

Harold Paulk Henderson, Sr. Oral History Collection
OH Vandiver 21B
James Coleman Owen Jr. Interviewed by Dr. Harold Paulk Henderson
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EDITED BY DR. HENDERSON

Side One

Henderson: Looking back over the Vandiver administration, what would you say were his major accomplishments?

Owen: That's hard to say. Ernie did a lot of things maybe that didn't cost so much money. One thing he did that I've always admired him for--our roads at that time had become so shoddy. I remember the road from Waycross down to Jackson, just a little, old turtle back strip of [laughter] tar, and Ernie came in and he put white lines on the edges of the roads as well as putting a centerline on the road. You can't imagine how many people I've heard echo, "Wasn't this one of the finest things that a governor could ever do? He has our roads looking like North Carolina roads now. He's gotten us out of the mud. He's gotten these lines down the road where we can see them. We're not embarrassed now to have some friend come in here from North Carolina or Virginia and see our roads. Also we're not embarrassed to bring them to our hometown on roads like this." It's things like that that I'd hear. That didn't cost much money, but Ernie could do things like that all through his administration. That's just one illustration that I've heard so many comments on.

I think that for the money he spent, I believe that he got a lot of support from the people in Georgia by just doing little things like that. These type [of] things Ernie did all through his administration, just on little things like this, but I know another time with the Board of Regents

there now. They were talking about getting a cow barn, auction place, where they'd go and exhibit cows and such as this over there. They said also this would be a coliseum. It could later be used for basketball in off-seasons and such as that.

Well, of course, the athletic department started turning flips about the thing, and Jim [James Anderson] Dunlap, a close friend of Ernie's, was chairman of the board at that time. He and the chancellor [Harmon White Caldwell] had been to see Ernie about getting the money for it, and they [Jim Dunlap and Harmon Caldwell] finally came out and said, "Jim [Owen], we're going to miss a good opportunity to get some good money here on this thing and get a good thing for the University of Georgia." [Jim Dunlap] said, "You are at the university." And he said, "The chancellor's been; the chairman of the board's been." He said, "The only thing I know to do: as close as you've been to Ernie, do you mind going to the governor?" I said, "Lord, I hate to do that." I said, "Y'all have been to him." I said, "He's got a budget." He said, "You're talking about five hundred thousand dollars now that you want from the governor."

They said, "Well, you're for this." And I said, "Oh, I'm for it 100 percent. I wish he was in a position to do it." But I said, "If he does this, he's going to be committing his whole [emergency] fund." They said, "Well, would you please go talk to him about it?" I said, "I'm going to do this: I'm going to go to him and tell him straight how this came to me, now. That you as chairman of the board, and you as chancellor of the university system, and you other two friends I have on this board here are asking me to go do it. I'm going to tell Ernie that y'all asked me to come do this. I'm not going to let him think that I'm doing it through my friendship for him, and I want to predicate it on that. I want to predicate really on the issue where the issue lies."

I went to see him, and I went out to his house that night. We talked to him at the governor's mansion. He said, "Jim, good gracious, you know, I've even prayed about this thing; I've talked about it." He said, "You know, you've got to have funds to--that's what you have a surplus fund for." He said, "If some emergency comes up here tonight I've committed all this five hundred thousand dollars, I'm going to be so low I don't [unintelligible]." Anyway, then Ernie, he could make decisions, make them fast. He said, "I'll tell you what: I'm going to do this," he said, "because if I don't I wouldn't be a loyal supporter of one of the greatest universities in the South." And he said, "This will help it right now and help esprit-de-corps and all that." He said, "I'm going to do this." He said, "It may later turn out to be not the best judgment." But he said, "I just feel like that if I don't do it we're going to miss a wonderful opportunity." And he did that.

Now, one thing I've done with the other regents, I would hope--regents don't name things like that for people, but I've planted the seed up there with the secretary of the board and others each time we get new friends on the board, that's what I do. After Ernie's end of his earthly pilgrimage, he is due. The [James Lester] Gillis Highway runs right in front of that [coliseum], you know. Now he's due to have that coliseum over there named the Vandiver Coliseum, and I hope and pray that--I may not be here, but hopefully we've laid enough foundation so that when Ernie ends his earthly pilgrimage--that somebody will have courage enough to come up and say "let's give due and credit where it's given," because Ernie made a real sacrifice to donate that five hundred thousand dollars for that. That's one of the things that I think he should be honored for later in life, and that coliseum ought to be named the Vandiver Coliseum in his honor.

Henderson: Let me go back to your time of service on the Board of Regents. Were you on the board when the university was desegregated?

Owen: Yes.

Henderson: You were? Did the governor have meetings with regents at the governor's mansion or at the governor's office--someplace--trying to get input from you who were on the Board of Regents as to what action should be taken?

Owen: No, sir. No, sir. Now, on social occasions when we'd meet sometimes something would come up. We frequently mentioned things there, but, now, of course, the chancellor and the chairman--Bob [Robert O.] Arnold there was chairman for a long time and then Jim Dunlap came in--they had to go keep him posted on what's going on because otherwise they'd have a tough time over in the legislative battle getting enough money to keep its use of higher learning--to pay the bills. So they had to keep the governor posted where he could help there on that if need be. If they were not going to get what they thought, then they would also go over to the governor and say, "Governor, can you help us a little bit now with your legislative people over there? We really are going to need this. If we don't we got to raise the tuition."

Well, to raise tuition in those days was still tough on people, getting the kids to college and paying for the education, and if we raised it some fine young people would miss their education. So Ernie tried to keep in touch for that reason, but he did not in any way, after the Dean [Walter Dewey] Cocking case and all that had been here, he didn't in any way use the Board of Regents to help him in any political battle or anything else. He truly and honestly wanted the board to go over there and make its best judgment as to what was good for higher

education, and let it take its place in the governor's budget, legislative budget. That's what we tried to do, but we didn't go ask the governor. [He] didn't come tell us. The people he put on that board, he put good men on the board, and he put people that he could have confidence in, that would do the right thing for higher education.

But at the same time, he couldn't sacrifice the education of the public schools for higher learning. You had to keep it all going, and we had to keep this in mind. We knew Ernie [Samuel Ernest] Vandiver [Jr.] well enough to know what he wanted, so therefore there wasn't any behind green doors or blue doors or red doors to have any of these type conferences. No, sir, he didn't operate that way. He put men on there to use their best judgment, to do what they thought was right. Now Ernie, he didn't mind telling you; he said, "Well, I was proud of you when you got a junior college down at so and so. They've needed one there." That type [of] thing. He would congratulate, commend, and such as this. He kept up with what was going on; he knew what was going on. He could work now through the chancellor or the other people there. They knew how his feelings were.

So anyway, that's the way he ran all of his committees. I don't think he went down and wanted to use these committees to help him politically. No sir, not one--never, any committee, I don't think he ever used any one for that purpose. That had been used in prior administrations, but Ernie Vandiver did not have that in his. He just didn't allow that. He was strong enough to do it on his own.

Henderson: Seems like in recent years every governor likes to be called an education governor. Do you think it's fair to call Ernest Vandiver an education governor?

Owen: He laid the foundation really to be called the education governor. Carl [Edward] Sanders followed in his footsteps. Carl came up, and he was in legislature. Ernie took a liking to Carl. He opened many doors for Carl to come in, and then Carl came in and Carl was called more so than Ernie. But Ernie laid the foundation so that, when Carl's administration came in, he had it made and cut out to come and do this. But the foundation was laid when Ernie Vandiver was there, and I think Carl knows that too. Now, I'm not discrediting Carl. Carl's a fine man; I've known him a long time. He did a great job there and did a great job for education. He is known, though, more as a governor of education than Ernie is, but Ernie laid the foundation for it. Had it not been for that, then Carl wouldn't be the governor of education. So we got to give credit where credit is due. Ernie never did go out and try to get credit for himself on this, but a lot of people all over the state know that he did lay the foundation for education, and he laid it soundly, and he laid firmly, and look what's happened to it now: it's prospered all over, all over.

Henderson: His decision to allow the university to remain open even if integrated and to support the public schools, how important a decision was that in the history of the state?

Owen: Well, it was not only important for Ernest Vandiver as governor, had we come in and maybe tried to use some of the tactics that were used in Alabama and Mississippi, this would have given us a black eye. We had had such a fight, you know, with the rail rates, with the tariff of the railroads. That had been a sore thing between the North and the South here for so long. Now if the North could come in and try to depict us down here as Bolsheviks; some of us we were going to rebel against the government. This was not good, and Ernie didn't want that to happen. He didn't want people to eye this state, and let them go off, and let them be

bragging on Virginia and North Carolina and some of these other states and not be bragging on Georgia. So he laid the foundation to get us out of that mold, and I think the people all over America respect Georgia for its position in opening it up. Ernie initiated that, came in and did it. I'll always--that's one of the finest things he did--I'll always commend him for that.

Henderson: This is probably a difficult question to ask a good friend of the governor, but did you see him having any failures as governor?

Owen: Having any what?

Henderson: Failures or shortcomings.

Owen: Oh, this, for instance, he might have certain bills that were through the legislature that he might desire and might want. Politics gets in the way of so many of those. He had some of those that were killed while he was governor, and he was disappointed, I know, on many of those things. I was not active in the legislature, but, still yet, forty miles away from Atlanta, it's just sort of like living in the legislature's backyard. You know what's going on up there everyday, and you've been around the halls up there enough to see it in the works. Anyway, I think Ernie played that well though in those times, yeah.

Henderson: How would you describe his stewardship as governor?

Owen: I don't know of any other governor that was ever a better steward than Ernie Vandiver. He knew the value of a dollar and he knew the value of ten million dollars, and there's a great difference. I, too, have never seen the time when Ernie would go out and try to buy strength by putting roads out. So many people in past years, prior to Ernie, would try to go out and win popularity by getting roads. Now everybody wanted to get out of the mud; everybody wanted roads, but you had to watch the economy. So Ernie had to balance that out.

After [Samuel] Marvin Griffin's [Sr.] administration--Marvin ran rampant in using those methods to get votes and friends and such as this, but Ernie was a true steward of the money, and he kept our roads in good shape. He finally came in and got them in better shape than they had been, but he didn't do it to buy votes. He didn't need that. He didn't need those; he was strong enough without it. So as far as stewardship, I think Ernie was one of the best we've ever had.

Henderson: How would you describe his political philosophy?

Owen: Well, I've been conservative all my life, and my philosophy and his philosophy are coincided. I'm still conservative now, and I still have this feeling. On the other hand, well, right now we have a case up in the U.S. district court about our county commissioners here and getting them on their terms and such as this, getting minority positions on the board. We're doing our best to try to comply with the laws of this country and doing that in a small town. We're in that position now. So, on the other hand, you see, sometimes the minority groups take this. . . . I watch all these judgeships now. They've had this thing tied up here for months and months on this judgeship business. This is giving Georgia a black eye. This is not the way to handle it. It's bad. If Ernie Vandiver had been governor this wouldn't have been like it is now, I don't believe.

Henderson: How would you describe his work habits? Was he a workaholic?

Owen: Ernie, he knew that a good eight hours sleep would be what is needed, but, now, when Ernie undertakes something, when he's out campaigning, he probably averaged five hours sleep a night then. It's just like being in battle. When you're in battle, in combat, then you don't get much sleep at night. You know, when you're lines against the Germans or Japs on the other

side then you may get four or five hours sleep a night. But basically that was only in battle that Ernie got that. Otherwise, he got a full eight hours sleep and enjoyed it. When the battle was on, he could go on two hours sleep if it took it. He stayed in combat when it was on, but when the combat resided then he didn't continue that policy. He got a normal eight-hour sleep then.

Henderson: Would you characterize him as a strong governor or a weak governor?

Owen: Strong. All the people who have--not only his friends. You just ask anybody. But he was not a dictator now, see, but a strong governor. The people had respect for him, had respect for him. When you got a man of his integrity and his ability, well, we watched many: Dick [Richard Brevard] Russell [Jr.], Walter [Franklin] George. There's a difference between a statesman and a politician. Ernie was a statesman.

Henderson: Did he have a laid-back style of dealing with people, or was he aggressive, activist-type of person?

Owen: Well, he wasn't either one of those extremes. He's right in the middle of that. He wasn't either one. Ernie maintained close ties; he maintained respect, but I don't think he was on either end of that. I think he was right between them.

Henderson: How would you describe him as a politician?

Owen: Well, of course, being so close to him, my opinion would be rather partial there, but I don't know of a better politician in my life than Ernie Vandiver, not anybody. I had an uncle in Congress. I went around with him a little bit, and I'd see him politick. I used to think he was a great politician, and he was, and between these two men, I watched them both, and still my thoughts for both of them are about the same. Not [unintelligible] strong as Ernie Vandiver. I'll say that.

Henderson: How would you describe his personality?

Owen: Winning, strong, likeable, respected, wonderful, just tops, just tops. This is one of his strongest characteristics is that personality, and I saw that the first day I ever met him. I never did lose it, always the same. He didn't vacillate. He walked a steady line. Well, I just think that personality was one of his strongest characteristics and just so great, so great.

Henderson: Marvin Griffin was a great storyteller on the stump. Was Ernest Vandiver of a similar nature?

Owen: Ernie was more of a statesman, so much more of a statesman in the way he presented his messages to the public than Marvin was. Marvin was a great, great storyteller. [Laughter] I remember some of them, the stories they used. . . . Well, there was a place in Texas, he went out there to speak. He was out there, you know, going. So he'd get up and he'd say something, you know, and they had a bunch of Spanish-Americans there, Mexicans, and they were [saying] "Hoya! Hoya! Hoya!"

So then the next day they were riding around, and they were looking at the parks and all. So they saw all this manure out in the parks, and Marvin Griffin [unintelligible], said to him, "Good gracious alive, is that cow manure?" He said, "Oh, yes, white folks out here, we call it "hoya." That's what the Mexicans call it." [Laughter] Marvin used to tell that story, see, but Marvin was a great storyteller, yeah, a great storyteller. He did so many things that I didn't like, but you got to admit the truth: I don't know a better storyteller in the world than Marvin Griffin. He could do it; he could just appeal to so many people too with these stories. But, instead of telling the people stories, Ernie was a real statesman the way he presented his message to the people, just a strong contrast, the difference. Ernie was sincere, and genuine, and just a true

statesman. He was not known as the jester of the court or anything like that, but he knew a lot of good stories now. He can tell them going and coming, and among his friends sitting down around social occasions he'd keep a lot of people laughing because he knows a lot of stories; he knows how to tell them.

Henderson: How would you compare his speaking style with, say, Marvin Griffin or Herman [Eugene] Talmadge's?

Owen: Well, all three had great styles; all three had different styles. All three were able, able statesman speakers, no doubt about it, just no doubt. I think probably Ernie was--he appealed, say, to the workingman here. He appealed to the salt of the earth with his speeches. But just in general I've always admired Winston [Spencer] Churchill. I think he was just the epitome of everything. Of course, Mr. [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt was just so great, but people like this. Ernie Vandiver is going to go down in the history of Georgia just like Winston Churchill is going down worldwide. Ernie's just not known in that many countries and areas, but he had a great style.

Henderson: In the 1958 campaign for governor, did you play an active role in that campaign?

Owen: I did as much as I could without being up at his headquarters, in and out everyday. Here in this area all around Griffin, I knew that I could help Ernie as much around here and me not coming around with badges on, handing out things, going in the courthouse, handing out Ernie's cards, and going around and seeing what you call the courthouse crowd. The best thing was that every time you were out, if I had a case over in Jackson, Georgia, I'd stop in some drugstores there, and I'd stop and get a Coca-Cola somewhere, stop and get

gasoline somewhere else, maybe just talk to the people that way, and ask them what they thought about the governor, this, that, and the other.

You could get close ties that way and you could do a lot of good for him that way. They would know then that you were not on the paid payroll up there to go out and be a politician, wearing a hat and all this--I didn't do anything like that, no. You can do a lot more just doing it your own easy way, just so somebody--I remember one fellow said, "Well, so-and-so came in here on so-and-so's campaign," and he said, "Oh, when he got through," he said he started wiping both arms off, he said, "I just felt like he poured olive oil all over me, you know."

[Laughter]

Henderson: In 1966 Governor Vandiver is considered a major candidate for the governorship, but he has to withdraw because of health reasons. Were you supporting him prior to his withdrawal for that office?

Owen: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I supported Ernie Vandiver in any undertaking. I thought that his abilities as a statesman were needed in Georgia during his era, and he was one of the few during that era that really was a statesman. So I supported any inclination he might have to be of public service [unintelligible].

Henderson: In 1972 he runs for the Senate and is unsuccessful. Why do you think that race was unsuccessful?

Owen: Well, of course . . . probably the "no, not one" backfired on him. Another thing too . . . maybe if more money'd been spent on television in that race, Ernie could probably have won 'cause he could have gotten his message out to the people better. Anyway, I often go back in retrospect now and think about that election, and I wonder then--Ernie could have overcome

this had he gotten his message over to the people on TV as they do today, but TV was just coming in in those days. It was not really and truly in vogue as it is here today. Had it been here today and the people had seen Ernie compared to the other candidate, who is in the Senate now, but if they had seen him then on TV, Ernie Vandiver would probably be in the Senate today. That's just in retrospect. I go back and wonder just what might have happened in history if, you know, if, and the big word *if*, such a big word. [Cut off]

Henderson: I have one more question I'd like to ask you, but before I get to that question is there anything else you would like to say about Ernest Vandiver?

Owen: Well, we described him in several different ways and as highly as I know how to do it. In every sense of the word he was a true statesman, but one thing that so many good statesmen have, just like we have old relatives sometimes we'd like to go lock up in a closet, Ernie doesn't have anything to sweep under the rug or to go lock up. His life is an open record. He doesn't mind who sees it; he doesn't mind what's in it because he has done nothing, nothing in this world in his earthly pilgrimage to be ashamed of or to want to go back and repent for it. He has nothing to sweep under the rug, just nothing, and so not many people can say this, now, whether it's a statesman or not, just very few people in life can do this. But Ernie Vandiver, he's lived a good life, and due justly and walk [unintelligible] with the Lord, he's done that and he has nothing to hide. So I just think that's one of the greatest accomplishments in life.

Henderson: Okay. My final question to you: what do you think is the place of Ernest Vandiver in Georgia history? How will he be remembered?

Owen: Well, he's certainly going to go down--he's going to have a remembrance, and he'll go down in history, and he's going to go down as one of the greatest. The educators will

see to it that this comes out because the truth [unintelligible] is going to rise again, so Ernie's going to rise. As they write these histories of the governors, the histories of this state, Ernie Vandiver's going to be right there with the greats, right with the greats. Each year it's going to be that way. I'm real happy for him because he deserves it.

Henderson: Mr. Owen, I want to thank you for granting me this interview. This has been most informative, and I certainly have enjoyed it.

Owen: Well, appreciate it. It's just nice to meet you, and it's nice to have such a great subject matter that we can discuss [laughter].

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