

Harold Paulk Henderson, Sr. Oral History Collection  
OH Vandiver 30B  
William Donaldson Ballard interviewed by Dr. Harold Paulk Henderson (Part B)  
Date: 07-28-94  
Cassette #483 (14 minutes, Side One Only)

**EDITED BY DR. HENDERSON**

Side One

Ballard: Before I forget about it, I mentioned some of the people that I sat with back in the northwestern corner of the legislature. [Robert] Chappelle Matthews from over at Clarke County over at Athens, he was one of those people. He and Bob [Robert Grier] Stephens [Jr.] and George [B.] Brooks and us, we sat back over there, and I was really subjected to a good environment, I mean, a thinking--let me say a real educated type environment. Not . . . blockheads or nothing like that or anything, but I'm talking about they were people that had good education and they knew what was going on basically.

Henderson: The county unit system is challenged in federal court, and the legislature is called into special session to deal with that challenge. Do you recall that special session?

Ballard: I remember it. That's when we had to do the changes and start doing the whole works again, and it was a traumatic thing, but we knew we had to do it . . . and there wasn't no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

Henderson: In looking back on the [Samuel Ernest] Vandiver [Jr.] administration, what would you say were its major accomplishments?

Ballard: I would say the major accomplishment of the Vandiver administration was keeping our state's name legitimate, [and] keeping our university system straight and up because of the trouble we'd gotten into back in the Gene [Eugene] Talmadge days fooling with it. I think that's

probably the major thing that kept the integrity of the state of Georgia. I think at the time it took a real statesman to do that. We had the right person in office to do it. I think the integrity of Georgia could have been ruined at that time.

Henderson: Do you see the Vandiver administration having any failures or any shortcomings?

Ballard: Oh, of course, there's no question about it. You know, you kind of forget the bad things, and I'm quite sure there was. Offhand I can't remember, but I know there were, I mean. It'd just be absurd to say--and probably some of them was major. Probably there were some major shortfalls, probably in some appointments. I didn't agree with Ernie a lot of times on some appointments, and I think that's probably some of the things, and I guess every governor goes through with that.

Henderson: How about his appointment of Roy V. [Vincent] Harris to the Board of Regents?

Ballard: Roy served with me in the legislature too, and Roy was in his declining days when I knew him. I never knew Roy when he was the powerhouse in the state of Georgia. I knew him in his declining years, and he and I, we got along pretty well together, but Roy was . . . he just . . . he did not talk my kind of language. You know what I'm saying? I mean, I was younger; I looked at things different from Roy Harris, and that's the only thing I had a problem with that. I think Ernie was mending fences.

Henderson: How would you describe Ernest Vandiver's stewardship as governor?

Ballard: With what he had to do with he did an admirable job.

Henderson: How would you . . . ?

Ballard: And let me tell you, I'm not just saying money, with what he came from. He came from practically a totalitarian type state government into running into trying to be fair and at the same time trying to control legislators and things that want to take their lead and run as well as not have any--I think he did a good job of transition. That was the transition thing 'cause Carl [Edward Sanders] never had--they had an easy row to hoe when he hit them. The dirty work had been done.

Henderson: How would you describe his political philosophy? Was he conservative, moderate, liberal?

Ballard: He was a moderate. He was definitely moderate. Back then you were conservative or one of them Atlanta liberals, but now you would look back at him--he was a moderate. He agreed when you have to do, he would get in the middle and try to work things out. He was a good person at working out things. He was a damn good one at that, and I don't know how he did it but he always worked out things pretty good, kept down big stinks, you know, that would come up.

Henderson: Would you consider him a strong governor, a weak governor, or somewhere in-between?

Ballard: Ernie was not a real strong, forceful governor. Ernie was one that would try to reason with you, sit down and work things out. You understand the difference? [Samuel] Marvin Griffin [Sr.] was a strong governor. He was the chop ax type. Then, we had Ernie, then we come back and Carl, Carl tries to be the chop ax type. Ernie got stuff done without [the ax]. You understand what I'm trying to tell you? He was not a weak governor by any sense of the word, but he did not exert his power. Do you understand what I'm saying? I mean, if you saw

Ernie Vandiver you didn't see a governor exerting power: "I'm the governor period." You didn't see that in him like you did Marvin and maybe later Carl and some of the others.

Henderson: How would you describe his style of dealing with people? Is he laid-back? Is he aggressive? Somewhere in-between?

Ballard: He was relatively laid-back. He was not a real aggressive person. When he would move into it, he usually knew what he was getting into, what was he was doing when he hit it, but he was not--he was more . . . when he would just come and be with us boys, he was just one of the crowd. He was looser then than anytime you would ever see him at any other time. He would just sit around and chat and talk and all that, but he was never pushy. He never tried to show: "I am the governor." You understand? And they all love that.

Henderson: Would you consider him a backslapper?

Ballard: Not necessarily, uh-uh. But he knew people, and I would say that he had to backslap some of the old Russell crowd to get where he was and to keep them in line. I would think he probably had to do it, and you still have to do that.

Henderson: How would you describe him as a speaker?

Ballard: He wasn't in the category with Marvin Griffin. He wasn't anywhere near the category of Marvin, and he didn't do the eloquent kind of talking like Carl did. He was just, I would say, just mediocre. He wasn't any great speaker or anything of that nature.

Henderson: How would you compare his style of speaking with, say, Marvin Griffin's?

Ballard: Marvin, well, oh God, Marvin--let me tell you something, Marvin Griffin was a great speaker. Oh, he could capture you. I don't give a damn. You could hate his guts, but you just loved to sit there and listen to him talk, and he could talk for damn hours. I mean, that's the

difference. Ernie was more down to earth. You understand what I'm saying? Ernie talked business. Marvin, he'd talk to you about the catfish pond or about the ole such and such down there that got caught doing this and so on, but he was--Marvin was the best speaker I have ever encountered, and Fred [Frederick Barrow] Hand was probably the keenest speaker I ever encountered.

Henderson: How would you describe Ernest Vandiver as a politician?

Ballard: He was a good politician. He did things without being offensive, and I think he got elected without being offensive. I think he did.

Henderson: How would you describe his personality?

Ballard: He was one of the most likable people I have ever met. He and Betty [Sybil Elizabeth Russell Vandiver] both, I mean, they were alike in that category. They were just--they were like the people next door. They were like your next-door neighbor you bump into. I didn't know it at the time, but in the probably '60. . . '59, '60, '61, I was going to the Smith Group up at Piedmont Hospital for check-ups and all. I had a problem, just a kid, but I went in there for check-ups and I bumped into him. I was coming out of. . . where were we? I don't remember where. . . the Smith Group was at that time, but anyway I was going in and Ernie was coming, Ernie and Betty coming out, and I hollered out at him. I said, "What you doing over here?" You know, he just stopped and went to talking, said, "Well, hell, I went up yonder to that Smith Group," and said, "I paid them"--oh, I think back then maybe \$100, \$125, "for a check-up for them to tell me to quit drinking, get more exercise, don't smoke, do such and such and such." Maybe he says, "I don't smoke" or something. I don't know; I don't even remember, but anyway stood there talking, him and Betty, awhile. But that was just casual--I mean, this

was the type [of] person Ernie was, and he didn't just do that with me. He did it with any legislator. He did it with people. I think he had far too many folks wandering in, just coming and visiting Ernie. He was good too. Let me tell you, if you wanted to know if he had a fault, I'll tell you his main damn fault: he was too damn good to his enemies. He treated them too good. They took advantage of him when they could. He was far too good to his enemies. He would forgive them, and you can't forgive some damn things. You've got to look at them. You've got to put them in perspective.

Henderson: Can you think of a specific instance?

Ballard: I can't think of a specific one but several different things they knifed him in the back, people that he had tried to help and do that were totally out. . . . Some of us would tell him, "You better watch that son of a gun." [He'd say,] "Oh, everybody's got some good in them," or something like that--you know, that kind of crap [laughter]. I think by the time he left office, though, he learned.

Henderson: In 1966 he's considered the leading candidate for the governor, and he has to withdraw because of health problems. Prior to withdrawing, were you supporting him?

Ballard: Yessiree, I was 100 percent into it. I was up there pushing and setting up [an] organization, and I would have been a big part in it.

Henderson: Do you think if he had stayed in he could have won that election?

Ballard: At that time we had never reelected a governor. Once they were in you didn't do it. Ernie, he was on a good footing to go, but there was. . . . I didn't have the same feeling that I had the first time or the time when we switched Carl from the lieutenant governor's thing over

to the governor's race. I didn't have the same feeling, but he was such a good governor I'd have loved to have seen him serve four more years when we had some money.

Henderson: You say, "We switched Carl over to the governor's race."

Ballard: You know when Garland [Turk Byrd] dropped out with heart trouble and we switched from lieutenant governor up to the governor's office.

Henderson: Do you think he really had heart problems?

Ballard: I'd rather not say [laughter].

Henderson: In 1972 Governor Vandiver runs for the Senate. He fails to get in the run-off with David [Henry] Gambrell. Why do you think he was unsuccessful?

Ballard: At that point they had placed him back in another era and that's the whole story. He was in a different era from what things were at that time, and he had some baggage that was left over and so forth that he was carrying. If the people that put him in that position, put him out of the run-off, had really thought back to what he really did instead of just thinking, "Well, he's one of the old time political hanger-ons," or something of that nature, if they would've just thought of what he did and what he could do in the U. S. Senate, it would've been a different story, as you well see what happened to Gambrell. [Cut off]

Henderson: My final question to you: What do you think Ernest Vandiver's place in Georgia history will be?

Ballard: Ernest Vandiver was at the gate when Georgia turned all the way. They opened the gate coming out of the past into the present. He is the one that really was the transition between the old Georgia and the new Georgia. That's the place it took place right there, with Ernest Vandiver, and if you look at your government after that probably he paved the way for a person

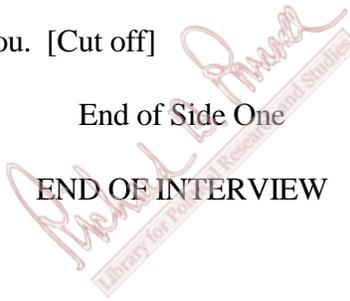
like Carl Sanders to be elected, that type person. Carl would have had a hell of a time getting elected before Ernie Vandiver. . . probably could've never done it. But Ernie was the one that opened the gate, the transition, from Georgia. I think that's the main contribution he's made all the way up, and I think that is the thing that history should carry about Ernest Vandiver. He did what needed to be done when it had to be done.

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

Ballard: All right. Thank you. [Cut off]

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