

OHD 005-02

The Oral History Documentary Series

George Chandler

George Chandler Interviewed by Sarah Duncan

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DUNCAN: This is Sarah Duncan interviewing George Chandler for the Sandy Creek Park Oral History Project of the Russell Library. This July 21, 2005 and we are at the Sandy Creek Park visitor center in Athens, Georgia. Why don't we start off -- why don't you just tell me a little bit about yourself?

CHANDLER: Oh, I am George Chandler. I live in Winterville, Georgia. I served as county engineer for Clarke County from '79 until about '85 during which time one of my additional duties was to assist in the construction of Sandy Creek Park.

DUNCAN: When you say additional duties, what were your regular duties?

CHANDLER: Well, as the county engineer I got to pave roads and build roads. When I first started working for the county they had had the great ice storm of 1979 and we spent the first six months picking up limbs off the side of road down every road about head high. You could only travel about one lane from the limbs that had been broken and piled up.

DUNCAN: Sounds like quite an introduction to the job.

CHANDLER: It was, yeah, it was a new experience.

DUNCAN: So I suppose since you were county engineer you had an engineering background your education?

CHANDLER: Yes I have a Bachelors Degree for Civil Engineering from Tennessee Tech in Cookville, Tennessee. That's been about twenty -- been about thirty years ago I guess, thirty four or so.

DUNCAN: Are you from Tennessee originally?

CHANDLER: No I am from Winterville. I live in the house that I was raised in as a child in Winterville which is a pleasant venture for myself and my wife. Have two children one is in the surveying business here in Athens and my other son who is the Service Writer for Pep Boys here in Athens.

DUNCAN: Huh alright. How did you get involved originally in the Sandy Creek project?

CHANDLER: Well, when I came to work for the county it was actually part of the interview process. I asked them the question what projects did they have that I would likely be working on and one of the first ones was the Sandy Creek Park. And they had just completed the building of the dam by the Soil Conservation Service when I came up here, when I came to work for the county. And actually in the first week or so I guess of kinda of seeing what the county looked like today at that time we came up here and looked at the reservoir and

really the guy who had brought me up here was a road superintendent and didn't really quite expect the dam -- or the reservoir to have been completely filled up, but it was.

DUNCAN: Huh and that was 1979?

CHANDLER: That was in '79 yeah.

DUNCAN: Was that the first time you saw the park?

CHANDLER: Yeah.

DUNCAN: What did it look like at that time?

CHANDLER: Well, it was just a lake is about all it was. There was all -- everything from Holman Road over to lake was just rolling country, I guess. They had had to cut a good bit of the land down here in order to have enough earth to make the dam. And they had pretty well stabilized the ground so it wouldn't wash and those kind of thing best I can recall. It was kind of a rough ride over to the dam at that time so.

DUNCAN: [DUNCAN laughs] I bet. Were the roads in here or anything?

CHANDLER: No, no there was nothing. There was -- all it was was a lake out in the middle of 500 acres worth of property.

DUNCAN: Did you know about the project before that fellow took you over here?

CHANDLER: No, I had never heard of it and I guess, as I said that was one of my questions to the commissioners and they told me about it. And then one of the first things I did was go look at this park and see what this deal is going to be about. We came up here and saw the lake and started out from there. One of the first things we did was put up a chain link fence along the road to control access to the park and shortly after that I guess the first thing that we built that was for public use was the boat ramps, so people could begin to enjoy the fishing aspects of the lake.

DUNCAN: Why did you start with the boat ramp?

CHANDLER: Pardon?

DUNCAN: Why did you start with the boat ramp?

CHANDLER: Well because the lake was here, had fish in it and it was something people could start enjoying immediately with a boat ramp where as you need to have roads and buildings and so forth and the picnic tables and so forth which had not been funded or anything they ... we had to plan I guess but it was a multi-year plan was how it was envisioned. It felt like that if we got people to where they could start using the park that it would help build interest in it.

DUNCAN: Was it already stocked with fish?

CHANDLER: They had stocked it somehow, now I don't know when they had stocked it, but it had fish -- and it may have had fishing it from the stream that feeds the lake.

DUNCAN: Had you done anything like this before, a park or any kind of natural area?

CHANDLER: No, I hadn't. I had worked with the U.S. Forest Service at one time and we had some recreational facilities that we helped constructed, but we were mostly overseeing contractors to do it with construction opposed to trying to do it in a force account. This was a force account job which meant doing it with your own people. And the philosophy that we used in building the park was basically that the county would furnish the labor and equipment and hopefully use the federal government's money to get it built. So that's kind of the philosophy we used about the development of it.

DUNCAN: What did you think when you first saw this park? I guess you took the job so you must not have been completely intimidated by it. [DUNCAN laughs]

CHANDLER: It did scare me off, but it was a -- I don't know that I knew -- that I remember exactly what I thought. I could see it was going to be a large park and I guess in my mind I probably compared it to some state parks that they have and I guess it is probably fairly similar to a lot of the state parks that we have.

DUNCAN: Unh-huh, yeah. How was the land for the park acquired?

CHANDLER: I don't know that I can answer that. The land had already been acquired when I came here and got involved, but I really...

DUNCAN: Okay. What did you think when you saw the original plans for the park?

CHANDLER: Well, I was really impressed. You know it appeared to have a high quality to it and something I felt would be something that we could be proud of doing as opposed to trying to do something that is under budgeted and you don't have the money. You end up having a park, but it's not something that gives you the pride that you would like to see and have. And I think that the pride that this park gives to not only the people who have constructed it, but the people who maintain it, the people who use it.

DUNCAN: How did the original plans compare to what we see today?

CHANDLER: Original plants?

DUNCAN: Plans, sorry. [DUNCAN laughs]

CHANDLER: I think the original plans are almost exactly the same. We followed them to the letter and I will say that the visitor center here was not part of the original plan. As we

got into it we saw that we needed a visitor center. I think they had built an additional picnic shelter down here off the first road to the right and I don't think that -- I think that's that and probably that the new rental place are about the only things added that were not part of the original concept.

DUNCAN: Was anything dropped out of the original concept? As far as you remember?

CHANDLER: I don't recall anything. Now I guess the one thing I am not sure is in existence is a footbridge at the very upper end of the park. I don't know whether that has been constructed or not. I believe it has. I always had some reservations about it because I felt like it was very expensive and may not have enough use to warrant that kind of expense, but that would be about the only thing that I had really questioned I guess.

DUNCAN: When you say the upper end of the park, do you mean over by the camping area?

CHANDLER: No, where the lake is fed on the Sandy Creek at that -- where it changes from a creek into a lake.

DUNCAN: Okay, yeah. How did the phases of construction develop?

CHANDLER: Say again.

DUNCAN: How did the phases of construction develop?

CHANDLER: The phase of construction?

DUNCAN: Yeah, as in how -- I mean I noticed it was split into what is it seven phases and...

CHANDLER: I don't know that I can remember that much. [BOTH laugh] I do know, like I say we did the chain link fence first to maintain some security and then we built the boat ramp and then from there -- and it may have been a year or so from there -- we did buy some picnic tables early on so people could also picnic. And I believe that we probably only did the road from this entrance here and about a fourth of the circle road and then built the road on to the boat ramp. And I am not sure how many -- what these phases were, I am doing a lot of recalling so this may not be as accurate as it should. It's been about 25 years I guess so, but think from there we probably built the rest of Ring Road as we called it and put in water lines around that and parking areas. I thought it was kind of interesting that we did most of this work was done by inmate laborers from county farm and that included the installation of the water line that we have. Probably the last phase that we did was building the road across the dam and putting in the camping area was probably the last thing.

DUNCAN: How many phases did you work on?

CHANDLER: All of them. [BOTH laugh]

DUNCAN: All of them.

CHANDLER: Yeah.

DUNCAN: Do you remember some of those projects if pieces of a project being more difficult than others?

CHANDLER: I don't know that I would say that any of them were particularly difficult. They all had their own challenges and I think that probably the building of the beach was probably -- that was near one of the latter parts of the phasing. And we had to bring in sand from South Georgia. It came from Fort Valley I guess. And had to you know haul the sand from down there up to here. And of course the other part of that -- and one of the things that was kinda interesting I think that I still remember -- we had dropped the lake level down probably about 12 feet maybe 15 feet from normal pool as they call it to get it down low enough so that we would have sand under the water and when it came back up you would have sand to walk on while you are swimming there as opposed to mud. But anyhow, we had the lake drawn down and one weekend -- I want to say it was in the fall -- but we had just cleared it. And anyhow the operator had backed the bulldozer back up on the side of the hill. Rain set in that weekend and I had wondered about how the lake might have looked and anyhow when we got to work Monday I said "Let's see how the lake looks and what happened with all this rain." And when we got up here the lake had filled up and it had

covered up part of the bulldozer and it had not covered up any of the engine -- it didn't do any damage or anything...

DUNCAN: That's good.

CHANDLER: ...but it got up pretty close within about a foot of the emergency spillway, which I had just kind of thought when I first saw the emergency spillway man we don't want to ever see any water going out of there. [CHANDLER laughs] If we not had the lake down that amount, I think water definitely would have run out. I have asked a couple people since then and I think they've had water going out the emergency spillway once or twice. It's not a common occurrence. There were a couple things to think about when I was coming up here that when we -- I think the first time when we lowered the lake to build the boat ramp we had to drop the lake a good bit, twenty feet maybe. I think the lake is only about 28 feet deep or something is what I recall. We had to let a lot of water out. I came up here and gotten the guy with Soil Conservation Services to help me. We didn't have a way to actually to get to the dam over to where the riser is so that you could raise the gates and let water out. And they had to have a little boat or something. So anyhow we came over there and started to raise the gate on the thing. And you would have to turn the lever on the gate about 25 times in order to get the gate to rise about one inch [DUNCAN laughs] and it was difficult enough to turn the handle. You couldn't turn it with one hand it had to have both hands it was that difficult and of course we had to take a long time. It was a hot day and we didn't even have a drink of water with us. We about wore ourselves out on that. [BOTH laugh] So in the future

when I would have to raise the gate I would bring three or four prisoners with me. [BOTH laugh]

DUNCAN: Yes, that's what I was thinking.

CHANDLER: And we would all take turns. It wasn't so bad if you had three or four guys working on it. I learned my lesson kind of quickly on that I guess.

DUNCAN: Sounds like it.

CHANDLER: The one other thing that happened to was when we let that first release of water out in the reservoir it didn't occur to me that that would present a problem, but that water came off the bottom of the lake and consistently had a lot of magnesium in it. And it went down to where the city of Athens water intake for the drinking water was. They did not have adequate chemicals to treat that amount of magnesium. And so there was a lot of people who had black water that came out in the wash and the city had to waste about a million gallons worth of water that they had already treated to. And I was wondering if I was gonna get into big trouble on it. Apparently I didn't get in big trouble, but I was worried. But I learned no to do that and the city learned they started to test the water too. [BOTH laugh] So in the future when we had to let the reservoir -- when we had draw it down I would call in and told them and they made sure they had enough chemicals on hand. [BOTH laugh] We came to a mutual agreement after that first exercise.

DUNCAN: Was Magnesium-would that actually be harmful to people?

CHANDLER: No, it wouldn't be harmful it just turns white clothes in the washing machine [BOTH laugh]into a gray looking matter.

DUNCAN: I imagine that some people were a little upset. [DUNCAN laughs] Why did that happen because just the water was so...?

CHANDLER: In the decay from materials like trees and so forth.

DUNCAN: Okay. There was the material at the bottom of the lake, I see. Did you have problems with the beach ever eroding away or anything like that?

CHANDLER: No, not that I was aware of. I don't know -- I know they had to bring in additional sand and kinda resurface I call it. So I guess some had washed on out into the lake a little further than what had initially been planned. It was on a fairly level -- well a reasonably flat surface. We had to build a wall on the non-water side of the beach in order to kinda make it flat. And there had been some times when water you know from just rain would go over that wall, but it didn't cause any major problems, no. That I am aware of. We built that little diving platform -- I am not sure that they still have the diving platform out there now. That was part of the original plan. And we had constructed it was about a 20 by 20 -- maybe it could have been a little bigger but something like that. [It] had a diving board and so forth. And I guess one of the unusual things that I would have to say about building

the park is that for a civil engineer who has experience in road construction and that type of construction there was a number of challenges that you know I didn't know what to do much about building a diving board or whatever. We found them and bought them and put them in. It wasn't difficult but I was may have had to ask more questions of someone who has done two or three or something like that. I don't remember where we bought the diving board. Probably from [unintelligible] but I don't know that I remember that. There were a lot of items like that that you just don't find. The flag pole that was like about a 50 or 70 foot flag pole and you know you don't just find those in he local hardware store [DUNCAN laughs], you have to...

DUNCAN: You can't just go down to Wal-Mart. [DUNCAN laughs]

CHANDLER: Exactly where should I go and get that? And so you just have to kind of start out asking and go to some other places. I wouldn't have as much trouble today I think as I did then. I was still a pretty young engineer and still learning a little bit I guess.

DUNCAN: When you say you kind of asking questions, who would you ask about that kind of thing?

CHANDLER: Well, probably anybody I thought might know the answer [BOTH laugh], but I think today I would say oh I went to somebody where they had just built a building like that and "Hey, where'd you -- see ya'll got this flag pole. Where'd that come from? Who'd you order that from" Today I would probably do that a whole lot quicker than I did then. I think

that I also learned today you have the internet and where you could do a search and you could find the answer in five minutes or less. At that time personal PC's hadn't -- I don't know if they were invented at that time, but I don't think we got one until probably about '84, '85 or something like that. I know we didn't have them in '79.

DUNCAN: No, no I wouldn't imagine. There was the next thing I was going to ask about actually was, where the construction materials come from?

CHANDLER: Most of the construction materials came from locally now what I call the vertical building or buildings. They were all contracted out where we took bids from builders. The builders came in and they bought their own materials and so forth, but the asphalt and the concrete and the gravel that we used for a base and so forth all that came from local market. We ended up with the trails -- there was a place over on Barber St. that cut veneer to make plywood with. Alexander Wood Products and we ended up going over there and buying most all the material -- the bark and so forth -- to make the trails for the park. We had experimented with some things as to how to best get the bark put out in the woods or out without a lot of construction equipment tearing up a lot of things. I don't remember that I -- don't know that I remember exactly how we ended up doing most of it but I do remember that I had borrowed an old manure spreader and we had tried loading bark in it and letting it do that, but I don't much believe that was our final [DUNCAN laughs] method of putting it out. But sometimes things are just trial and error till you find something that works pretty good.

DUNCAN: Yeah, sounds like you probably had to do a lot of that.

CHANDLER: Yes, we did. We did all trees -- we bought them from a nursery up in Crossville, Tennessee. I sent the tractor trailer up there to get those and we brought them back down here and planted all those around the Ring Road and so forth. There were not any local nurseries in the area at that time that had that kind of species; this was Pin Oak and so forth. I think they were specified to be four inch calipers something like that. That's a pretty good sized tree. Today it wouldn't be a problem buying those locally, I guess. But at that time they just wasn't the market I guess that there is today.

DUNCAN: Was it difficult to kinda get a budget for that kind of thing? I mean if you're having to go all the way to Tennessee to get certain species?

CHANDLER: It really wasn't that big of a deal. We had a credit card and spent the night in a hotel. I wasn't but one night so it really wasn't an expensive proposition. And our purchasing procedures you know paid for the trees you know. So we really only had to put two guys up for one night and fuel which we would have used anyhow you know. So it really wasn't too big of a deal. It was something we didn't that often. Kind of a little bit of an adventure I guess.

DUNCAN: Did you go up there?

CHANDLER: No, no. I sent one of my assistants there who is an engineering technician who is a landscape architect. He went up there with an equipment operator who drove the truck and so forth.

DUNCAN: How was this landscape to work with? The natural landscape, was it difficult?

CHANDLER: Well, I am not sure and I don't -- I guess as an engineer what we end up doing -- I did not design the park.

DUNCAN: Yes

CHANDLER: A landscape architect had designed it. My job was -- he had the plan and the specs and my job was to just carry out that plan and specs. I think that it had worked well. I think the park you know ... the core of the park and the finish on the buildings gives it a rustic appearance which was part of the original design concept. And I think that's been pretty well maintained. I would say that I don't think they maintained it quite like I would have liked to have seen on one of the new buildings that were added in. It seems like it a little more modern and had some laminated beams that didn't seem to quite have the character that we might have had initially, but it's a nice building and it functions well.

DUNCAN: What kind of condition was this land in after the Soil Conservation Service had sort of finished their project?

CHANDLER: They had had to where there –what we call the Ring Road they had to cut that dirt down significantly. I don't know how much they had removed, but the earth that was there was what we generally what we called, whale dirt [DUNCAN laughs] around here which means it is deep in the ground and it doesn't have much organic or ability to grow very much. But they had planted that in lespedeza which is a deep rooted soil and loam that would tend to add the nutrients back into the soil, so it was in pretty good shape. We ended up doing what I am gonna call a final shaping where we -- inside the Ring Road it was intended to have a couple of ball fields -- I think actually it was gonna have three ball fields, and two of those ball fields were joined together where they could be a soccer field type field. We had to move a lot of earth in order to shape that up and make that work, but that's part of our job I guess. [DUNCAN laughs]

DUNCAN: When you say make it work, do you mean you had to flatten it out?

CHANDLER: Yes, we had to grate it out so that it would all be on the same level and will still drain and do all the things you want it to at the same time still allowing people to play on it you know and so forth. And we reseeded that and of course one of the things that we had concerns about I guess was establishing the turf back and I don't -- I can't remember I think we must have just planted common Bermuda but I don't believe we did any sprigging but anyhow the point I am trying to make is that we were trying to and looked at some irrigation to try to keep the grass alive and growing and get it well established so that we provide a good surface for [unintelligible] use and so forth.

DUNCAN: You mentioned kinda bringing in trees to do plantings around the parking lots and those areas; did you do any plantings in the natural areas? I know that's not something you would have designed but you might have worked on it.

CHANDLER: I don't think I think the natural areas other than the center islands of the parking spaces I don't think any planting was called for and we were very careful to try to save any existing trees that had -- any significant existing trees and incorporate them in to the park and into the design. A time or two that meant shifting things and so forth which is what we did and to take advantage of those.

DUNCAN: Did that usually work out with those trees, I mean was it hard to...?

CHANDLER: Yeah, I don't think we had any difficulty with that at all and matter of fact on the road coming in -- I didn't notice it coming in but uh -- I think down about where the low spot in the road were there is a little creek that crosses there was a... I think it was a Sycamore tree or it could have been a Birch. But anyhow there was a large tree there that was scheduled to come out and I fought to save the tree. And two or three people said it was going to die and so forth but the last time I saw it hadn't died. [BOTH laugh] So everybody has an opinion on those kinda things. I kinda felt like it was worth a try and once it's dead but that's a good time to go ahead and admit defeat I guess. [BOTH laugh]

DUNCAN: Yeah not much you can do.

CHANDLER: It kind of reminded me of a tree that I had at my house that I didn't want to take down, and my wife criticized me for trying to save it but I told her I said, well if we cut it down at the ground we know it's gone. I said as long as there is something there it still has a chance. [BOTH laugh] So yeah it went ahead and died too so I took it on down.

DUNCAN: Did you do any other kind of work in the sort of natural areas? You did mention making trails?

CHANDLER: Well you know we developed all those with the picnic areas, and cleared out undergrowth, and went in and put in the barbeque grills. And we made most of the park benches and that was a kind of interesting little challenge that we had the design for those they're like the same benches used in downtown Athens and so forth but their dimension number on there was not and the boards were like 4 ½ by 3 ½ or something. Something that was...

DUNCAN: So sort of an odd?

CHANDLER: ...an odd kinda thing and I ended up -- we found a place over in Atlanta that we could just buy redwood beams, so I sent a truck over there and they brought back some beams that were like eight inches wide and 12 inches deep and I got Hogan Lumber Company to saw those into a more nominal size then we cleaned them on down to the sizes we wanted for the benches. We had a press where we bent the steel and welded it together and we just made the whole thing essentially from scratch. It was actually very fun more fun

doing that than it is just buying benches out of a catalog or something or other you know.
But it was....

DUNCAN: So someone from your department had to actually manufacture those benches from scratch?

CHANDLER: Yeah, yeah. We had two or three guys and they kinda did that – I wanna say on rainy days or you know.

DUNCAN: Did they have any experience in that?

CHANDLER: Well, they were -- these were prisoners. One of them was – he was a pretty good welder. I think they took more pride in doing that themselves. We ended up buying a joiner/planer from Sears-Roebucks that we used to plane the wood to make it smooth and so forth and course the shavings from that we gave to Animal Control to use for bedding for their dogs and animals that they had over at the Dog Pound. But it was kind of fun and challenging I guess, but....

DUNCAN: What was that like working with inmate labor?

CHANDLER: I thought it was great. I know there are people who have different concepts, but most of the prisoners that we had -- that we used on those kinds of things are what I would say were had been trustees. They had already proven themselves and had pretty good

skills. It was surprising at the skills that were available so you know you just need to utilize people for what they were good at. If you had someone good at welding they had welding projects, if you had somebody good at carpentry they needed carpentry projects and use them that way. I guess philosophically I still feel the use of inmate labor is a good thing and one of the things I had said then was society has already decided that this person is not going to be out and free and it is up to society to care for them, house them and feed them. So philosophically I felt like that if we got 50 cents worth was a number I used back then, if we got 50 cents worth out of it then that was 50 cents worth and so you do that several times and you got ten dollars or something you know. [BOTH laugh] And it's not money that you had to go out and hire someone for. It's nothing against hiring people but I think it's just a good way to utilize people who have been set aside in society to not mix. And I think that the other thing you may certainly probably do not know is that Sanford Stadium was initially graded out with inmates from the Clarke County Public Works Camp. So they did another good thing when Sanford Stadium was built and now those 93,000 of your closest friends [DUNCAN laughs] on an autumn afternoon so that was done by my inmates. We had found those records at one time that had their work records and it would show eight prisoners, one t-model truck and 6 mules in Sanford Stadium. It was just real interesting to go back and see that bit of history.

DUNCAN: Huh, I bet it was. What sorts of crimes had these inmates committed? I mean I assume they weren't -- they obviously weren't maximum security types.

CHANDLER: No, but they had done everything and this sounds strange, but I guess the thing I would say – had said then is that I think [one of our] best prisoners was somebody that killed his wife and the wife’s lover.

DUNCAN: Wow.

CHANDLER: And you know they had a crime of passion and they did their time. It ranged from everything, I guess. And they did not take -- what do I want to say -- hardened criminals. I’ve forgotten I think they had a rating system. They had to only be like at least minimum to light security or something, some kind of classification before they could get assigned to the Clarke County Work Camp. So it wasn’t like you know the movie there with... oh I can’t think of it now, but some real hardened criminal, the one with Jodie Foster.

DUNCAN: Oh, wait no. I was thinking Dead Man Walking, but that I think that is Susan Sarandon.

CHANDLER: You know the guy he was behind the bar there....

DUNCAN: Oh oh, Hannibal Lecture. [BOTH laugh]

CHANDLER: Yes, Hannibal Lecture. We didn’t have any Hannibal’s. [BOTH laugh]

DUNCAN: Well, that’s good.

CHANDLER: We didn't have anything like that.

DUNCAN: I don't know how that would go [BOTH laugh] working on this project. How was it decided originally to use inmates do you know?

CHANDLER: It something that the county had done probably a hundred years ago now, close to a hundred years. When I was in high school at age 16, 17, and 18, those summers I also worked with the County and the Public Works Camp and the prisoners then. I drove what you call a dinner truck which took lunch out to all the prisoners. Probably one of the reasons why I ended up being in the Civil Engineering profession was because of what we were back then. I would always arrange it to where I would take the lunches out to the prisoners then I would end up eating my lunch wherever they were building a road and they would let me get on the bulldozer and do that kinda stuff and that was kinda interesting for a 16 year old kid to be able to get up on a bulldozer and tinker with it, try to drive it. Not tear it up too much. [BOTH laugh]

DUNCAN: That sounds like fun, big machine. Did you ever have anyone try to escape?

CHANDLER: We've had some escapes, yes. I don't know that we've had any escapes from what I'd say the main group that we used for these things. They, like I said, they were mostly trustees and had pretty well already proven themselves. But you know there were in

that time I was there a couple of escapes. Generally, it didn't take to long to catch them and bring them back.

DUNCAN: You mentioned that they were a very skilled bunch. What was it like managing them?

CHANDLER: I thought it was easier. One they were there every day on time. [BOTH laugh] You didn't have to worry about sick leave or vacations, [BOTH laugh] scheduling any of that stuff. If they wasn't there – I used to joke about it – they're there every day on time ready to go to work and if they ain't we're out huntin 'em [BOTH laugh]. So I thought working with prisoners, like I said you don't have to schedule vacations [BOTH laugh] or any of that kind of stuff. So I thought it worked well and they had -- they took a lot of pride in what they did too. Good truck drivers, and equipment operators that really – had they not been in jail – a lot of them would have been able to have a good job on the outside. We helped to train some of them I guess to where they could improve themselves if they had showed an interest or whatever. I spent a good deal of time instilling what I -- care for equipment and so forth. One of the prisoners who worked up here a good bit he drove a tractor that we pulled what we call a sheet foot roller that you used to pack the ground. Anyhow we would stop and I gave him time and we would wash that tractor and keep it clean and it looked new for many years after it had been in service for many years it still looked new and they took pride in it. It was assigned to this prisoner we would need that tractor somewhere else he would be the one who would take it over there, same thing with trucks and so forth. I felt we had to give them time to take care of things if you want 'em

taken care of. It was easier to take care of it and keep it in good shape then it is to get a new one. So we worked hard at keeping things well maintained and took pride in it. And we did, I mentioned that we did all the paving work here. We did all the concrete work. And I got a guy who is in the concrete business today. He was working for someone else then but anyhow I kind of rented this concrete finisher to come up here and show us how to pour, curb and gutter and finish this and so forth and we trained some of them and when I left the county in '85 I made the statement several times that we could do as good as work with the inmates as any of the contractors were doing. I said it may take us -- we may be a little slower than the contractors, but we did work that we could hold our head up with and often I felt like I should take some contractors out there and shame them. [DUNCAN laughs] This is what I did with prisoners now look at your job over there [CHANDLER laughs].

DUNCAN: Was there any opposition to using prisoners particularly from contractors or labor unions?

CHANDLER: No, no most of them felt -- I think pretty good about it. There were some people who had made the statement that you could hire one man and replace two prisoners or something and that may have been true, but the two prisoners were already there, and you know you don't have to hire them, and you already got to take care of them, and meet their needs. So it's just a matter of personal philosophy I guess as to whether you want to try to utilize that or say no I don't want to utilize that I'll go all production or something. I felt like in general it was probably pretty cost effective.

DUNCAN: Did you keep in touch with any of the prisoners that you worked with?

CHANDLER: There's one I still see some. He was from the Athens area and I have run into him a couple of times since he was released. He got out early for good behavior and this kinda thing. And he had a job working for the Federal Government when he got incarcerated. And he went back when he got out of that job, went back so they thought a lot of him and he was a good operator and a good man who had just made a mistake I guess. Paid his time, did his duty and went on. There was one I had thought about actually trying to hire because you can actually get a tax credit for wages that you pay to a convicted felon. This one was initially from up around Cleveland, Ohio or something and he wanted to go back up there. I don't know if I could have -- I would have almost had to have invented a job for him to have done, but he was a good worker. He was always doing what you asked him to do and did his best. And I felt he deserved a little bit of a break and that I could count on him you know if I needed to so.

DUNCAN: That is really interesting. That's a kind of neat piece of the story.

CHANDLER: Yeah.

DUNCAN: What was your budget like for the park?

CHANDLER: We didn't really have a budget. How's that for an answer? [DUNCAN laughs] We had -- this is where you know you'll be talking direct names, but we -- our part

of the deal was to furnish the labor and the equipment. Their part of the deal was to furnish the money. And so we would negotiate on every phase as to how much this – the labor is worth to build the road and we would determine what our share was then they had the money and so we just did that it worked out, I think, exceptionally well. It almost makes too much sense I guess that's why you don't see more of it. [BOTH laugh] It was such a practical solution to the issue. But this lake is part of a watershed flood control project so it is one of about 18 or so lakes that were put in to control flooding. I would say that we have done a great job with flood control. Most people don't really realize, but we had had a time when flooding was much more serious. Had a lady that either drove off into the river or was washed into the river at like Oconee St. where that bridge is, during of a flood. She ended up drowning. It just came up all -- you know -- all at one time kind of deal which the flood retardant structures would prevent that from happening.

DUNCAN: Unh-huh, yeah. So did you I mean I suppose you were working on building roads and maintaining roads. Did you see a real difference between before this lake was built and after?

CHANDLER: I think the thing I would say is that most of the flooding I was not here during that period. I got out of high school in about 1961 you know you go off to college and then you're in the army and I had a couple jobs in Florida and then in Savannah before I came back up here. But I never have – we never have really had what I want to say much flood problems that I saw since I moved back up here in '79. Now there have been some times when we have had essentially hundred year storms and the river would get out of its bank

and so forth, but no loss of life and what I'd say very little property damage the exception being on Baxter Street in Athens where they did have a couple of flooding problems that were kinda severe that they have solved through SPLOST here in the past couple of years.

DUNCAN: How is it working with SCS?

CHANDLER: They were great. It was really a joy and a pleasure and I felt that I made some real friends over there. There was a guy names Joe Stevens who helped an awful lot and I -- he was a good bit older than I was but we developed a fond relationship I guess, and he passed away a few years ago. He was a lot of help.

DUNCAN: Was he involved in this project in particular?

CHANDLER: He was involved in it initially and then through most every phase he and I you know we would come together and figure out what's the next thing we want to do and how much money and then we would probably go direct .. let him go find money. [BOTH laugh]

DUNCAN: Sounds like the hard part. [DUNCAN laughs]

CHANDLER: [CHANDLER laughs] Yes, but he was good at it. He really was.

DUNCAN: That's good.

CHANDLER: There was a lot of red tape involved in it that he handled well and kept us straight. We had to account for what we put out and they had inspectors out to make sure we were following the plans and the specs and doing it the way it was intended to be done.

DUNCAN: So they provided all of the funding you said?

CHANDLER: I think they provided what I wanna say about all the cash that was involved.

DUNCAN: The county provided all the in-kind services.

CHANDLER: We provided the labor and the equipment and what – when we were doing paving and asphalt for instance and we would do enough paving and asphalt to where we would have say credit for building down there. It was about \$100,000 so we would have done \$50,000 worth of grading and paving and concrete work or whatever was, so that the \$100,000 -- we met our half and they had their half. So we could go and hire somebody to do that.

DUNCAN: Yeah, I see. Did you have to buy any special equipment or anything like that for the park?

CHANDLER: No, I don't think for the construction we did it all with what we had. Now we did use some equipment from the land fill when we were doing some heavy grading we

would use what we call a pan from there, an earth moving pan or a scrapper [it's] sometimes called. And we would borrow that for a month or so and do enough earth moving with that to get that done and then send it back down to the landfill or something.

DUNCAN: Yeah, yeah. Did you work with Cecil Chapman at all at the SCS?

CHANDLER: I think I wanna say he had possibly passed away by the time -- he may not have. But I never really did see him, but I know he was instrumental in getting the flood retarding program going and getting this thing set up as a park, but I don't think I ever met him or knew him.

DUNCAN: Okay. Why don't we actually take a little break because we are just over an hour right now?

DUNCAN: Did you work all with the Oconee River Soil and Water Conservation District?

CHANDLER: I would say that I did not do a great deal of work with them directly myself. I know Balfour Hunnicutt and I think he was the head of that at that time, but most everything we did here I think was through Soil Conservation and....

DUNCAN: What about within the county, for example County Commissioners or anyone else kinda that you had to report to? Do you remember being involved in a project at that level?

CHANDLER: I am not sure I am understanding what you are asking.

DUNCAN: Well, with the -- let me try to rephrase that -- was there someone within the county that was very involved in the project other than you know obviously you were on a [unintelligible] level?

CHANDLER: I think the thing I would want to say is that they -- they may not agree with this -- but Jim Holland was the chairman of the commission at that time. And I think, you know, we had the plan and I think they pretty well went along with what we had planned and phased and there wasn't -- you know we would tell them or keep them informed as to what was going to be the next phase or this kind of thing. But I think in general it seemed like that between the county commission and SCS that we were pretty well free to build it the way we sought and really didn't have any interference I guess, we had mostly support. I think everybody was in the favor of getting the park built and knew that we were progressing as well as you could without spending any money [BOTH laugh]. And every year we made pretty good headway. The County Administrator at that time being Lumpkin, he and I would talk about what was going on and he probably may have kept them more informed that I realized. But you know like I say we didn't have any interference and they were always supportive of everything, I think, that we did. And [they] were very encouraging in keeping things continuing to progress I guess.

DUNCAN: Was there public support for the project, specifically at the beginning especially?

CHANDLER: It's hard for me to say. I would say that there was, but I am kind of saying that based on the dam was already here and all that part was already done. There had always been, I guess, a lot of interest in the fishing part of the park. And one thing that I have felt a good bit, and I still feel somewhat, is I think that a lot of people, a lot of the residents of the county, I don't believe know this park is out here and what it has to offer. I could well be proven wrong, but it's really quite a place that you can take a lot of people and family and something for everybody to do. I am a member of Civitan and a couple years ago a friend of mine was governor and when he did that I said you know we always had to go to Atlanta for things and meetings and so forth I said we need to have them over here in Athens. And we sponsored a meeting where we had Civitan come over here.

DUNCAN: What's that?

CHANDLER: We used the pavilion and had a barbeque and so forth...

DUNCAN: What was that Civ-

CHANDLER: Civitan. It's a community service organization that has community service and some emphasis on people that -- developmental disabilities I guess so.

DUNCAN: Okay, yeah. I hadn't heard of that so -- not from the area but. Was that just because they always want to have the meeting in kind of an area like this?

CHANDLER: I think they were very impressed. You know it's just a cool little park.

DUNCAN: Do you remember at all what the original user population was out here?

CHANDLER: How many people came and used the park kinda thing?

DUNCAN: Yeah like not so much, you know, how many people, but what people? Were they people from in Clarke County or people from out in the other counties around here.

CHANDLER: I don't know that I could answer that. I think, like I said, I think the fishermen knew about it. And the fishermen were interested and I expect that they came probably as much from Jackson County as they did from Clarke County. I think that the park probably became a little bit more utilized when the beach came into operation. And I am guessing, but I think that the beach came online in '83 or '84.

DUNCAN: Sounds about right from what I have seen.

CHANDLER: Yeah, I don't have any way of -- I don't have any records, I don't guess. Soil Conservation Service I am sure that they have all that stuff but I don't really keep up any report [unintelligible] and so forth. They were open and operating and initially I think that the park was only operating about three days a week when we first did it, you know...

DUNCAN: That sounds right [unintelligible].

CHANDLER: Friday, Saturday, and Sunday or something like that.

DUNCAN: Well, because at the time the park opened it wasn't really finished is that right?

CHANDLER: Well, it opened for fishing and there was -- that was about all you could do was to fish. And then the next year I think we got some picnic areas opened up, and the next year we maybe built our first picnic shelter, maybe the pavilion and the restrooms that are around the Ring Road. Then came maybe the fishing pier and the barbeque shed and then we probably went to the other side of the lake and did the camping. I think the camping I never did quite -- because the park basically closed at dark or something, I never was quite sure how the camping worked. If you go over there and they lock this gate, so are you locked in or everyone else locked out or does it matter. [BOTH laugh] But if you had an emergency, or you know I just.... And there were a lot of little camp sites built you know and we would go into an area according to that plan and there would be 15 spots or something or other. And [we would] get out all the stumps, and rocks, and bring in a little mortar, and put in gravel. And you know it was not -- it was high level camping I guess. It wasn't the kind of camping I did as a boy scout where you slept on some rock all night [BOTH laugh].

DUNCAN: So you all had to clear out entire areas to...

CHANDLER: Well we just -- we took out the undergrowth so that it was you know...but we would go in and you know if there was say three campsites in here you know we'd go in there and level them up so that they were not rolling downhill all night, and had a little border around them, and then put gravel in there. And then there was some that I recall that had a little shelf or a little thing that was off the ground and a little lean-to top. And then I think there were two, what they call, group campsites that were actually two story deal that -- we built that. And you could have a lot of people, you know 20 or 30 people camping in that one thing [unintelligible]. I wonder how often those group campsites have been utilized but they were nice. We used to kinda joke about it call 'em pole barns [DUNCAN laughs], but they were right nice, nice little facility to camp in I guess.

DUNCAN: Did you work on Cook's Trail over there at all?

CHANDLER: Yeah.

DUNCAN: How was it [unintelligible]?

CHANDLER: Well, actually Cook's Trail, Cooks Trail came in later I think and was built -- I was working in the private sector at that time and our company and helped do some of the designs on Cook's Trail. Actually did some of the boardwalk that was involved with that.

DUNCAN: What kind of company was that?

CHANDLER: That was in an engineering firm.

DUNCAN: Okay, a private engineering firm, huh. Back a few years, how closely did you work with Robert Farmer who was the landscape architect that designed this area?

CHANDLER: We worked real close with Robert and I see him some even today. His office was just a little bit more than a rocks throw down the road and so if we had a question we would go by there. And he was always available and always listened and you know said, "Yeah we can change that" or, you know very cooperative in trying to accomplish. And most of those things were like we found this tree here and we think we'll save it. What if we move this around, whatever it was? He had done a lot of work on it and was very helpful in every phase I would say so.

DUNCAN: What sorts of things did you have to occasionally change? You mentioned that you know if there was a tree that needed to be saved or something?

CHANDLER: Well, I think that probably in building of the parking areas, the layout of the trails, I think he would come up and actually lay them out to where he felt they would best serve and meet the needs of the design. And then we would come in behind that with prisoners or we had a little backhoe that we used for some of it. But you know we would get any undergrowth out of the way, and then put down the bark and so forth, you know, so that the trail -- people would be on it without difficulty. Make sure it was flat enough to walk on and cross some drains and so forth. We had to put in a pipe and this kind of thing. I think in

locating these little fine ... the trails and the campsites those things I think he really did most all that himself and helped to get 'em to where they actually fit. I don't know that you can do all that initially, you know, when you're drawing up the plans you've got a topo map and so forth but you don't really know where the big white oak tree is and this kinda thing. When we would see those kinda things, we would if we felt like that it may ought to be preserved or whatever. We had a good -- I think every man who worked up here understood that this was not a red dirt park, but a nature type park. It had a natural theme. It wasn't some much the idea of seeing so much asphalt and concrete you could put in but how much you could save from putting down.

DUNCAN: Did Farmer did he kind of have a firm, or an office that he worked in or was it pretty much just him?

CHANDLER: Yes.

DUNCAN: Okay.

CHANDLER: He had a little gambrel roofed barn. When you go out on Bob Holman Road you get onto 441 you go probably about a fourth of a mile and there's this barn sitting off the road there and he had converted it into his office. That is where his work was and he did a lot design work for a lot of sub-divisions and other things. I think now does a good bit of pre-fab building construction work so.

DUNCAN: What were the real priorities for the park you just mentioned that is wasn't supposed to be a park where you lay down a whole lot of concrete and all that?

CHANDLER: I think it was –I think what they called it was passive recreation and family orientated. The fishing was something we could do almost immediately without having a lot of facility. There is a lot of asphalt that has gone into a lot of parking and curb gutters and if you waited for all that to be in place you'd have to spend a lot of money at one time, which I don't think that us or SCS wanted to do. And we wanted to kind of pace it out a little bit so that we didn't out spend our labor and equipment [BOTH laugh] commitment there. So you know and I guess we worked on it probably I guess about five years is what -- I think we pretty well had it completed by '85 except for a few minor additions that they have put in since then. But I think most everything was probably pretty well completed by '85 and we really got started really probably about 1980 when we really had the fence put in. But we also had our other county commitments. We were building other roads and resurfacing other roads and fixing drainage ditches, and doing everything else that the county does on a day to day basis and this was kinda, "Well while you're resting how 'bout going up there and building this park." [BOTH laugh]

DUNCAN: Lots of rest.

CHANDLER: Do that on your spare time or something.

DUNCAN: That's kinda the next thing I was going to ask is how big of a project was this for the county?

CHANDLER: I think it was a pretty big project. It took a lot of time, I don't know it would be kinda interesting but we had a lot of man hours in it. I would say that off hand we had about ... I guess it was something on the border of about five or six men probably working constantly for about five years at it. That would mean that there were times when there were 12 men and there were times when there was nobody. You could probably say somewhere around five or six people [unintelligible] everyday for about five years. It was...

DUNCAN: That sounds pretty substantial.

CHANDLER: Yeah.

DUNCAN: What primarily were those five or six people doing? I mean what kinds of jobs would they have had?

CHANDLER: I guess what I would say is it varied. It was not the same five or six, but if we were building roads and clearing trees and so forth, where the roads that would be one group and then when we got to where we were doing the paving and so forth that was a different group. And we did it all, all the asphalt and so forth and we had our own spreader and so forth. And that's -- it was all done as they say force account, with our own people, own hands. I think I mentioned we did the water line, but we also ran the water lines from the

main. There's a six inch line that runs around everything and feeds everything and crosses the dam and goes back up -- it's after the fourth inch water line on the other side of the lake. But then from where they would set water meters we ran the lines to the buildings, and dug the septic tanks, and put in the drain fields. When I say we did everything, I'm really meaning we did everything except the buildings. I guess one of the terms that we often use in engineering is that the architectural work and includes everything includes everything within five feet of the building. So we didn't do within five feet of the building but everything outside of five feet [CHANDLER laughs] of the building we did do: all the trees, and shrubs, and water lines, trash receptacles just everything. Probably you know several we would order, but a lot of it we made and a lot of it was kinda needed to be made by somebody and so we would just do it ourselves. You bound to have complete control when you are doing it yourself. [BOTH laugh]

DUNCAN: Yeah. It sounds like you had to be very resourceful. For those water lines is that the water that went in for the little -- sort of the toilet buildings and the sinks and so on and these buildings around? And did that water come all the way from the city water supply or does it come from the lake?

CHANDLER: It is from the city water supply and the city had a line that was on Bob Holman Road. And we tapped into that line and we dug and trenched the other thing in. We had a little help from the city we borrowed what they -- they had and call a Cleveland trencher which is a trencher that has tracks and has a huge wheel like about ten foot in diameter. You put this big wheel in the ground and it just kind of digs along and travels at

two or three feet per minute and it's digging this dirt and running up [unintelligible] and piles it over here on the side. Anyhow we borrowed that piece of equipment from the city. And Boyd Malcolm was the water and sewer superintendent and he would give us a little bit of guidance on things that we had questions, about fire hydrants and so forth. And they had a guy come out and looked and helped. But anyhow we got the materials through him and put it in and chlorinated, pressure tested, and put it into operation and you know it's been working for the past 25 years I guess.

DUNCAN: Must have done it right I guess [DUNCAN laughs].

CHANDLER: Yeah. And you know it's stuff that -- you know that was -- I remember the crew that was doing that and you know all the prisoners and one guard you know just counties that don't have water it just seems to me like that's a good way to put water in. I am sure that a contractor could have done it faster, but he couldn't have beat my price [BOTH laugh].

DUNCAN: I doubt it.

CHANDLER: That's right.

DUNCAN: I haven't met too many contractors who work for free yet. What percentage of the labor was actually prison labor?

CHANDLER: I would say it was probably somewhere around 70 percent and 30 percent being either skilled operators or supervisors or guards for the prisons.

DUNCAN: So the rest would be both prison guards then people employed by the county.

CHANDLER: Yeah.

DUNCAN: Yeah, okay. Have you done any projects like this since?

CHANDLER: I have done a lot of things, but I don't think I've had anything that's had this much diversity that I supervised the day to day construction of and uh...nope.

DUNCAN: So not in your private business or for work with the county?

CHANDLER: In private business, and this kinda thing, where you would do the design and then they bid it out and some contract comes in and does this. It was a unique opportunity I think to be able to design or to build this thing from scratch.

DUNCAN: Yeah.

CHANDLER: I used to tell Nancy I said you know you've got a unique opportunity taking over a park that is essentially brand new and then keeping it brand new. I used to have a philosophy, it's one of the things we would tell the prisoners when we got a new piece of

equipment and how I wanted to take it up I said you know if we keep it new everyday then it will always be like new. I still think that is a good philosophy I try to utilize that on my personal vehicles and so forth. If you keep it up everyday you know it will last a long time [CHANDLER laughs] and always look nice and be good.

DUNCAN: Do you think that's happened at this park?

CHANDLER: I think they've done a real good job with it. I really do. That was one things that I always look -- every time I come up here I can't help but judge it some. And I think they are keeping it about new every day. It doesn't look like a 25 year old park that's run down and in need of repair.

DUNCAN: Unh-huh, huh. Do you come up to the park often?

CHANDLER: Not very. We have a couple of picnics up here a year. I'm up here a couple times a year I guess for one reason or another. Our church has come up here a time or two for picnics and barbeques and so forth. A couple times a year is probably about my average.

DUNCAN: What's your favorite area of the park?

CHANDLER: All of it. [BOTH laugh] I don't know I guess I probably have to say that probably the barbeque building, and the fishing pier, followed very closely by the beach and the pavilion. The picnic thing I never had much use or I never have utilized the picnic part in

the woods. You know the picnics that I have participated with we have used the pavilion or some kinda thing like that. I think that the beach is one of those things that I get a lot of pleasure out of seeing the people use it because there's a lot of people that use that. Whereas the boat dock is used by 6 or 8 fishermen in a day or something or other and there might be 200 down there using the beach. And you know you like to see that number of people utilizing something that you had a direct hand in building.

DUNCAN: What have you been doing since 1985?

CHANDLER: Well, I was in the private engineering business for about seven years, and then I came back in the government sector and came back to work for Athens-Clarke County in 1995. I will have completed 10 years come September the first and I'll be retiring on September the ninth. [BOTH laugh]

DUNCAN: Sounds like a plan.

CHANDLER: Maybe I'll have more opportunity to come up here and utilize this park, bring my grandkids.

DUNCAN: That's what the fellow Donald Stewart, who I talked to yesterday, said that since he retired he'd been doing a lot more fishing out here. [DUNCAN laughs]

CHANDLER: Yeah, yeah.

DUNCAN: Do you have anything to add?

CHANDLER: I don't think so. I would say I did enjoy building the park and I'm proud that I was able to have participated in it. And I think the county has had a good project and I am glad I was part of it.

DUNCAN: Well, thank you.

CHANDLER: Thank you.

[End of interview]



Biographical Information

RBRL OHD 005-02

George Chandler

b. March 24, 1943

Occupation:

City of Savannah

Clarke County

Self-Employed

Oconee County

Athens-Clarke County



Subject Analysis

RBRL OHD 005-02

George Chandler

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- Involvement at Sandy Creek Park
- Appearance of the park the first time Chandler saw it
- Original plans for the park
- Phases of construction
- Buying hard to find items
- Construction materials
- Landscape
- Work on the natural areas of the park
- Working with inmate labor
- Chandlers involvement with inmate labor as a teenager
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