

August 7, 2006

A STROLL DOWN MEMORY LANE WITH SOME OUTSTANDING GEORGIANS

Please forgive me while I take a short stroll down Memory Lane. I'll be back to my usual cranky self next week, I promise, but today I wax nostalgic.

Nobody loves giggling politicians more than I do, but occasionally I need to be reminded that Georgia has been blessed with some outstanding leaders over the years. I was with a group of them last week. Some of the names may be unfamiliar to you, because many labored in a different era. But by their collective efforts, they have played an important role in the success our state currently enjoys.

The occasion was an art exhibit featuring the works of one of my favorite readers, Betty Foy Sanders, wife of one of my favorite governors, Carl Sanders. Ms. Sanders, a native of Statesboro, is a warm and gracious individual. She is also an extraordinary artist. Art is a passion of mine, and while I have a couple of my own paintings hanging around the house, I was quickly reminded that the difference in my talent and that of Betty Sanders is akin to the difference between butter and butterflies.

At the private affair was a Who's Who of Georgia's (mostly Democratic) political past and present: Former State Highway Director and Carter administration Budget Director Bert Lance and wife, Labelle, were on hand talking proudly of their grandchildren. Ben T. Wiggins, chairman of the Georgia Public Service Commission when I was a pup at Southern Bell, was in attendance, insisting I call him "Ben" instead of "Mr. Wiggins." (Old habits are hard to break.)

Pete Wheeler, commissioner of Georgia's Department of Veteran Services, is still fit as a fiddle at 83 years young. Wheeler has been a strong advocate for Georgia's veterans for more than 50 years. When his son told him he should tape his memoirs, Wheeler quipped, "There's a lot of stuff I know that some folks wouldn't want on tape!"

Former First Lady Betty Vandiver, wife of late Gov. Ernest Vandiver, was there with daughter, State Rep. Jane Kidd, a current candidate for the state Senate from Athens. Ms. Vandiver reminded me that Gov. Vandiver, another unsung hero of our state, was always quick to give me "instant feedback" on my columns when he disagreed with my opinions — which, thankfully, wasn't often. One of his last acts before he passed away was to send me an autographed picture, which occupies a special place in my office.

Retired UGA Athletic Director and Hall-of-Fame Coach Vince Dooley was there, having just returned from a trip to Idaho and Montana with one of my favorite people on God's Green Earth, wife Barbara, who had been laid low by illness, but is back and better than ever. I must confess that I love Barbara Dooley better than banana pudding.

Former Gov. Roy Barnes was making the rounds, telling folks that these days he is "just a country lawyer trying to make a living." That is akin to Michael Vick saying he "plays a little football." Gov. Barnes has an outstanding law practice in Marietta with his daughter Alyssa. I didn't get a chance to see Ms. Barnes, but I think I am in her doghouse. When I recently observed in this space that The Woman Who Shares My Name admired her husband, she sent a note saying, "The woman who shares your name is MUCH SMARTER than you!" That would have stung, had it not been so true. It takes a smart woman to know a smart woman

As I have grown older, I generally avoid these functions like the plague because (a) I hate putting on a tie, (b) I don't go out at night much anymore and (c) I no longer make an effort to be nice to people I don't like. I came because of the respect and admiration I have for Gov. and Ms. Sanders. I stayed because I enjoyed seeing so many friends from the past, and I left with a renewed appreciation that Georgia is a better place today because of the contributions of those assembled at the gala affair. It was a great night.