

**"SOME OF THE PEOPLE WHO ATE  
MY BARBECUE DIDN'T VOTE FOR ME"**

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*The Life of Georgia Governor*

**MARVIN GRIFFIN**

SCOTT E. BUCHANAN



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Marvin Griffin**

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To Kelea, Genie Grace,  
and Mary Claire

In memory of  
Marie Ammons Buchanan  
(1941–2008)



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# Preface

“Hold still, little catfish; all I’m gonna do is gut you.” This line from Marvin Griffin summarizes how I feel about the journey of writing this book. My initial interest in Governor Griffin stems from my master’s thesis, which examined the 1962 Georgia gubernatorial primary, Griffin’s last political hurrah. My initial exposure to Griffin came from anecdotes told to me by my father, Edward Buchanan. From those stories, I found myself drawn to Griffin’s humor. Thus, my interest was sparked to write a biography of the man who served as governor of Georgia during a turbulent time in the state’s history. Along the way, I have found that much of what I thought about Griffin was correct and some incorrect. I am reminded of a line once used to introduce him to a crowd: “the man who has had more lies told about him than anyone else in Georgia.”

My primary purpose in this book is to chronicle Marvin Griffin’s political career and show how dramatically Georgia politics has changed over the past half century. To accomplish that goal, I relied on both primary and secondary sources. Governor Griffin’s papers, such as they are, reside in the Marvin Griffin Collection at Bainbridge College. Unfortunately, the governor did not keep the most comprehensive records, and I harbor strong suspicions that the Griffin papers were highly sanitized as well. On one visit, I found a folder labeled “Illegal Liquor Fund.” When I opened the folder, nothing was there. What records I did find were quite helpful in gaining insights into the more personal side of Griffin. Other sources of primary documents included the Georgia Archives, the Georgia Government Documentation Project at Georgia State University, Georgia’s Political Heritage at the University of West Georgia, the Georgia National Guard Archives, and the Fred Hand Collection at the Troup County Archives in LaGrange.

The real fun of this research, though, lay in another of the primary sources: the interviews. I had the rare opportunity to talk with many of the participants in this story, some of whom have since died. Among those I interviewed were Griffin Bell, John Sammons Bell, Jimmy Bentley, Garland Byrd, Paul Cadenhead, Johnnie Caldwell, Bo Callaway, Cathy Cox, Frank Eldridge Jr., Jack Flynt, Cheney Griffin, Denmark Groover, Michael Herndon, George Hooks, Tommy Irvin, Jamie MacKay, Donald Mees, Reg Murphy, Jack Nelson, Emory Parrish, Bobby Rowan, Bill Shipp, J. R. Smith, Jim Stone, Herman Talmadge, Jimmy Hodge Timmons, Ernest Vandiver, Ben Wiggins, and Jimmy Wiggins. All of these individuals gave me a perspective (and stories) about Governor Griffin that secondary sources simply would not have supplied.

Special thanks go to both former governor Carl Sanders and former Georgia legislator Jimmy Rhodes of Baker County. Governor Sanders unselfishly gave of his time to answer my questions about his early political career and his relationship to Griffin. Very patiently, Governor Sanders allowed me two personal interviews and a number of telephone interviews dating back to 1994. Mr. Rhodes's storytelling ability regarding Griffin gave me a much deeper understanding of the Governor in his latter years than I would ever have had otherwise. At times, I could almost hear Griffin speaking, given Mr. Rhodes's knack for relaying a story.

Newspaper articles make up the major portion of secondary sources. Most articles come from the *Atlanta Journal* and *Atlanta Constitution*. I faced a challenge here in that Griffin never had the best relationship with the Atlanta newspapers, and he was often treated harshly by the news coverage. Sometimes that treatment was warranted; other times it was not. I also tried to neutralize this bias by taking a gander at the other major daily newspapers around the state. In many cases, the perspective of the smaller dailies was much less critical than the Atlanta papers. Another way that I got to "know" Governor Griffin was through his weekly columns in the *Bainbridge Post-Searchlight*. In the end, though, any interpretations—both accurate and mistaken—are my responsibility alone.

This book would not have been possible without the help of others. The pictures in this book were harder to come by than I expected. Most of them are from the collection of the Georgia Archives. I would like to especially thank Gale M. DeLoach of the Georgia Archives for her assistance in tracking down images of the Griffin era. Eli Bortz at Vanderbilt University Press showed interest in the manuscript and encouraged me throughout the review process. To Eli, I express special gratitude for championing

this project. Thank you to the reviewers of this manuscript who helped to make the final product much stronger.

This book took approximately six years to write, which is about four years longer than I anticipated. My wife, Kelea, has endured reading revision after revision. To her go my eternal love and thanks. During the writing of this book, I feel that I have become more immersed in historical Georgia politics than the law should allow. It has also given me a greater appreciation of how profoundly the state has changed over time. At several junctures, I felt ready to put this book down unfinished and walk away. Finally, though, the task is complete. I am reminded of a quote by Winston Churchill: "Writing a book is an adventure. To begin with, it is a toy and an amusement; then it becomes a mistress, and then it becomes a master, and then a tyrant. The last phase is that just as you are about to be reconciled to your servitude, you kill the monster, and fling him out to the public." I fling this book out, warts and all, to the reader.



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# Introduction

“If you didn’t want to like Marvin Griffin, don’t meet him.”<sup>1</sup> In many ways, this one line sums up Marvin Griffin, lieutenant governor of Georgia from 1948 to 1955 and governor from 1955 to 1959. Griffin was undoubtedly one of the most humorous and controversial Georgia governors in the twentieth century. He could be strident and merciless toward his political enemies, but he was a man of contradictions. Through the course of writing this book, I have found a common thread among both Griffin’s most adamant supporters and his most vocal critics: they all personally liked him. Griffin had a personality that was almost impossible to resist. Former Georgia governor and U.S. senator Herman Talmadge always remembered Griffin telling a funny story with people in stitches. Former U.S. attorney general Griffin Bell fondly remembered Griffin as “one of the most colorful governors and the greatest raconteurs we ever had.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, while such humor can serve a politician well, it will not necessarily ensure a favorable legacy.

In a poll conducted in the 1980s, Georgia historians ranked Griffin last among postwar governors in overall job performance.<sup>3</sup> On the surface, this ranking makes sense, particularly when one considers Griffin’s committed defense of racial segregation and the existence of corruption in his administration. Upon further examination, however, Griffin’s political career tells a deeper story about a Georgia that no longer exists, a Georgia that is (to use a trite phrase) “gone with the wind.”

Marvin Griffin lived at a point when Georgia was undergoing profound political changes. The 1950s and early 1960s saw Georgia transforming from a rural-dominated, segregationist culture to a more urban arrangement. With the growing urbanization of the state, voters in cities began to pressure for a greater voice in state government. Eventually,



urban areas became more accepting of desegregation and civil rights for all Georgians. Griffin very much came out of the rural culture that had dominated state politics for most of Georgia's history. In many ways, he was the last holdover of a much older political order. In his seminal study of southern politics, political scientist V. O. Key labeled Georgia as being under "the rule of the rustics." This was an acknowledgment of the influence and power of rural "courthouse gangs" that adorned the Georgia countryside. These cliques not only controlled county politics but also played an enormous role in influencing which statewide candidates would win their county.

Until 1962 two factions, those who supported Eugene Talmadge and those who opposed him, defined the state's Democratic Party at a time when no Republican Party existed. The Anti-Talmadge faction was led first by Governor E. D. Rivers (1937–1941) and then by Governor Ellis Arnall (1943–1947). Rivers was well known for his ability to sense the changing political winds and chart out a new course to benefit himself politically. Initially, he was nominally allied with Eugene Talmadge, but when public opinion began to turn against Talmadge, Rivers abandoned him. Rivers never had any apparent qualms about his tendency to zigzag across the political spectrum in order to achieve political success.

Interestingly, Marvin Griffin's political career began as a politician in the Anti-Talmadge camp with Rivers in the late 1930s. Griffin arguably learned much from Rivers about reading the political tea leaves and taking action to always be on the "right side." In fact, Griffin's ambitious pursuit of political power led him to abandon his political mentor as Rivers became embroiled in corruption controversies at the end of his term in 1941.

During World War II, the leadership of the Anti-Talmadge forces fell to Ellis Arnall. When Griffin re-entered civilian life and politics after the war, he did so within the framework of Anti-Talmadgism when he was named adjutant general of the Georgia National Guard by Arnall. However, when Griffin began to sense that the political ground was moving under his feet, he adroitly switched to the Talmadge faction of Georgia politics. The fact that Griffin was able to accomplish this feat was no small miracle given the contentiousness of both camps during the 1940s. For this reason as much as anything else, Griffin's political career warrants further examination.

Griffin's ambitions were not those of a pure opportunist, however. While he demonstrated an ability in his younger years to adapt swiftly to changing political events, he became unable to adapt as he grew older.

This inability had less to do with a lack of political skill than with Griffin's racial beliefs. While it would be unfair and incorrect to characterize Griffin as a racist—that is, one who harbored hatred for a race—it is true that he was a staunch segregationist who believed in a straight separation of race enforced both culturally and legally. While Griffin had been comfortable associated with Anti-Talmadgism in the 1930s and early 1940s, his personal racial beliefs prevented him from staying in that camp any longer.

As segregation came under attack, Griffin's political career began to revolve around preservation of racial segregation. While many of his critics would later claim that Griffin used race as a wedge issue to divert attention from other issues, such arguments are somewhat specious. If Griffin were nothing more than an opportunist, he would have attempted to mold himself to the new political realities he began to face in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In fact, he did not even try. If anything, he became more strident in his racial rhetoric and stances. Whereas George Wallace in Alabama used race as an issue when it was advantageous, only to abandon racial appeals when he no longer needed them, Griffin did not attempt to do so. Throughout his life, he had firm beliefs about race and did not depart from them for political reasons.

Despite his racial appeals, though, Marvin Griffin was not a segregationist with his head in the ground. He combined his support for segregation with programs and policies aimed at luring economic development to the state. In part, Griffin helped oversee a transformation within Georgia. While industrial expansion was already beginning in the South after World War II, Griffin used his role as governor to become Georgia's "goodwill ambassador" and lure industrial development to the state. Beginning with Griffin, Georgia governors began to expend enormous amounts of time and energy on industry recruitment, first on the domestic level and later internationally. Ironically, it was a governor whose base of support was rural Georgia who helped transform Georgia into a state less dependent on agrarianism. Griffin's attempted gubernatorial comeback in 1962 was partially thwarted by growing numbers of Georgia residents who were from outside the South and had moved to the state because of industrial developments led by Griffin.

During the 1960s, Georgia underwent even greater change. More individuals from northern states came to Georgia, altering the political landscape. Black voters, long disfranchised and excluded from state politics, would gain the right to vote via the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As

time went on, black candidates began running and winning elective office within the state—a prospect that was unimaginable ten or twenty years prior. With this black political empowerment, the state's politics would be changed forever. The practice of Georgia gubernatorial candidates running on blatantly racial issues would dwindle and die completely after the 1970 election.

During the course of Griffin's last gubernatorial campaign in 1962, Georgia's answer to the electoral college, the county unit system, which gave control of statewide elections to the rural areas, was declared unconstitutional. This system, which had been created in the early twentieth century to ensure rural domination of the state's Democratic nomination process, harmed the chances of urban candidates to win statewide offices. From the implementation of the county unit system in 1917 to its demise in 1962, all but one of the state's governors hailed from rural areas. When the county unit system was abolished in 1962, it spelled the end of an era in Georgia politics. Conventional wisdom of the time argued that the downfall of the county unit system immediately hurt Griffin and helped his urbane opponent, Carl Sanders.

A further analysis of the 1962 election itself reveals that Griffin would have probably lost even with the county unit system in place, based on two factors. First, Griffin preached a rigid segregationist policy that had become accepted among Georgians, especially rural ones, during the first half of the twentieth century, but the political landscape was changing by the 1960s. At a time when the Kennedy administration was vigorously pushing civil rights and desegregation, Griffin promised massive resistance to the federal government. Griffin was eager to go down the path being hoed by George Wallace in Alabama and Ross Barnett in Mississippi. Although opinion polls were new and rare in the state, it would appear based on newspaper accounts that a majority of Georgians were unwilling to follow this course. When one examines the county returns from his 1962 election, the only counties Griffin carried were the counties of southwest Georgia, an area that was heavily black and featured the most racially conservative and reactionary white voters of the state.

Second, a legacy of corruption was associated with Griffin's administration from 1955 to 1959. As Griffin himself remarked after his inauguration in 1955, "I plan to fire the Hell out of my enemies and take care of my friends."<sup>4</sup> Over the next four years, the corruption of the Griffin administration would become notorious throughout the nation. Even *Reader's Digest* published an exposé of the Griffin years. While Griffin was

never found guilty of personally benefiting from the corruption of his administration, it is fair to say he created a climate in which others felt it was acceptable to profit off the state.

Closely involved in the events of Griffin's term as governor was his brother, Robert Alwyn "Cheney" Griffin, who was so notorious that a joke circulated the state during Griffin's attempted comeback in 1962:

One day, John Kennedy called his father to ask him for advice about how to handle Cuba. "Jack, you should just buy Cuba and be done with it," said Joe Kennedy. "I don't have enough in the bank this month to do that," responded JFK. To which Joe Kennedy responded, "Oh, that's easy. As you pass through Georgia on your way to Cuba, stop and pick up Cheney Griffin. He'll steal what you can't afford to buy!"

This corruption issue was one Marvin Griffin's opponent, Carl Sanders, exploited throughout the 1962 campaign season.

Perhaps more fundamental than either the racial issue or the legacy of corruption, however, was the state's transformation from an era of powerful county officials to a more modern sophisticated political climate. Gone forever was the traditional way of campaigning, in which large barbecues and fish fries were held and voters would come from miles around to hear the candidates speak. Part of this related to the fact that television was coming of age. In addition, people's lives had changed to the extent that political events did not figure as prominently as they once had. Whereas large political campaigns once were social events for farmers who had little outside entertainment, by the 1960s they were increasingly becoming the province of hard-core politicians.

The story of Marvin Griffin's political career represents the changing of the guard in Georgia politics. Once dominated by white Democratic politicians who preached racial segregation, the political scene was taken over in the mid-twentieth century by a younger generation of Democrats who would adapt to the political changes to come in the future. Others would become Republicans, a prospect once unthinkable. As Griffin put it after his defeat in 1962, "These things come along. It seems to be the trend of the times. You fight as hard as you can and that's all you can do."<sup>5</sup> Thus begins our story.



# 1

## The Beginning

The Executive Mansion in those days was located where the Henry Grady Hotel is today. It was a red brick, two-story home set back about 75 feet from the sidewalk, and it was enclosed with a black, iron-picket fence. The gate of the fence had a large, shiny brass plate with the words, "Executive Mansion," and much to my surprise, it was not locked. I opened the gate, but did not go in. I did, however, stand up on the bottom rail of the gate and "swung" on it a time or two. A city policeman came along and said, "young man, do you realize you are swinging on the Governor's gate? He wouldn't like that if he saw you." He next asked me where I lived, and I told him down at Bainbridge, Ga. It seemed that he knew a number of Bainbridge people, and he scolded me no more, perhaps realizing that I had never been to the city before, which I hadn't. On my return to the Kimball House I related my experience to my father, and he asked the question, "Well, do you think you would like to live in that mansion?" I replied that it seemed to me to be hard to get into, and he made the observation that it was extremely difficult to get into, and that many Georgians had tried for years to live in it, but few ever made it.

—Marvin Griffin

Bainbridge lies deep in the heart of southwest Georgia. Its live oaks draped with Spanish moss make it a stereotypical Deep South town. Traveling around the town one sees the traditional courthouse square and downtown area, with newer restaurants and stores located away from downtown. Near the courthouse lies Willis Park surrounded by towering trees and plaques honoring the fallen dead of prior wars. On one side lies a

monument to the subject of our story: Marvin Griffin. The monument extols Griffin's achievements as citizen, statesman, and soldier. Up the street is the *Post-Searchlight*, the local newspaper started by Griffin's father, Ernest H. "Pat" Griffin. Marvin Griffin once remarked about the paper, "While just about everybody in Decatur County already knows the news before we print it, they take the paper to see 'who got caught at it.'"<sup>1</sup>

Older residents of Bainbridge have memories of the former governor, but outside of Bainbridge those who remember Griffin are becoming fewer and fewer. Historians lump Griffin in the category of other southern governors of the time who resisted federal efforts to integrate schools and society. Yet such a cursory view of Griffin is inaccurate. Marvin Griffin had a deep love for the state of Georgia and his home. Before we begin looking at Griffin's political career, we must first understand the environment and town in which Griffin was reared.



As one drives through the plantations of southwest Georgia, it is evident how far removed Bainbridge is from much of the state. The highways are narrow, and one finds there is no simple, direct way to get to the town from the rest of the state. Bainbridge is the county seat of Decatur County in the far southwestern corner of the state. Situated on the border of Florida, the county is about 250 miles south of Atlanta and 20 miles north of Tallahassee, the Florida capital. Decatur County was created from a portion of Early County by an act of the Georgia General Assembly in 1823. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Decatur County was a major player in the state's agricultural economy. A publication of the day advertised the easily arable land available in the county, which contained nearly one million acres. The county boasted of being home to the world's largest tobacco plantation at that time, and Bainbridge was a major producer of Sumatra tobacco, used as a cigar wrapper.

The southwest portion of Georgia is part of the coastal plain. The state is divided into three distinct geographic regions. The extreme northern section of Georgia is made up of mountainous areas that are part of the Appalachian Mountains. The middle portion of the state is made up of the Piedmont region, where a majority of the state's citizens reside. The largest urban areas are in the Piedmont area, and the soil is the characteristic red clay for which the state is so famous. At one point, the Piedmont was the largest cotton-growing region of the state.

Dividing the Piedmont from the southern half of Georgia is the fall

line, an area where the rockier Piedmont begins to lose elevation. The fall line is marked by numerous waterfalls as the Piedmont gives way to the softer, sandier soil of south Georgia. Water in streams and rivers speed up and descend downward to the coastal plain before eventually emptying into the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic Ocean. The coastal plain is also the prime agricultural region of the state. Peanuts, soybeans, and tobacco have traditionally been major cash crops in this area.

Three economic and political regions exist in the state: the black belt, southeast Georgia, and north Georgia. The black belt arched from the southwest corner of the state through middle Georgia to the Augusta area. This region had the heaviest black populations and was the home of the traditional plantation economy supported by slavery. As a result, rural black populations were the highest in the black belt, and it was in the black belt that segregation and political disfranchisement of blacks was the most rigid.

Southeast Georgia was the most sparsely settled region of Georgia in the early twentieth century. Much of the settlement of this area had come during the Reconstruction period, and black populations were not as high in as the black belt. Citizens of southeast Georgia shared in the economic deprivation of those in the black belt. As a result, historian Numan Bartley found, voters in southeast Georgia periodically had the same voting patterns as their cousins in the black belt. By contrast, north Georgia was a land of smaller farms and a less diverse population. Since slavery had never been conducive in the mountainous areas of the state, black populations were lower, and in some cases nonexistent, in this area. As a result, white voters in north Georgia tended to be less concerned about racial issues and more concerned about economic development.

After his retirement from politics, Griffin alluded to the distinct political temperaments of the three regions when he recounted a speech that he gave in Cleveland, Georgia. After the speech, he said, "they came up theah and shook hands with me . . . the closest I evah got to any expression of suppo't was when a few tickled the palm of my hand and said, 'I ain't gonna do ye no harm . . . ' I could have made the same speech in Hahira and them boys would have thrown their hats as high as a Georgia pine!"<sup>2</sup> In a day before mass media campaigns, politicians had to tailor their campaigns for what section of the state they were in at that moment.

In addition to the geographic, political, and economic differences across the state, Georgia politics from the Reconstruction period until the 1930s was a free-for-all, with a dizzy array of factions who were constantly



aligning with one another only to disavow those alliances after a particular election. For the most part, the state government had little money to spend and was more show than substance. In a day when few recreational opportunities existed, political theater was riveting and free. However, relatively few people actually could vote. During the early 1900s, Georgia effectively limited the franchise to whites of the middle and upper classes. Because of poll taxes, literacy tests, and the white primary, state voter turnout plummeted in the early 1900s and would remain low through the 1940s before slowly rising again. Disfranchisement techniques were equal opportunity, however, in the sense that they could ensnare both whites and blacks.

Race relations were also codified in the late 1800s and early 1900s just as Marvin Griffin was born. While the South had been segregated by custom since the 1870s, many states began to require segregation by law by 1900.<sup>3</sup> As a result, states began to establish a strict division of society that also played into political life as well. By the early 1900s, Georgia politicians were preaching a policy of white supremacy and segregation that would last until the early 1960s. In fact, generations of Georgians would be raised in an era of legally mandated segregation, and politicians of all ideological stripes were expected to uphold these racial traditions.



In the midst of the Georgia black belt was Bainbridge, and it reflected the political realities and racial traditions that were characteristic of the region. In the early twentieth century, Bainbridge resembled many sleepy towns of the South. The fact that it was on a navigable river, the Flint, gave slightly more diversity to its economy than some of its sister towns. Still, Bainbridge in the early twentieth century was an economically depressed area like most of the region had been since Reconstruction.

It was also a city isolated from the rest of the state, especially the state capital in Atlanta, given its physical location. At the turn of the twentieth century, it took twelve hours to travel by rail from Bainbridge to Atlanta. The roads were all unpaved so far from Atlanta, so even for the few people who had cars, the roads became impassable when the spring rains came. Years later, Marvin Griffin vividly described Bainbridge's relationship with Atlanta: "In the state of Georgia, the city of Atlanta is the heart. When the heart starts pumping out blood, the farthest member of the body from the heart is the big toe, and that generally stays the coldest because it gets the least amount of blood."<sup>4</sup> It is no wonder many south Georgians, includ-

ing Griffin, looked askance upon the wicked and wild state capital. (This perspective also helps to explain, in part, Griffin's vitriolic dislike of the Atlanta newspapers years later.)

Into this environment, a son was born to Pat Griffin and Josie Butler on 4 September 1907. The baby was named Samuel Marvin Griffin after his grandfather and was the fourth of six children born to Pat and Josie. Pat would later remark that his son's birthday must have coincided with Labor Day because as a child he "liked to take a holiday when confronted with hard work."<sup>5</sup> The Griffins trace their ancestry back to James Griffin of North Carolina, who fought in the Revolutionary War and later moved to Montgomery County, Georgia, before finally dying in Irwin County, Georgia, in 1804. Beginning at the age of eighteen, Pat Griffin moved frequently during his early adult years. After moving from his home of Brooks County, Griffin was married and involved in the grocery business in Camilla, in Mitchell County. He had trouble succeeding in the grocery business and decided to try his hand at newspaper publishing. The *Pelham Free-Lance* turned out to be a failure for Griffin, but he moved his family in 1907 to Bainbridge where he founded the *Bainbridge Post*. By the time Marvin Griffin was born, his father was on his way to building a successful newspaper, and in 1915 he bought the *Bainbridge Searchlight*, resulting in the *Post-Searchlight*.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the stage was set for Marvin Griffin. Over the course of his life, Griffin would be intimately associated with the family newspaper, which allowed Pat Griffin to provide a better lifestyle than many of the families in rural Decatur County. Years later, Marvin Griffin would state he had grown up in "a family of moderate means."<sup>7</sup> Still, it would be misleading to portray Griffin's youth as one of leisure. In fact, from a twenty-first century perspective, Griffin's formative years were marked by poverty. Public education was primitive at best. Roads were inadequate, medical facilities were nonexistent, and the economic plight of the average south Georgian was overwhelming. All these facts undoubtedly helped to shape and influence Griffin's beliefs and personality.

We are getting ahead of the story, however. Young Griffin was most likely typical of other boys his age, at times getting into mischief. One of his favorite activities was to go swimming in the Flint River, but the river was dangerous because of its strong currents (eventually, the river was dammed where it joins the Chattahoochee to form Lake Seminole). Griffin's father often warned his children not to go swimming in the river. One summer day, Griffin decided to go swimming anyway. However,

he made the mistake of staying in the river too long, and his skin got wrinkled from the water. He ran home to take a bath to make it look like he had stayed in the tub too long. Unfortunately for the young Marvin Griffin, Pat Griffin found out from a neighbor about the lad's afternoon, and he promptly gave his son a whipping for disobeying him.<sup>8</sup> As Griffin later said, "There was no Dr. Spock to get us around a good licking if we disobeyed the instructions of our parents."<sup>9</sup> Bainbridge was such a small community that others would keep an eye out for neighborhood children, and often news of the children's activities would make it to their parents before they even returned home.

Griffin always took a special interest in his younger brother, Robert Alwyn "Cheney" Griffin, seven years his junior. From an early age, Griffin would try to protect his younger sibling. As was the custom at that time, children received a dose of castor oil in the spring to flush out their systems. Every spring at castor oil time, Cheney would always run from his mother, who would instruct Marvin to go chase him down. Griffin would run after his younger brother, but as he got near would tell him, "Cheney, hurry up or I'll catch you!"<sup>10</sup> Their close relationship continued through both men's lives. When Marvin Griffin ran for governor years later, Cheney Griffin managed his brother's campaign and later became his chief aide in the governor's office. Cheney was also a source of many of the wild stories of corruption in the Griffin administration.

The corruption issue is interesting given the notoriety of Bainbridge as a town where both the respectable and the more unseemly sides of life were easily found.<sup>11</sup> Bainbridge had a reputation for being a place where one could easily acquire alcohol, though the town was officially dry until well after the end of Prohibition. The country club offered slot machines and other forms of gambling, though it was illegal under state law. Doubtless other vices abounded as well, often under the watchful eye of the local sheriff, who would be paid for his "blindness" to these activities. Many of the respected pillars of society who attended church every Sunday would be involved in less admirable hobbies on other days. While not everyone in Bainbridge was involved in these corrupt affairs, there was a general knowledge, even acceptance, of illegal activities in the community. Undoubtedly some individuals likely observed and concluded that this was simply the way business was handled.<sup>12</sup>

Another reality of growing up in a rural Georgia community at that time was the racial element. Segregation was rigid, and people's racial prejudices were in the open. Blacks were prevented from taking part in

politics and were kept in an economically depressed condition. If blacks dared to agitate for social change, white authorities would put down such uprisings, by force if necessary. In addition to legal authority, the Ku Klux Klan operated in much of the black belt. It is logical to conclude that the racial environment of Decatur County had an impact on Griffin as well.

At the same time, it is too simplistic to paint segregation as total and absolute. Out of necessity, relationships existed between black and white. Blacks were often dependent upon whites for economic survival, and having black servants who worked in white homes was typical. This inevitably led to black and white children knowing and playing with each other. For example, the Griffin brothers had a black friend named Fred "Chicken" Taylor. On occasion, the three would get in trouble together. Whenever they did, Pat Griffin would discipline all three of them, treating Chicken no differently than his own sons. In later years, Pat insisted that Chicken finish school and attended Chicken's graduation ceremony.

Years later, when Marvin Griffin was governor, Chicken came to the governor's office to see the Griffin brothers. The bodyguard assigned to Cheney Griffin came into his office and told him a black man wanted to see him. When Cheney walked out into the lobby, he saw Chicken and immediately went over and hugged him. The two men had not seen each other in twenty-five years. The bodyguard later remarked, "I never thought I'd see Cheney Griffin hugging a nigger!"<sup>13</sup> Such was often the way with race relations in the South. While segregation was rigid and strictly enforced, personal relationships between white and black were often more complex.

Undoubtedly, the strong racial stances put forth by Marvin Griffin many years later were part of his upbringing. Yet, at the same time, Griffin supported programs that helped black citizens. More new black schools were built during Griffin's administration than any governor before him. In fact, the race issue was not a fundamental part of Griffin's political career until he became governor. Around that time, segregation came under increasing attack from the federal level, and *Brown v. Board of Education*, in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled segregation unconstitutional, came down in 1954 as Griffin was running for governor. Like all southern political leaders of that era, Griffin voiced strong opposition to integration; to have done otherwise would have been a guaranteed way to lose an election. And once race became a major issue, Marvin Griffin used it to its fullest.



# 2

## From Dan to Beersheba

Despite the idyllic pleasures of childhood, one reality for all children eventually hit young Marvin Griffin: school. However, Griffin began his school career one year later than most children. Suffering from jaundice at the age of six, Griffin did not attend first grade. Instead, his mother taught him until he was well enough to go to school in time for second grade. Because his mother was well educated herself, Griffin was actually better prepared than most of his classmates when he arrived in second grade.<sup>1</sup> Griffin attended the Bainbridge public schools, and in his high school years, he played various sports, showing particular promise as a baseball pitcher. In the spring of 1925, Griffin graduated from Bainbridge High School. In those days, Georgia students went to school for only eleven years before graduating, a trend that would continue until Griffin became governor many years later.

In the fall of 1925, Griffin began his collegiate career at The Citadel, the prestigious military college in Charleston, South Carolina. Griffin enrolled at The Citadel because his father felt very strongly that his sons should receive a military education.<sup>2</sup> In a reference to the rigorous expectations at The Citadel, Griffin later remarked that he “majored in history and political science and changed clothes nine times a day.”<sup>3</sup>

Traditionally, freshmen cadets, or “knobs,” at The Citadel faced severe physical hazing. To the present day, freshmen are symbolically treated differently than upperclassmen. The freshmen cadets are not permitted to walk on the sidewalks and must salute everyone passing their way. Consequently, Griffin likely did not have an easy first year on campus, but he was promoted within the cadet ranks to corporal by the beginning of his sophomore year. At the end of that year, Griffin had become 1st sergeant of the cadets. At the end of his junior year, Griffin was promoted to ma-