandiver 20  
William Herbert Bonner Interviewed by Dr. Harold Paulk Henderson  
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**EDITED BY DR. HENDERSON**

Side One

Henderson: This is an interview with Dr. William Herbert Bonner in his home in Athens, Georgia. The date is March 19, 1994, and my name is Dr. Hal Henderson. Good morning, Dr. Bonner.

Bonner: Good morning, Dr. Henderson.

Henderson: Thank you very much for granting me this interview.

Bonner: It's my pleasure.

Henderson: I understand that you grew up in Lavonia with Ernest Vandiver. Please describe for me Lavonia, Georgia, in your childhood.

Bonner: Lavonia, Georgia, was a small town, approximately fifteen hundred people, cotton being one of the outstanding industries. My father worked for the Southern Cotton Oil Company. Ernest's father worked for the Vandiver Seed Company and sold cottonseed all over the state, as well as ran a cotton gin and had extensive land holdings in the area.

Henderson: What was the size of the population back then? Do you recall?

Bonner: Fifteen hundred people, more or less.

Henderson: As far as the racial composition, did you have any blacks living in Lavonia?

Bonner: Oh, yes, we had blacks living in Lavonia, but, of course, we didn't divide them up then. They just were there, and [we] didn't know any percentages. They worked for us regularly, and we had blacks at home, at the mill. The Vandivers had black servants too.

Henderson: Please discuss for me your recollection of Governor Vandiver's parents. What were they like?

Bonner: His mother was a most charming woman. We would go to her house for spend-the-day parties, and she was always very pleasant, a real Southern lady. Mr. [Samuel Ernest] Vandiver [Sr.] seemed to us an older man--to me--an older man than my father, and he was, approximately maybe ten to fifteen years older. I looked upon him as more a grandfather-type person rather than a fatherly person. But he was a businessman and not as much a social person as Mrs. [Vanna Bowers Osborne] Vandiver.

Henderson: Now when you say he was a businessman, describe that for me. What do you mean by that?

Bonner: He had an office, a little office, close to his home, and worked out of this small office. His gin was close to his home, and you didn't see him except usually on business. You didn't see him socially.

Henderson: Were they considered community leaders, and were they considered well to do in Lavonia?

Bonner: They were unquestionably community leaders and among the more well to do people in town.

Henderson: What were some of their activities as far as community leadership? Do you recall?

Bonner: Mrs. Vandiver was a UDC worker, UDC meaning United Daughters of the Confederacy. She was on that. She was quite active in the Woman's Club, and that was a

woman's civic organization. Mr. Vandiver, I can't tell you; I don't remember what his position was, other than he was a prominent man with money and people looked up to him.

Henderson: Do you recall him being involved in politics in any way?

Bonner: Yes, he, come to think of it, was on Eugene Talmadge's. . . .

Henderson: Highway Board?

Bonner: Highway Board is what he was on. He was a member of the Highway Board under Eugene Talmadge when he was governor.

Henderson: You were a classmate of [Samuel] Ernest Vandiver [Jr.] during grammar school and high school.

Bonner: That's correct. We were classmates for eleven years.

Henderson: Describe Ernest Vandiver for me as a student in Lavonia public schools.

Bonner: He was a good student. He was quite competitive. He worked to make as good a marks as the rest of us, and he and I were quite competitive, and on certain occasions his daddy offered a prize to the one who got the best grades. We worked at this--primarily in grammar school, of course, not in high school.

Henderson: How large a high school was it? How large a grammar school was it?

Bonner: We had in the neighborhood of twenty to thirty students in the classes when we were in grammar school and about the same number in high school. However, there were, when we graduated, I think they were about nineteen of us that graduated from high school. This was in 1935.

Henderson: Now this was from Lavonia high school?

Bonner: This was from Lavonia high school. It was a--I guess you wouldn't call it a private school; it was a city school, not affiliated with the county, all done through the city government.

Henderson: Looking back on your time with the governor, would you describe his childhood as typical? Was he a typical young boy growing up in the South?

Bonner: Oh, yes, he was quite typical. The main thing that set him apart was each summer he went to a private boys' camp up in the mountains, and none of the rest of us had enough money to go to that camp. But outside of that he was on the par with the rest of us.

Henderson: Do you recall any humorous experiences that happened with Ernest Vandiver and perhaps you, or during childhood?

Bonner: Let me think what you'd consider a humorous experience. I can remember going to his house and he had a big, homemade sliding board, and we would have a big time sliding down that sliding board. We would get bread wrappers to use to wax the slideboard to make it go faster. We would slide down on them and then slide down fast.

Henderson: What were some of the extracurricular activities that you could engage while you were at Lavonia high school?

Bonner: Of course, they played football, and he played football. I didn't play football. You had--I can't remember whether we any other activities that were particular. We had, of course, the junior/senior proms. We had prom parties that we went to. We belonged to--they had what was called a glee club. We'd sing in that. Ernest was a more an elocution student. He took elocution lessons while a lot of us took music and piano lessons. But he took this; it was sort of in preparation, they said, for his becoming a politician.

Henderson: Did he ever discuss with you while going to high school a possibility that he had higher political aspirations?

Bonner: Oh, yes, that was known all the time that his daddy had aspirations for him, and it was always talked up that Ernest was going to be governor one of these days [laughter].

Henderson: Did he ever discuss that, that he wanted to be governor?

Bonner: I'm not sure that he did. I think it was all through his father that we knew this.

Henderson: How would you describe his personality as a young boy?

Bonner: Oh, he was very pleasant, very outgoing, energetic, smart young man, and always popular. Everybody thought a lot of Ernest.

Henderson: Would you describe him as an introverted personality, an extroverted personality, or somewhere in-between?

Bonner: Well, if you had to classify him, he would be more extroverted than introverted.

Henderson: Do you recall any occasion where he got in trouble with the teacher over anything and perhaps was disciplined for that?

Bonner: No, I don't think so. I mean, he was not one that gave the teacher any problems. He did his lessons and knew them and was never reprimanded, that I can remember.

Henderson: Did he succumb to any vices, such as smoking or chewing or things like that, that perhaps his mother did not approve of?

Bonner: I can't remember that we did, any of us. You see, this was in the Depression. We didn't have any money, and it was a small town. I can't remember any of us picking up any of the vices.

Henderson: What do you do for entertainment growing up in a small town like Lavonia?

Bonner: You go to the picture show; we had a picture show. At first the picture show was out of town and you'd have to go, and I don't think he went as often as the rest of us because his daddy, being a little older, didn't go, but a lot of us would go to Hartwell or Toccoa. But later they opened a picture show in Lavonia, and you would go to the picture show. As I say, you would have parties around at houses--not very often though. 'Course, you'd have church activities. He went to the First Baptist Church, and we had BYPU [Baptist Young People's Union] on Sunday night, and we would go to that more as a social activity than church activity.

'Course, you also liked to get the car, if you could, and just ride around in the car. This was when we got to be--course, you didn't have to be sixteen then to drive, and you didn't have to have a driver's license. We had another member in the class whose father was a--Dill Harrison was his name, and his father had an automobile agency, and Dill could get cars. So Dill would get the car and we'd ride up to Toccoa or sometimes. . . .

Henderson: Did Governor Vandiver have his own car or did he borrow his father's?

Bonner: He must have borrowed his father's. I don't remember his having--certainly he didn't his car in high school. [Pause] Whether he even had a car in college, I don't know because, when I was in school, there were only one or two boys who had cars, and their daddy owned the picture show in Columbus. I can't remember their names, but very few people had cars.

Henderson: Was he interested in such things as hunting and fishing?

Bonner: Yep. I can remember that he would go dove hunting, and would come back talking about going dove hunting. Don't know about fishing.

Henderson: Did he pick up this knack for hunting from his father, or is this just something he on his own did?

Bonner: He must have picked it up on his own because I can't remember his father being a hunter.

Henderson: Did he have responsibilities around the home or at his father's business that he had to take care of?

Bonner: Uh. . . .

Henderson: I realize this has been years ago.

Bonner: It's been years ago and I can't remember how much--I think his father wanted him to be interested in the business. He didn't spend a whole lot of time with it though, that I can remember.

Henderson: But do you recall that he was very popular with his classmates?

Bonner: Oh, yes, he was very popular with his classmates.

Henderson: And would you consider him a leader among his classmates?

Bonner: Oh, yes, I would consider him a leader among his classmates. Again, we had such a few [students] that it was not hard [laughter] to be a leader.

Henderson: Some of his friends and his critics point out that his personality had two traits that sort of stood out: one was that he tended to be rather frugal, and one was he had a tinge of stubbornness. Did you ever see either one of these?

Bonner: Well, of course, I think the frugality dates from the fact that we grew up in the Depression, and, to this day, we still watch our pennies. I'm sure he feels the same way about money. The stubbornness? Can't say that I can remember anything that would classify him as being stubborn.

Henderson: Do you think some of this frugality was passed on from his father, or is this just something that he acquired because of the depression?

Bonner: No, I guess it was from his father. His father was a businessman who watched his money.

Henderson: Was his father proud of Ernest Vandiver?

Bonner: Nobody's ever been prouder of his son than [laughter] his father was, and showed it. I mean, lots of people are certainly proud of their sons, but Mr. Vandiver was quite proud of Ernest . . . and his mother was too, but in a different sort of way. His mother was not as pushy as Mr. Vandiver was. She didn't make him go out and do things, but Mr. Vandiver was the one that encouraged him to learn all these things, and do all things, and take all these extra things, and, as I say, send him off to private school, feeling that he did not get quite enough education in Lavonia, and that an extra year at Darlington would help him to do better at the university.

Henderson: Now, at Lavonia did you just have eleven grades?

Bonner: We had eleven grades.

Henderson: I see. Most governors who are lawyers, they tend to stay in Atlanta and practice with a large firm there. Why do you think Ernest Vandiver came back to Lavonia?

Bonner: Well, of course, didn't he come to Winder after he finished his education, and set up practice in Winder first, as I remember? It was from Winder that he did his electioneering, and didn't come back to Lavonia, as I remember it, until after he finished his governorship. Is that not your. . . ?

Henderson: That's true, but I was saying that most governors, once they're in Atlanta, they tend to stay over there if they're lawyers, and they practice in Atlanta. Did he have such a love for Lavonia that he wanted to come back and live there?

Bonner: Well, of course, that was part of it I think, and part of it, he's supposed to have had enough land and business that he would look after that. I'm not sure how much law he did in Lavonia after he came back. Do you know that?

Henderson: He did practice law.

Bonner: Yeah, but did he do much work?

Henderson: I'm not sure.

Bonner: I don't really [laughter]--I think, as I say, I think he looked after his business, but I'm not sure he was a workingman when you consider a lawyer. He did things, yeah, but. . .

Henderson: Do you recall his father not only being a businessman but owning a great deal of land?

Bonner: Oh, yes, yes, he owned a lot of land, and grew his cotton on this land, and ginned this cotton, and from this cotton sold the seed. As a child in grammar school, Mr. Vandiver took a spring vacation to Hot Springs, Arkansas, each year to take the water treatments, and he would take Ernest with him. There was discussion as to whether Ernest could manage to miss that much school to go with his father during the spring term. But it was

felt that Ernest was smart enough that he could not be hurt by missing these two weeks that he went with his daddy out to Arkansas. But this was in the third, fourth, fifth, sixth grades, as I can remember. It may have been. . . .

Henderson: Did the Vandivers go on numerous trips?

Bonner: This was the only trip that I know about. As I say, in the summer Ernest went to this summer camp and stayed at Camp Dixie for six weeks, I remember. Dr. Alfred [Witherspoon] Scott, the chemistry professor, ran that camp, and it was a very fine camp.

Henderson: While he was in high school did he give any indications that he wanted to go to law school?

Bonner: I think it was understood that he was going to law school. I mean, just like certain people do certain things. I didn't know what I was going to do, but it was felt that he was going to be a lawyer, and, as I say, he had to be a lawyer to be governor. We weren't surprised at all when he ended up being governor.

Henderson: Now, when he ran for governor, were you involved in any way in his campaigns?

Bonner: No, no, I didn't. Our ways did not cross after we left high school, other than some Christmas cards and, of course, we were always friendly. But nothing. . . . I ended up in the army--I don't know when he ended up in the army--and medical school. My medical school days kind of crossed with his law school days.

Henderson: Was there anyone else in your graduating class or in high school that played a role in his political career campaigns that you're aware of?

Bonner: No, I don't think there's a soul in our class that would have had anything to do with it.

Henderson: Well, we've talked about his personality. Do you think it has changed over the years?

Bonner: I think it's mellowed more, yes. I think now that you see him and talk to him he has mellowed more. Of course, he's always been friendly with me. I mean, he's on a different basis with me than most of the people that he knows because I've known him from, well, childhood.

Henderson: Did he have a temper when he was a young boy? Did he ever express anger or displeasure?

Bonner: Not that can remember as anything that would be outstanding.

Henderson: Anything that you recall that he may have done that displeased his mother or his father?

Bonner: No, I don't know that I can think of anything. 'Course, again, this is a long time ago [laughter], and it's interesting. You can remember some of these things that--the Santa Claus story.

Henderson: Now what was the Santa Claus story?

Bonner: He was the one that brought the information to us as third or fourth graders, second or third graders, somewhere, that Santa Claus was not real, that Santa Claus was your parents. He had stayed awake at night and had seen his father and his mother fixing Santa Claus. So he was telling us as young children that we didn't have to believe in Santa Claus anymore.

Henderson: Dr. Bonner, I believe this completes my list of questions. Is there anything else pertaining to Ernest Vandiver while he was a young man that you would like to relate to me?

Bonner: I'm not sure that I can think of anything that we haven't covered.

Henderson: Okay. Well, I want to thank you for granting me this interview. It's been most interesting and informative.

Bonner: Well, thank you. I hope you can get some use from it.

Henderson: Thank you.

End of Side One

END OF INTERVIEW



**Name Index****H**

Harrison, Dill, 6

**S**

Scott, Alfred Witherspoon, 10

**T**

Talmadge, Eugene, 3

**V**

Vandiver, Samuel Ernest, Jr., 1, 2, 3, 4, 6,  
8, 9, 10, 12

Vandiver, Samuel Ernest, Sr., 2, 3, 8, 9

Vandiver, Sybil Elizabeth Russell (Betty), 8

Vandiver, Vanna Bowers Osborne, 2

