

**Erwin Mitchell interviewed by Bob Short  
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**BOB SHORT:** I'm Bob Short, and this is Reflections on Georgia Politics sponsored by the Richard Russell Library at the University of Georgia. Our guest is Erwin Mitchell, former member of Congress, former member of the Georgia State Senate, solicitor general of the Cherokee judicial circuit, and superior court judge in the circuit. Welcome, Mr. Congressman. We are delighted to have you.

**ERWIN MITCHELL:** I'm delighted to be here with you Bob. I've enjoyed our preliminary memories that we've shared together.

**SHORT:** Good. Well, you had a full and enviable career in Georgia politics, but before we get to that, I would like to start by having you tell us a little bit about Erwin Mitchell and growing up in Dalton, and how you got interested in politics.

**MITCHELL:** Alright. I was born in Whitfield County. And my father was born in Whitfield County. My grandfather was born in Whitfield County. And my great-grandfather moved here but that was about 1818 and he was a Confederate veteran and is buried at the

Mitchell cemetery, which adjoins the Conasauga River, which is the dividing line of Murray and Whitfield counties. So, my roots are all here and I've managed to stay here and love it for 84 years. My father was Dwight Mitchell, a lawyer. And my uncle was John Mitchell, a lawyer. And they both attended the University of Georgia as almost all of the Mitchells that have come along since, including my family. But I say I was born in 1924 and I think most people try to reflect as to what event you can relate to an age that you were. And you say, "Well, Bob, you asked me how did you get into politics?" The first thing that I can remember that relates to my age, was being with my father at the old red brick court house in Whitfield County when they were tabulating the votes between Herbert Hoover and Al Smith.

And my father was the campaign chairman for Al Smith in Whitfield County. And of course, you know, Al Smith was a Catholic and you know how that was back in those days. But I was 4-years-old at the time, and my father and my Uncle John were active and my father only had one elective office. He was mayor at one period of time and that was back during World War II, and then was asked by Governor Ellis Arnall to come to Atlanta as a part of the attorney general's office, which he did. My Uncle John became solicitor general, district attorney, and also superior court judge. So, that's sort-of the background in which I grew up. I was fortunate that I didn't have to go through the agony that the majority of young people have in determining what they want to do with their lives. I'm getting to go to the court room, with my dad and my uncle, when I was probably 9 or 10-years-old, just absorbed by the atmosphere of the court room. So, it was all that I ever wanted to do, was to become a lawyer. And that decision was made before I was in double-digits.

And, so I went to the schools in Dalton and I played a little football, played a little basketball. That's the only athletic teams we had back in those days. We had intramural track but we didn't have baseball, we didn't have golf, we didn't have the other things because the high school at that time was probably about 300 to 350. And of course it was only the eighth through the eleventh grade. And, I graduated from Dalton High School in May of 1941. Before that time, from the time I was 9 or 10-years-old, my father had carried me to bulldog football games. We always went back to --- down to Columbus for the Georgia-Auburn game. If you'll remember old Memorial Stadium down there. I think it would seat about 15 to 20,000. But we'd make that trip every year. I remember one trip when I was just a kid! When Huey Long was Governor of Louisiana, and LSU had this huge -- I think maybe it had 300 or 350 member band that they'd brought up. And, LSU just beat the devil out of us that day. But I remember walking out of the stadium and my dad's friend that was with us, his name was Ed Strain, he was right in front of me and somebody back of us yelled, "To hell with Huey Long!" And somebody in front of Ed turned around and knocked him flat on his -- [Laughter] -- so that was another taste of strong political feelings -- that was demonstrated very vividly to me at that time.

My father was an ardent supporter of Dick Russell. My uncle John had been a classmate of his at the University of Georgia Law School. So, you know, Senator Russell had very little opposition when he became Governor and when he went to the United State' Senate. But, we were always strong supporters and admirers of his. Gene Talmadge came along and this was not my dad's and my uncle's and my mother's cup of tea. And so we never supported Eugene Talmadge, nor did we support Herman when he came aboard. So, there were political clashes in northwest Georgia, which my family was one of the leaders on one side and others on the other. Sometimes we won, sometimes we lost. Most times we won, until people started saying, "Well, you're always supporting the loser!" So, we think maybe we better join the other side, because we're not getting a lot of the fruits that come from winning in state politics back in those days.

But, I digress and move way on to Washington, where I served when Herman Talmadge was the United States Senator and became a friend and very fond of Herman personally. And, I thought much of him personally. We still didn't have a lot of political agreements, but I'm very fond of him. But that's sort of the background of my history and how I got into politics. Because it was just almost preordained by my father's influence and my uncle's influence. I headed to -- I'll say I graduated from high school in May of 1941. Of course the British were already at war, and one of the things that our family always did was, righteously, with my father and my mother we'd listen to the evening news. Always, every one of FDR's fireside chats, I heard. And, I would hear about all of the aircraft being shot down. The British aircraft and the raids over Europe back in World War II. And, of course our ships were being torpedoed by the German submarines and it was clear in my dad's mind and therefore in my mind that we were going to go to war.

So, I really knew nothing much about the Citadel till Tom came to go off to college. I'd always said, "I'm going to be a bulldog. I'll be over in Athens as soon as I can be there." But, I decided to go to the Citadel and was a freshman there at the time of Pearl Harbor. I was on our intramural basketball team and our covenant commander to the armory Sunday afternoon and told us that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. Well, I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was. But it was obvious that, you know, that everything changed. We had the old M3 rifles. They came and got our rifles so they could hand them out to the draftees that were going to be coming to parade for the army.

But as soon as I finished my freshman year, the love of my life who --- we began, I guess, steady dating. You really can't date when you're in seventh grade. But she was my girlfriend from the seventh grade on and all the way through high school. And, we sort of planned to go to college together, except there weren't any girls at the Citadel. So, she went over to Shorter. But then after my freshman year I transferred to the University of Georgia so she could transfer and we could be at the University of Georgia together. And we were.

And, those were glorious gridiron days. Frankie Sinkwich, George Poschner, Charlie Trippi. Charley Trippi is still living and I'm sure you won't remember this, but I had an ROTC class with him. And I'd been to the Citadel, and I probably knew as much about the military as our instructor did. Charley always sat next to me, and we had a lot of conversations. And of course I can very incorrectly claim that I got him through ROTC. But, I do remember him and I remember him very fondly. After Pearl Harbor and war was declared, I applied both to the Naval Air Corps and the Army Air Corps. And that's before we had an Air Force, it was the Army Air Corps. And heard first from the Army. I was accepted and so I went ahead and signed with them. Later heard from the Navy, I don't know what I would have done if it'd been reversed. I'm sure I would've gone with the Navy.

But anyway, I was too young to serve, so they just put me in the --- I don't know what they called it then, but I was just on a waiting list to get old enough so I could go in cadet training. And I did the following February. But in the mean time I'd gotten enough undergraduate credits at the Citadel and the University of Georgia that --- this is before you had to have a graduate degree to enter law school --- so when I finally got out of World War II I could go straight into the University of Georgia Law School. But, I went on into the Army Air Corps. I was first called to, I think, Montgomery, Alabama, and then they sent me down to Biloxi, Mississippi, and then to San Antonio, and then to Fort Worth, and then to Winfield, Kansas, and then to Victoria, Texas, and Mt. Agora, Allen, Texas, where I was classified as a fighter pilot and that's where I transitioned and learned how to fly a very difficult airplane to fly, and that was the old P40.

Then, I spent a little time in Moody Air Force Base at Valdosta, and mainly just waiting for delivery of latest fighter that we had, and that was the P51D at Sarasota Army Air Base. And when the P51s arrived, and they sent 18 of us down there to transition in those air craft for, as they said, operational training. And we had no idea what they had in mind for us at that time. But I remember that in addition to the 18 of us that went down there, there were 2 Iranian pilots. They were captains of the Iranian air force. What a difference now. I doubt if we would have any Iranian pilots in the air force today. But when we completed that they put us on a Pullman, and for 5 days we were on that Pullman, going from Sarasota to Seattle, Washington. And of course when they said our destination was Seattle we knew we were going to the Pacific. Then, with our air craft loaded on an escort carrier, we headed out to Honolulu with our air craft aboard. And, when we got there, then our air craft went on to Guam, which we had already taken --- acquired Guam. And they flew us to Guam to join our air craft. Then from the there, the battle of Iwo Jima was about to take place. I was not involved in the -- this was a Navy and Marine operation, the battle of Iwo Jima. But we were there waiting for -- for Iwo to be secured so that we could move in as fighter groups to escort B-29s in their rage over Japan. And that's what happened. Now, you know, I just keep going on Bob, and I think your question was, "How you got into politics?"

SHORT: Right.

MITCHELL: And I'm talking about World War II.

SHORT: Well, that's history. That's what we want. But let's talk for a minute now about your --- after service you went to the Law School at the University of Georgia.

MITCHELL: Yeah, but one thing I've got to tell you -- because we've got some old bulldogs and other researchers that have an interest in flying, I'm sure, and World War II history. But I've got to tell you about this Georgia boy's first escort mission escorting B-29s over Japan. And it was over Tokyo itself. That was my very first mission. And, what we would do is the bomber's would be in a bomber stream, and we would just fly alongside of them to protect them from any air craft that might be coming. Of course, I looked down below and there was the city of Tokyo.

At that time, in order for us to do these long-range missions, the ingenuity of the air craft mechanics had devised a 163 gallon external wing tank on each of the wings of the P-51. Now the P-51 was designed for only a 75 gallon tank, and that could be operated internally, switching tanks. The 165 gallon tanks, we were told, we had to manually switch. We had to keep time as to when you were going to run out of fuel and make a switch to the other tank. And if you didn't do that, if it ran out, you might fall in vapor lock, and your engine would shut off and never start again. And there I was flying over the city of Tokyo, and all of a sudden all of my other pilots were up here and I was going down there. And everything was quiet. And I realized that my engine had stopped. But I switched over and it caught back up.

But I just couldn't resist telling that story. But that was my first experience. Anyway, I finished the air force and immediately came back after I was separated. And, as a matter of fact I was separated in February of 1946, I guess it was. And the next month I went right onto law school.

SHORT: Let's stop for a minute. I want to get your -- get your mouth a little there.

MITCHELL: Talking too much!

SHORT: No, you're doing good. You're doing good.

BREADEN: Great.

SHORT: Yeah. This is what we love. Okay, so now, we've got that. Now, I'm trying -- we're trying to get you back into Dalton from the University of Georgia. You did come back to Dalton after you finished the University of Georgia.

MITCHELL: I came back to Dalton.

SHORT: And practiced law.

MITCHELL: Yeah, after finishing law school I came back and joined my father and uncle in practicing law. The firm Mitchell & Mitchell was founded the year of my birth, 1924. And, later my older brother, who served in the Navy during World War II -- he had gone to law school before Pearl Harbor, but when the war was over he came back. He had married, and got a job with Judge Jule Felton at the court of appeals. And went to Emory and got his law degree there. And he also joined us. So, that was the foundation I had in starting the practice of law.

I'd been practicing for about, oh, less than three years when -- when I separated from service. I say separated instead of discharged because I signed on in the inactive reserve. And, you know, all you did was just get something in the mail every now and then. You didn't have any meetings and you didn't have any responsibilities, but a lot of times I wouldn't even open the mail. But this time, this one looks sort of official and I opened it. And they said, "Lieutenant, we want you to come to Montgomery, Alabama. You're going on active duty during the Korean War." And so, I was recalled and --- because I'd gone to law school instead of putting me in the exotic jets that I'd never flown, they said, "Well, we need a legal officer up in Prescal, Maine. We're just going to make you a legal officer and send you to Prescal where they have two seasons: winter and the 4th of July. And so that's what happened. They sent me up there and I said, "My Lord, this is a Georgia boy in this kind of weather?" And you know, I was married then and had children and I noticed the first thing was that the houses along the roads were all right next to the roads. And I said, "Why would people do that because of all the traffic noise?" Of course I realized it was because of the snow.

But anyway, before my family could join me, they transferred me to Wilmington, Delaware, at the New Castle Air Force Base, where I stayed until I was separated from the service in the Korean War. I spent about 16 or 17 months in the Korean War, and during that time a very fine man who became a dear friend of mine was the current solicitor general. But people were unhappy with his service. And some people were prevailing upon me to give it a shot at running. And I was in the military now, keep in mind, and my dad said, "Well, you know, we'll help, but you've got to come home now on weekends now and do your campaigning," and I did that.

And while I was in JAG at New Castle Air Force Base I ran and was elected solicitor general of the Cherokee circuit, which consisted of Murray County, Whitfield, Gordon County

and Bartow. That's Cartersville, Calhoun, Chatsworth and Dalton. And I was released, I guess, probably in November, about a month before my time expired. And that's because my Uncle John contacted Senator Russell, and said, "Erwin needs a little preparation time. Get him home." And so Senator Russell got me home about a month early. And that's my beginning in politics.

SHORT: So then as I recall, Henderson Lanham passed away. He was a congressman. And you decided to run for Congress.

MITCHELL: Well, before that I spent 4 years in the district attorney's office, the solicitor's office. And, the presiding judge that I worked with announced that he was not gonna run for reelection. Well, I was only 31-years-old. And, folks would say, "Well, look, this is time for you to run. And, you've been on the circuit for 4 years." And I said, "Yeah, you think I can get elected?" "Oh, we'll help you, we'll help you." And so I did run and was elected Superior Court judge at the age of 31.

And, I enjoyed that service very, very much. But, after I'd only been on the bench for a little over a year, Henderson Lanham, who was the congressman from the seventh congressional district, was killed in an automobile-train collision. And, the seat in Congress came open. And here again -- and Bob, you know, the -- every person's got a right to say no. But, all of my adventures in politics were brought on by someone else encouraging me. Literally, it was not an ambition I had, because I had no thought. I'd gotten to know Judge Lanham real well. Had great admiration for him. We were supporters of him, and I was just saddened about his death and the loss to all of us. But the folks kept coming, including some folks over where he lived, in Rome, saying, "We want you to run." And I did. And, we really had a short but rather --- rather heated contest.

A very distinguished criminal attorney named Bobby Lee Cook was one of the candidates and Judge Manning from Cobb County was the other. So we had a 3 man race. At that time the Cherokee -- the 7th District was comprised of 14 counties: Murray, Gordon, Whitfield, Catoosa, Dade, Walker, Floyd, Gordon, Bartow, Douglas, Haralson, Polk, all the way down to the --- actually below Atlanta in Douglas County and Haralson. So, I ran and I was very fortunate in that election. And won 12 out of those 14 counties. This is a time of the county unit system, as you remember. Of course, that's another story.

SHORT: Yeah.

MITCHELL: But anyway, I went to Washington and without -- just as happy as I could be, sitting on the bench. I love the law. Still love the law. It's been my life. But somehow I always seemed to get entangled with the political adventures. And so I began my first term, which was during the Eisenhower administration, and served with people like Lyndon Johnson, who was the majority leader. Jack Kennedy, of course both of them were vying to become the Democratic nominee, you know. Of course Richard Nixon was the vice president. Probably the greatest speaker ever was Sam Rayburn from Texas. He was the speaker of the house at that time. And, Carl Vinson from Milledgeville was the Admiral. He was known as the Admiral of our country's Navy, because he was chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. And Dick Russell, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. And at that time, Senator Talmadge had been elected. So, those are the notables that I served with, including Phil Landrum, and he may have been your Congressman.

SHORT: He was.

MITCHELL: Yeah, and he was a dear friend of mine.

SHORT: Georgia back then had a Congressional delegation that had built up a lot of seniority.

MITCHELL: Oh yes. And that we miss so much today. Because all of the military facilities that we have relate back to the Talmadge/Vinson times. But they were, you know -- they were respected not only within the Congress, but they were respected everywhere for their knowledge and their service.

SHORT: If I remember correctly, you were on the space program. One of your committees. And that was before we went to the moon!

MITCHELL: That was when --- if you remember it was announced that, "We're going to go to the moon." And the 7 original astronauts came before the --- this was the House Committee on Science and Astronautics. As a matter of fact, right over your left shoulder is a photograph of that committee and us receiving our Congressional flag. But, we had Senator Glenn and all of the other astronauts came before us. They were just --- of course, I was a kid. I was 32-years-old at the time. But, John Glenn I guess was older than I was. But he and the other 6 came and were just unbelievable. It was a fascinating experience, because I -- Overton Brooks from Louisiana was Chairman of the Committee. And, even though I'd only been there a short time, I was the fourth-ranking majority member on the committee.

And I know a trip I'll never forget. He asked me to come down to Alabama to register my arsenal. And that was the time, if you remember, we had hypothecated the one who had designed and implemented the -- what were they called? Back in World War II? The unmanned bombers that were coming from Wernher von Braun.

SHORT: Right.

MITCHELL: Was there, heading the regular arsenal and preparing us for the boosters for the space committee. And, he was really a fascinating man, and if he was anything other than a scientist, I don't think he ever was a --- not saying he was just a scientist, and this was just part of his inner being. But yes, I was on the original space committee, and I still have that interest. But those were quite remarkable days, back in the beginning.

SHORT: So you were elected to fill out the term of a former congressman, and then you were reelected for another term.

MITCHELL: I was reelected, you know, I'd had no Democratic opposition, but I did have Republican opposition. I just --- you'll have to explain why, but I always seemed to have opposition. But I was reelected. But now, this is an oral history of, not just me, but what I observed, what was going on in Washington and in Georgia and in the world. My antennas had been really --- although interested in politics --- had been directed toward the law. When I got up

there, of course, it was all politics. And, I began quickly to find out that my philosophy was probably not the prevailing philosophy in the state of Georgia. And there were things that were coming up for our vote, that I was having a struggle voting for. But for a year I did that. And I didn't like it one bit, but I did it. After I was reelected I said, you know, one member of our delegation told me the first day I arrived. He said, "Now Erwin, you just be quiet. Stay away from those damn newspapers. And you can be here as long as you want." And just voters and delegation votes.

But my second year that became harder and harder and I had some votes that were not earth-shaking, but yet --- they stirred a little --- a ripple or two back in Georgia. For example, when the statehood for Hawaii came up for a vote, I couldn't find any reason not to vote for Hawaii to become a state. But I was the only member of the Georgia delegation who did that. When the National Defense Education Act, which was, you know, sort of akin to the --- it was federal aid to education, and course I had benefited immeasurably by the GI Bill, putting me through law school with my dad's help. And I couldn't find no good reason to vote against it. I voted for it, but I was the only member of the Georgia delegation that did.

And then, my dear friend Phil Landrum sponsored with a Republican Congressman for a while named Griffin. Landrum/Griffin Bill, which was a labor bill, and it was one that never had any committee hearings on it or anything, and I this is probably the vote that bothered me the worst. Not because I voted against the bill, but because it had the name of my friend that I really admired and respected, Phil Landrum. But I voted against that and that caused all kinds of activity by the folks in Georgia who felt like that was a pro-union bill. I did feel like it was a pro-worker --I mean it was an anti-worker bill. It was not in the best interest of workers, but I thought it had nothing to do with unions. But anyway, I told you some of the things that began to cause people to be concerned about me and me be concerned about whether I was, you know, in tune with the people that sent me up there. But after the time passed with the Landrum/Griffin bill, people began to -- those that had not really agreed with me about my vote on that bill, were telling me, "Well, you know, tomorrow's another day. You'll get seniority. You'll stay." But I didn't stay and didn't run for reelection. Whether I could've been reelected or not, I don't know. I think I could, because the friendships that I had built up throughout the district were good, strong friendships. But that's not why I didn't run.

I didn't run for two reasons. I had three children. Back at that time the Congress didn't stay in session from January till December. Usually broke about Labor Day. What I would do is I'd put my children in school in Virginia -- I mean in Georgia, and then in January move to Virginia and put them in school there. I had a son and 2 daughters. Son was the oldest. He really -- this was really bothering him badly. The girls were alright. My wife was alright. But it was really not a good situation. And besides that, when I ran for the Congress, we decided that I would break completely with my law firm. I thought that any conflict of interest questions wouldn't be possible, so I received absolutely no income from Mitchell & Mitchell. So there I was with a wife and three children, trying to maintain a home in Virginia, and one in Georgia, with 2 mortgages. This is mortgage time now, and a salary of 22,500 dollars a year. And, because of good friends at First National Bank in Dalton, I was able to borrow the money and I in fact subsidized myself from the time I was in Washington till we decided it was just a frugal thing to come on back and start practicing law. And that's what I did.

I had no intention of running for the Senate, the State Senate, initially. But, the last year that I was up in Washington, the integration situation was getting worse and worse as far as Georgia's concerned. Of course, the Supreme Court had already ruled. We were making very

little headway in Georgia, as you remember. And so I was being very vocal on my feeling that this was the law and we didn't want the University of Georgia or the University system of Georgia or the public schools of Georgia being radically affected by the anti-integration forces that were prevalent in Georgia at that time. And, so I was invited and made speeches all over the state, advocating that we keep the public schools open. That we go ahead and comply with the law where the University was concerned. And, my dad said, "Well, son, you know, the best platform to keep that going is just go to the State Senate and get elected." And I did. And I was elected to represent the senate district in Atlanta for 2 years back during the county unit system.

SHORT: Those were very historical times.

MITCHELL: Those were historical times, and you know, I look back at that and think about the folks that I joined in the state Senate. And, if you'll remember, and this certainly is your cup of tea, Bob. Of course, Governor Vandiver, who I admired, had great respect for, made that famous, "No, Not One" speech. Well, there was one bill in the state Senate that -- I can't remember what it was, but it involved the schools --- and it involved integration. There were only 4 no votes against it, and that was Zell Miller, myself, Ed McWhorter from Athens-Clarke County, and Charlie Brown from Fulton County. And back then Charlie Brown, you know, it was the old county unit, he was the only senator. In those days it was really serious, and you may remember the days of the Sibley Commission. The Sibley Commission had a tremendous amount to do with changing public opinion. And of course the business community said, "We can't think about, you know, having tuition grants to our public schools. We can't think about the lack of accreditation, maybe, from our colleges and universities."

So almost overnight, Governor Vandiver changed his mind, and all of those wonderful people that I was serving with changed their minds too. And it really was an example that the people that were elected to serve, the majority of the people that were elected to serve in the general assembly of Georgia at that time, their heart was in the right place. They felt like that the constituents didn't really appreciate that. And as a consequence it sort-of put up a barrier to moving forward on the integration-segregation course. But as soon as they made that bill, I don't know of anyone that lost his seat by following the governor's lead, and the lead of Charlie Pannell who was the majority leader, and Carl Sanders. And others of course. Carl Sanders became governor, and was an outstanding governor, as you know.

And, but those were historic times. And, that stayed around for a while and at that time, because of -- I guess a certain notoriety that I'd achieved because of being the sole vote on a number of national legislative priorities, the news media and some influential individuals were advocating that I run for governor. And I'll tell you that I knew, there's no way that this fellow from Whitfield county, with a track record like mine, at that time in life, was going to be elected Governor. But it was a setting where my views, which I did not think were radical, could be exposed to all of Georgia. And I was invited to Albany, to Valdosta, to Gainesville, to Rome, Atlanta, Athens, where I would voice these views. And I say that they were simple things like, "Keep our public schools open. Let's have a two-party system. Let's do away with the county unit system. It's absurd, it's ridiculous."

And things of that nature, which a lot of people didn't like, but it turns out that all those things happened. And they happened for a reason because that was the right thing. And so I hope that my voicing those things, and the media picking up on those, caused some people to begin to think. You know, maybe it caused us to make those changes a little bit quicker than we normally

would, but it was just going to happen.

SHORT: Do you remember the three governors' fight?

MITCHELL: Yes.

SHORT: Tell us your memories of that.

MITCHELL: Well, they -- of course we were supporters of M. E. Thompson at that time. And as I remember Herman just took over the office. And M.E. had to find him someplace else. And, of course I think the courts finally ruled and that was accepted, but that was one of the trying times -- another trying time was back during the Gene Talmadge administration, where the university system actually lost its accreditation, because of the governor interfering with the board of regents. And I think that really was what brought Gene Talmadge down to earth, but here again it was the county unit system back in those days and south Georgia was ruling the roost.

SHORT: Well, in that year, 1946, Jimmy Carmichael actually outpoled Gene Talmadge, but the county unit system kept Talmadge.

MITCHELL: Jimmy Carmichael from Cobb County.

SHORT: Right. Right, he was a heavy choice of the modern thinkers in Georgia at the time. And quite an individual.

MITCHELL: Yeah. And back at that time we were really laboring, and I say laboring under the illusion, that we only had one party. But we really had two parties back then. And, when I was in Washington, all of us were elected as Democrats, but we certainly didn't think alike, all of us. I felt my thinking to was more akin to Phil Landrum and Prince Preston who was down in Savannah if you remember, and J.L. Pilcher of Meigs, Georgia, and that's just about as south Georgia as you can get, down in Meigs. And he was a wonderful, wonderful man and a very progressive individual and a tremendous asset to Georgia. Yeah, those were interesting times. And with the two-party system, that I was such a strong advocate of, I didn't intend for the republicans to just take over.

SHORT: Well, you know, it's said, and I believe that we actually had two parties all along.

MITCHELL: Oh yeah.

SHORT: You had the Rivers-Arnall faction, and you had the Talmadge faction. And today, and I hope you'll agree, the Talmadge faction of that day would have been republicans.

MITCHELL: Yes. No question about it. No question about it. But I think the delineations between the parties is slowly becoming more defined, but we've got we've got religious issues involved that I don't think we had back in those days. There was no issues concerning, you

know, gay marriage or abortion. And now, that seems to play a tremendous role in Georgia. And the evangelicals have a -- churches are so influential in Georgia politics. And the race issue is going to be very interesting in that regard in Georgia as well as nationally.

SHORT: What do you think caused the, I won't say demise, but the loss of power by the democratic party in Georgia.

MITCHELL: Well, you know, I don't profess to be an expert in that, but when the schools became integrated, that did not change the depth of feeling in a lot of Georgia. Civil rights movement and, of course, Martin Luther King is one of my heroes. I mean, really, what a wonderful person. But when I was coming along and had this great admiration for Martin Luther King, he was being demonized by a lot of prominent political figures in Georgia. He was a communist. And a man of bad morals. Just, a lot of bad things. So, that feeling has taken some generations to pass. And so, the civil rights activity in Washington with Lyndon Johnson -- and I had tremendous respect, and I think was a wonderful president. And I think he still could have been elected even because of Vietnam. I still think he could have been elected if he'd chosen to run.

\*Break\*

MITCHELL: I'll tell you one thing that I didn't tell you that I haven't really told a few people in my life. But this is the Richard Russell Library, and ---

SHORT: Do we want to get this?

BREADEN: Yeah it's on.

MITCHELL: The first year I was up there and I was just getting settled, and I say Senator Russell and his family, and the Mitchell family had already a long history. And I was elected, you know, what they termed a landslide, but I went up there. I've been a younger superior court judge in the state. The youngest prosecuting attorney in the state. And Senator Russell had the Georgia delegation in a little place up in the capital where we had a quail supper. And, which was very enjoyable and I, of course, knew everybody, but I was really still getting to know them and feel my way around.

And he said to me, just the two of us. He said, "Erwin, I expect you to succeed me when I retire." Now, you talk about a scared young man. I mean, that just absolutely blew the boots off of me. Dick Russell wasn't wrong very often, but he was wrong then. It just wasn't my destiny to succeed him. I would've had to change a lot of what was within me to have continued to be reelected for the period of time it would've taken to succeed Senator Russell.

SHORT: Let's talk about one of your favorite projects of all time, and that is the Georgia Project.

MITCHELL: Okay. Now that is -- now we're really getting up to date right now. Back in the --- you know, I guess it was over 15 years ago in the early '90s, this area began to have an increase in the Latino population. My youngest daughter was a paraprofessional at a Roan Street

school in the city of Dalton, and about 1993, she started -- literally, tears would come in her eyes, about what was happening. She said, "We're getting all of these little Latino children who can not speak a word of English, and we have no teachers who can speak Spanish. And everybody's just wringing their hands and the school board's not doing anything. They're just acting like it doesn't exist."

And the truth of the matter, the school board was --- because this was such a strange thing to happen in northwest Georgia, they had no idea how to go about it, nor did anyone else. But they were sending people out to say, "What do you do in a situation like this?" Well, they weren't getting any answers. They weren't getting any Spanish-speaking teachers either. Then I would tell Leslie, my daughter, "Well, this is horrible. Something really needs to be done. I'll talk to some of the school board people." But I'd say, "I'm not an educator." "Well, Daddy you can do something." And I know one of the media people asked my daughter, Leslie, "Say, why did you think your Daddy could do something about it?" She said, "Well, he always did."

And, anyway, the next year it really got more pronounced, and she enlisted the aid of the teachers. Then the teachers started coming to me, and saying, "You know, don't get me in trouble. Don't reveal what I'm telling you, but here it is. We've got a horrible situation. These kids keep coming into our school. They're wonderful little kids. They behave, they are not a problem, except we can't talk with them. And they can't speak with us. And it's just getting worse and worse. We're trying as hard as we can, but we're making no progress." And, so with that I just said, "Well, let me think about it the last day in." And the editor of the newspaper, he was a friend who was sort-of a political ally, and I got him and about that time the chamber of commerce asked me to chair a committee that would be a group of us older guys, the mentors. And we would just gather together a group of mentors that could talk with young people about what we had learned through life and all of that and that was to be my project. And I turned it down. And then I was asked again if I would, and I said, "Well, wait a minute. I'd accept that role if I could chose the project."

And so I told them my project is to try to do something about this influx of non-English speaking children in our public schools. And they said, "Okay." So I got together a committee of just four people. But that gave us an aura of legitimacy, rather than me just getting a group of people and saying, "Look, we want to go into the school system and find out what you all are doing wrong." That doesn't really make you welcome, you know. But since it sort of had the auspices of the chamber of commerce and I contacted them and the folks at Roan Street and they said, "We're delighted to have you and we'll schedule where you can go in and with whom you can talk." And I told my folks. I said, "We're not going to pay any attention to where they tell us to go or to whom we have the ability to talk. We're going to talk with anyone we want to."

And now that time, the teachers had told me some folks for us to talk with. And we went in, and our eyes --- I will never forget it. I've lived here all of my life. I had noticed more brown-skinned folks living in the community, in the automobiles and things. But I hadn't no earthly idea what was happening in Dalton, Georgia, in northwest Georgia, where you would see at that time, one out of every three children was brown-skinned. More brown-skinned than black-skinned. And, so this was really shocking. I began to write everyone. I wrote the governor. I wrote the chairman of the board of regents. And all of these people would reply to me. I wrote to the superintendent of schools. I wrote to the -- about that time Zell Miller had appointed Johnny Isaacson to the chair of the state board of education. I wrote and talked with Johnny Isaacson. And, all these folks got interested. Not that they really did anything to help. But they thought this was a -- finally, and this was when superintendent -- what's her name -- Schrenko was the --

and she just passed it on down, but it got down to a person that really understood what I was talking about and she contacted me. And she sent me material to read and the people to contact throughout this country, which I did.

And we began to formulate an idea as to how we could do something to help the teachers and students in the public schools of Dalton. And there the enrollment and Latino rate was growing from one out of three to -- it finally got up to nine out of ten! Ninety percent Latino enrollment. And it's just unbelievable. But in the meantime we were making some progress, as that went along. And I was getting a lot of cooperation out of the leaders in the community, the industry, because certainly the industry was the reason these folks were coming -- to fill the jobs that were really critical at that time. Because the carpet industry was just running out of people, and they needed these people. And they were good workers. And with the rare exception were all, you know, model contributing members of the community.

So, finally, Bob Shaw, who is chairman of Shaw Industries and founded of Joy Industries, lifelong friend of mine -- he and I would talk, and he was aware of what I was interested in and he asked me one day. He said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "Well, Bob, we've finally reached a determination as to what we had to do. And that is we've got to get some teachers from Mexico or somewhere in Latin America, to come up here and work in our schools. Because these kids -- I mean, you could bring an Anglo-Spanish speaker, but they're not of the same culture. And that cultural aspect is absolutely a dynamite thing." And he said, "Well, you know, I've got a partner down in Monterrey, Mexico, he's connected with some school down there. Would you like for me to contact him?" I said, "Go get it!" And to his everlasting credit, I don't think that Bob's partner was all that enthusiastic about it, but I think Bob was very tenacious and stayed after him.

And finally, out of the clear blue, I got a letter written by Dr. Victor Zuniga from the University of Monterrey. It told me that he had been designated as the Mexican director of the Georgia Project. Not our name. It was their name. And that he wanted to begin communicating with me. And that started a communication, and that was back in about 1995 -- or '94. Anyway, we kept saying, "You've got to come up here and see what this situation is." He'd say, "You come down here." I said, "No, it's not down there, it's up here! This is where this has to be addressed." "You come down there. You come down to us." And so finally, they prevailed, and I took the superintendent of schools, the chairman of the board of education, a teacher or two, and some of the people that were working with me.

And we went down and met with people at the University of Monterrey. The first day that we got there, they put us in a little room that'd be just half the size of this office. But we had a good meeting. And so, we got a call the next morning at the hotel to say, "Okay, we're changing locations. We came about three times as far and about three times as many people. By the third day we were almost a ballroom of folks at the university who were listening to what we had to say. And now, one of the folks that I've continued to work with, who's now a professor at UCLA, and written a number of books about the Georgia Project. I asked him. I said, "Hernandez, tell me. Why is that you all insisted that we come down here, rather than you all come to Dalton?" He said, "We wanted to find out if you were real. We have."

And so, just a couple or three weeks later, they came to Dalton, and the project was well underway. The funniest thing, is the folks down at the University of Monterrey, I think they felt that the carpet industry was going to fund us and pay the bill. Of course, the carpet industry hadn't promised us any money at all. Nobody'd promised us any money. But we had done this elaborate planning, and we had a plan and force that we were going to put into operation, the fall

of 1996. And we didn't have one dime to fund it. And this was the spring of '96. Well, you know, this is oral history and you don't need an old man not telling you the truth. Out of the blue, the city of Dalton, composed of five folks. And I kid them, they were all bright and intelligent, and I'd say, "Here you got five fellows who can't speak good English!" Say, look here, we're going to give the Georgia Project \$750,000 over a three-year period to get you off the ground. And that was just like manna from heaven.

And believe me, we had kept them informed after everything. We kept the whole community -- and the newspaper. This is why I have such respect for being open with the news media to let people know what's going on. They came to our aid and we got that \$750,000 plus we got about half a million dollars from the federal government, plus we were beginning to get, through Max Cleland and Paul Coverdell, federal funding. And we continued to get it, to a lesser degree, through Johnny Isaacson and Saxby Chambliss, till it got to be such a hot issue that I -- and it just ran its course in the money. But, what we had done during the 10 years, over 10 years we had operation -- we had brought 60 some odd teachers. These are graduate teachers, experienced teachers in Mexico to work in Georgia schools. Now, it's not just working with the immigrant non-English speaking kids, but what these teachers did, was to teach Spanish to Georgia teachers. But they taught them the little gimmicks that what only one of the same culture has, to where they could take an Anglo teacher and say, "Now, in this culture, this is the way kids will react."

So they have been a tremendous help to our -- as much help to our teachers as to both the English-speaking and non-English speaking. And through a connection that we made with the Center for Prime Linguistics in Washington, we've provided staff development for several hundred English-speaking teachers. Teaching them the tricks of the trade to teach immigrant children. And that's a book in itself to tell you how we've made contact with them and how that developed. We took that money and we provided scholarships to Georgia graduates from high school who are bilingual, and gave them two years of full scholarships to Dalton State College.

And later on, we went to South Georgia, and did the same thing at ABAC. And we had teachers down in Colquitt County, and of course had them in Chatsworth and Dalton and Calhoun, but it was a very expensive project. And we did get considerable volunteer funding by local businesses and individuals. But it was too big to be funded by the community chancellor, or whatever you call it now. Because it was a million-dollar operation. The local schools that we worked with, would have had to put up half a million dollars a year, and we would get half a million dollars a year to help provide this program. But the beauty of it -- why it's really sort of been the love of my life -- is that although we're, theoretically and in reality, non-functional, we still continue to operate, because we've got at our local school districts, teachers that we've brought from Mexico that are still there, and will be there. They have become citizens, or they have married. And what we've taught the American teachers, has been taught by those American teachers to other American teachers, to other American teachers, to other American teachers. We've got those kids that have got scholarships from us, that have gone through school, and are now becoming graduate teachers. And they've gone into the school system teaching. They've gone into Georgia Tech and become engineers. They've become architects. They've become bankers. They've become contributing members of society.

So, all of my life, as you know, if you've ever had sort of a prominent role in your community, people are going to call on you to do public service things. Well, public service to me is -- anyone who goes into public service is automatically my hero. Because it is a wonderful undertaking. But anyway, I did a lot of things in the community that I've never, in my eighty-

four years, ever had one thing that I saw produce results as quickly as the Georgia Project. When we brought that first teacher into the schools of Dalton, it changed the whole attitude of the school. I told you about the meeting, me taking four folks to go to Roan Street. It was a sour atmosphere. There were no smiles. The children weren't smiling. The teachers weren't smiling. It was just like, this is sad, this is pathetic, this, you know, it made you feel bad. As soon as we got the first teacher and those brown-skinned kids saw that person of their culture, that told them that my white-skinned teacher, and my white-skinned principal, she respects us. They're going to get somebody here to help us. And it wasn't a couple of months later that you'd go there and see the whole atmosphere in the school had changed. Both the Anglo teachers, Monterrey teachers, the administrators, and, in particular, the kids.

SHORT: Is the project still alive?

MITCHELL: The project is alive only in that respect. But we have no funding. I'm sure it's alive in part, in many parts of the country, because we had so many inquiries as to how to do it, you know, and we were happy to share what we did. We won many national awards. And, you know, not that that necessarily means it was that great, but it was because I'm telling you it was. I saw it. And, it just helped so many people. And continues to.

SHORT: What is the health of the carpet industry today.

MITCHELL: Carpet industry is having tough times, very tough times. As about all industries are. And it's probably a mature industry now. I think we've seen our growth. I think the carpet industry is going to stay right here in the center of it. Of course, it's diversified solely into all kinds. It's not really the carpet industry anymore, it's a floor covering industry. You've got laminates. You've got woods. You've got acrylic. You've got everything, besides carpet. And all of the majors have gotten into those things. But I say it is a mature industry. It hasn't tended to go overseas, like so many industries. I can't ever say that won't happen. But it's so situated with all these service industries that supply the carpet industry at hand, that it might be difficult, and I think their shipping costs rise and makes it more difficult for the Chinese to, you know, we can still compete because of certain costs.

SHORT: As you look back over a very illustrious career, what is your proudest accomplishment?

MITCHELL: Oh, my proudest accomplishment! And I'm sure everybody says this, but I can't say it with any more sincerity than me. It's my wife and children. And grand-children. And great-grandchildren. That the wife and I had three children and I'm proud of the fact that they all had some identity at the University of Georgia. My son, he graduated from the University of Georgia. Well, I did have a daughter who lives in Atlanta now, that she went to Queens College in Charlotte. But she's a Bulldog, through and through. And my grandchildren all went to the University of Georgia. Now my great-grandchildren are coming along, and my first one is graduating from Lovett this year, and she's applied. And I'm sure that the rest of them are too young to be thinking about college, but she'd be the first of my great-grandchildren to go to the University.

SHORT: What about your biggest disappointment?

MITCHELL: Looks like I could come up with something like that. I feel like George Bush when they asked him what his greatest failure was and he couldn't think of one. Ah. Gosh, Bob, that's a wonderful question, and I wish I had an answer that I could give you. Honestly, it would take some -- I've had, you know, many disappointments. Last Saturday in Baton Rouge was not one. I loved that! And I don't want to be disappointed in Jacksonville this Saturday.

But I've been very fortunate with the health of my family, the success of my family. Well, I guess one of the great disappointments of my life was losing my boyhood friend who stayed my very best friend until the time of his death when he was on in his early '40s. You know, this is a man whose son owns this building now. He was a lawyer. His son is. But this Ray Bates, we started school together and, you look at every school picture, from the first grade on, and I didn't realize it till a couple of years ago with people bring out these pictures -- we were always side by side. But we did everything together. And, he is as close to me, I guess, as a brother can be. And I hated losing him so early in life.

SHORT: If you had your life to do over, would you do anything differently?

MITCHELL: Oh, heavens yes. I mean, I would have to think of the many things I would do differently. Do I think my philosophical view would be different? No. I think so many of us are a product of our environment and our upbringing. And I'm a product of my mom and my dad. I mean, they involved me and all their children in everything that was going on. And, when you've got kids sitting around listening to the evening news with their parents. When they're listening to Fireside Chats with FDR with their parents. When they're listening to Amos & Andy on the radio with their parents.

You know, I feel like I was taught that honor was something that was important and truth was something important. My mother, she was -- and all of us, the whole family, my dad too. We were all Methodists. We were Methodists since John Wesley came, practically, I guess. But, she told me, "Don't ever call anyone a liar. That's just not the right thing to say." And I've remembered that all my life. And I know somebody was talking about McCain on the stump and some things he was having to say about Obama. And I just said, "You know what, my mama told me never to call anybody a liar, but that fellow is testing my upbringing."

SHORT: Well, Erwin Mitchell, on behalf of the Russell Library, and the University of Georgia, and Bob Short, I'd like to thank you for being our guest.

MITCHELL: Well, Bob, thank you. Thank you for having me. I hope there's something in there that can be of some use to scholars as they dig into it in the years to come. because I love the University of Georgia, and it's just getting better and better and better.

SHORT: For some reason, I observed that.