

**Betty Vandiver interviewed by Bob Short**  
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**BOB SHORT:** We're deeply honored today to have as our guest again Betty Vandiver, the former first lady of Georgia and wife of Ernest Vandiver, who was Georgia's governor. The last time we visited, Mrs. Vandiver, you were preparing for a Russell family reunion.

**BETTY VANDIVER:** That's right. And it happens every year, it's just kind of like Christmas. It comes in June. It comes on the weekend, the closest to grandmother and papa's anniversary, which is June 24. So, sometimes it's an early Saturday, and sometimes it's late Saturday. But everybody can plan. And if you're not there, then you didn't plan, because you know when it's going to be and you're supposed to be there.

So, my sister-in-law and I, we always have a lasagna supper on Thursday night, and we feed about 100, 115 people at Betty-Ann's house. And that's fun, because it takes a while to get it all made, and I make the lasagna, she makes the salad. I bring the bread, and she has the dessert. I mean, we've been doing it so long it's just set in concrete.

So, anyway, that's the beginning of the Russell reunion, and it goes on until Sunday morning, when Uncle Fielding Russell, his family has a blueberry pancake breakfast. And everybody comes by and gets sausage and blueberries, and leaves from Grandmama's house to go home. So, I mean, it's just a wonderful time, and we enjoy it. And last year, I think we had like 212 or 15 people on Saturday, which is when most of the people can come. But we have that lasagna supper kind of for the out-of-town people that come early. But they just kind of go from that. Anyway, that's a good idea.

But the first one, I don't remember the first one. But I have a picture with my other grandmother and grandfather in it, and I'm about two years old. So, I'm between grandparents and it was wonderful growing up with all grandparents in town. But I remember the one in '36,

and then in '47, when after the war -- and you have to remember, this is something that I think is so wonderful. Grandmother Russell had seven stars in her windows. And for those who don't know about the stars, it meant somebody in her family was in service. And luckily, and I think it's due to Grandmama's prayers, they all came home safe and sound. And so that was at -- the first reunion after the war was in '47. And Ernie and I were getting married on Wednesday, the third of September. And so, Aunt Billie, she was a big bossy bill, she held a reunion for '47, because everybody was home from the service. And then Betty and Ernie were getting married, so everybody had to come anyway. So, we had a reunion in '47 on Monday before Ernie and I married. And he always said he met 100 Russells, and that's about how many were there in '47. And of course, now it's gotten over to 200 on Saturday.

But anyway, that was the next reunion. And since then we have had one every year. That just kind of started it. And so now they come from far and wide, and we have that Russell reunion. Each family takes a service on Saturday morning at the cemetery. Every family is in charge. It started with Aunt Billie's -- the Green family -- and it goes down to the Ellic-Russell family. And so every Saturday, one family will be in charge of a memorial service. And that's when we talk about, well, whatever you want to talk about. And we name the people who graduated from college. They get up and tell them where they graduated from and what they hope to do. New babies are introduced. Now, I've got one introduced last year -- my first great grandchild. And they introduced her. And they do the high school graduations, college graduations, new jobs, babies, weddings, and you know, people don't bring just anybody to the reunion. You have to be pretty serious to bring somebody to the reunion and introduce them to all these people, because if you come back next year with somebody else, that's not the way we do it there. You bring the one. I know when Elizabeth was a kid, she just wouldn't bring any of her boyfriends ever until she met Matt, and then Matt came to the first reunion with her. So, it's nice. We love it, and it everybody seems to enjoy the reunion.

**SHORT:** Everybody knows or has heard of or somehow has encountered the name of Senator Dick Russell. But the Russells as a family was a very unique and talented group of Georgians. Tell us a little about some of the other Russells.

**VANDIVER:** Oh gosh, don't get me started, because I loved all of them. And see, there again, I was lucky to live next door to grandmother and papa. And I was there before the 'young boys,' as my mama used to call them, got married. So therefore, I knew them as bachelors and women who had not married, because they were my aunts and uncles next door. And they would come home to see grandmama and papa so often. I've said one time, I've never felt such love as I did at that time, because we were not some lone grandchildren, see, because like I said, they had thirteen the first batch. But I was about fifth down, and I was next door. And all those aunts and uncles just made me feel so loved, and I loved all of them.

Now, let's see, we could go down. Uncle Gordon Green, who married Aunt Billie, he was an inventor, and he was in World War I. He invented guns, he invented the machine that makes up the M16 key firing, and of course that's so long ago now. But he invented things like that all along. Uncle Jim was with the bank. That's a cute story. He had a stub of a finger. And I don't know how it ever happened, but he said he did it counting money, because he'd been with the bank for so long. And then, let's see, of course you go down and Uncle Walter was real big in the A&P back when A&P was a grocery store. And so was Uncle Bill, as a matter of fact. But he came home when papa died and grandmother was alone. He came home and started farming.

And Uncle Bill was just my -- he was the one that was always there. And Uncle Jeb was a Presbyterian preacher, and ended up being the preacher in the second largest Presbyterian church in America. And that was out in Memphis. And Uncle Jeb was just such a precious person. And Uncle Fielding and Uncle Bill were twins. And you have spoken about Uncle Fielding. Well, Uncle Fielding started at Georgia when it was Georgia Teachers College. Well, he and Aunt Virginia married in '31, I think, or '32, and I was in their wedding. But they were at Statesboro, and they stayed in Statesboro, and Aunt Virginia just died two years ago. Uncle Fielding died. But now the big student union down there is named for Uncle Fielding. And Uncle Alex was a doctor in Barrow County just forever and ever.

And you know, these are the men who went to war too. Uncle Alex was in the Battle of the Bulge. He was behind the lines at times, and he was a medical officer of course. So, he had some horrible experiences. And of course, they all had children that have done well. Aunt Carolyn was a teacher forever and married a Presbyterian preacher. And so, everybody had children except Aunt Ina, Uncle Dick, and Aunt Harriet. So, you can imagine what we've got on hand now. We've got hundreds, and lots of them are itty bitty children. And you can almost tell which family they're from, because they all look like their parents. It's really amazing to me.

But anyway, we still do that every year, and it's just fun. Wonderful. And I don't know whether you know something about any of the rest of them that you want me to talk about. I loved all of them, because they all loved me. I'll put it that way. Excuse me.

SHORT: You mentioned to me that you had a special place in your heart for some of Governor Vandiver's friends.

VANDIVER: Oh, I did. Well, they're more than friends, because all those friends know who they are, and they're all gone now. That's what's so sad. But the people that I held so dear is because at the mansion, the people who helped me personally. And of course you know all those people that I'm talking about that were Ernie's friends. They were his friends in college, all the way through his political career, those same people. And I hate to start naming names with that bunch, because there were about, oh I guess 14, 15, 16 of them. And they payed his entrance fee every time he ran for anything. They took it up and did it, and just payed for it. I hate to bring those up.

But the ones at the mansion that meant so much to me, we had Fanny Smith. Now, Fanny came with me when my second child was born. She spent her Christmas one time with my children because my grandfather had died. Not Grandfather Russell, but Grandfather Milsaps. And she came over and left her family and came and kept Chip and Beth, so that I could go to Winder and be with the family. Well, there's nothing like friendship like that, and love, you know. So, when we went to the mansion, I called Fanny. I said, "Fanny, I can't do it without you. You've just got to come and take care of my children." So, she did. You know, back then we didn't have help as such. We had a man in the kitchen that was a prisoner, and David Walker was one of my best friends. But he was carried back to prison every night. But he came in and he'd fix meals. But David Walker was my right arm and Fanny Smith was both arms. And I was fortunate in that my mother and Ernie's sister were both -- I'm not fortunate that they were widows, but they were, and they could come and stay at the mansion when I was gone with Ernie.

So, that was wonderful. I had them, and then T.A. Smith and Ben Gaw, they drove Ernie from the time he was running for lieutenant governor, and they were with us when we left the

mansion. And those are the kind of people you just -- we had troopers out in the back, and I love all of them, but they didn't -- it wasn't the same as Ben Gaw and T.A. Smith and Fanny. Oh, dear Fanny. We're still in touch with her children. Of course, she's gone. But those were the people that really made it possible for me to do what I could do to help Ernie. And without good help with the children, I never would have gone out the door, because Ernie and I, that's not the way we worked. Those are the people that just mean so much to me. And I miss them all because they were all so good.

SHORT: Let me tell you a story.

VANDIVER: Please.

SHORT: When Governor Sanders was inaugurated -- of course, he followed Governor Vandiver -- T.A. Smith and I walked out of the Capitol with Governor Vandiver carrying some boxes that he had. That was his final trip when he left the governor's mansion for the last time. I'll never forget that.

VANDIVER: I didn't know that, Bob. But I wonder now what was in those boxes. You know, he'd probably just cleared out his desk.

SHORT: Yeah, yeah.

VANDIVER: Or just things that were in the drawer. But wouldn't it be interesting to have that box? T.A. was a wonderful person. And I can remember when Ernie and I were campaigning, and just the two of us in a car, and T.A. was in the GBI at that time. And he would meet us at just various places over Georgia and just tell us what was going on, and he would tell us what he's heard and so forth. And I know one time -- I guess this is all right -- one time he brought Ernie a gun -- a pistol. And he said, "I think you need to have this with you." And we carried that pistol with us in the briefcase or under the seat or somewhere. I didn't know why we needed it, but T.A. thought we might need it.

SHORT: We got cheated. You didn't get to live in the new mansion.

VANDIVER: Well, I don't call it cheated, because except for all that help -- they've got 26 people out there as a staff now. I could've used about half of them at sometime or other. But it's a beautiful place. I did get to spend the night there one night. Roy Barnes invited us to spend the night. And we stayed in the Presidential Suite, and it was just wonderful. I loved the family parlor upstairs. But I don't feel cheated. We loved that old house.

SHORT: Leaked.

VANDIVER: Well, they said that, but you know, I don't ever remember it actually leaking. I can remember them coming out and fixing the roof. But I don't remember where it did. Now, when grandmother -- now that's an interesting story. Now, here I go. Grandmother Russell was Uncle Dick's hostess and she lived at the mansion and took care of the mansion. She took the back room and put up double decker iron cots. I can just remember them right now. And that

was for grandchildren to come over in the summer, just like any other grandmother. And we took that room and made a playroom for our children out of it. Painted it blue and we called it the blue room, and it was up there and it was a nice, wonderful place for them to be and to have their little TV and their games and the children came and visited. I can see right now, they always used to turn the furniture over and make like it was tunnels, and then they'd jump over it and make like it was horse jumps. So, I don't think my children suffered at all.

SHORT: How was it raising children in the Capitol -- I mean, in the mansion? You had school. Did you car pool?

VANDIVER: Oh, I car pooled, and I had some of the best friends, and we took our children -- I took my children. I was not going to have state patrol do it. But anyway, I took my children every morning, and I picked them up. Well, in the afternoon, you know, it's hard to believe, but you could let them walk home from Spring Street to the mansion, stop at the drug store, have a Coca-Cola or an ice cream cone or something, and then come on home. Now, that's how innocent and something or other that Atlanta was at that time. You didn't worry about your children. Only rule was they had to be home by five o'clock, because the traffic started getting really bad around the Prado. If you know the Prado, it just circles all over the place. But they had to be home by five o'clock. And that was just like living in Lavonia.

SHORT: Did you miss living in the mansion when you returned to Lavonia?

VANDIVER: No. Not really. Fanny Smith didn't go with me, that was one thing. But no, Ernie and I were both glad, resigned. I do wish that Ernie had had another four years, which came on later, because he did have things that he wanted to do and say and finish that he didn't get to do, because he couldn't succeed himself.

SHORT: Well, during his administration, some historical events that took all his time.

VANDIVER: They did. But you know, we still had a really -- I'd say three out of seven nights we had -- maybe more than that, I guess. Four or five nights we had supper together. Because he kind of planned to be home for supper, and then he would go to a meeting or have men come in and they'd go upstairs to the den and talk about the problems. But he was home a lot at night. I don't think they get to do that well now. But he was always there, and David was in the kitchen. You can't almost ask for anything better.

SHORT: Well, your daughter, Jane Kidd, is chairman of the Georgia Democratic Party.

VANDIVER: That's right.

SHORT: I bet you're very proud of her.

VANDIVER: I am very proud of her. I know her daddy would be proud of her. And he was alive when she was in the House of Representatives. And of course, he kept up with everything, and they talked every night. You know, just because he was putting his finger back in the pie and it was wonderful for him. Well, of course, I'm proud of all my children and

whatever they do, they seem to do well. And I'm just as happy as everything.

SHORT: Well, we've enjoyed talking with you, and I hope you'll promise to come back again when we can spend some more time together.

VANDIVER: Well, you know I'm never out of words. I will talk with you. Well, I'll be glad to talk to you Bob anytime.

SHORT: Thank you.