

Interview

with

JAMES C. GARDNER

September 6, 1995

by Jonathan Houghton

Indexed by Jonathan Houghton

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

~~Original transcript on deposit at~~
~~The Southern Historical Collection~~
~~Louis Round Wilson Library~~

Citation of this interview should be as follows:
"Southern Oral History Program,
in the Southern Historical Collection Manuscripts Department,
Wilson Library,
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill"

Copyright © 1996 The University of North Carolina

SOHP Series: The North Carolina Politics Project

TAPE LOG

Interviewee: James Gardner, Former Lieutenant Governor, Congressman, state party chairman, co-founder of Hardee's.

Interview Date: September 6, 1995, 3:00 PM

Location: Jim Gardner's office, Gardner Foods, Rocky Mount, North Carolina.

Tape No.: 4007 (2 Cassettes, roughly 155 minutes)

Topic: An oral history of James Gardner, Congressman and Lieutenant Governor of North Carolina. Gardner has been a powerful force to make North Carolina a two-party state, especially in the 1960's. This interview also covered his political efforts into the 1990's, including his years as Lieutenant Governor and his 1992 bid for the Governorship.

Comment: Only the text that appears in quotation marks is verbatim; all other comments are paraphrased, including the interviewers questions.

Tape Index

Tape 1 of 2, Side A

North Carolina GOP before Goldwater

Gardner's childhood and early impressions of GOP

Forming Hardee's and how Gardner became aware of government's intervention in business affairs; how Barry Goldwater's philosophy made sense.

Democratic resistance to his and other white men changing their party affiliation in Nash County.

Jim Gardner's challenge to Congressman Harold Cooley and the excitement of the 1964 campaign.

Randolph County Republicans and their insistence that Gardner change his billboards to have name "Republican" printed instead of just "Conservative."

Critical role of young people and women in Gardner's door-to-door campaigns.

Cliff White and Goldwater's "Extremism" speech to the 1964 Republican Convention.

Goldwater's forthright opposition to tobacco subsidies to farmers in Raleigh. Democrats brought Lyndon Johnson, Orville Freedman, and others into Cooley's district to help beat back Republican Gardner.

Gardner's 1966 race and how LBJ became a target that year. Critical role of women in campaign; age differential between the candidates; Vietnam; contrasting campaign styles and direct mail.

"Marie's letter"--a letter from Jim Gardner's wife, Marie, that started off "Dear friend" and was printed to look like it was hand written. It was mailed to "every female in the district" and hundreds of women wrote back while others clutched the letter as they went to the polls to vote.

Jim Gardner worked to establish contact with constituents by setting up Congressional offices, using tv and radio, and setting up a congressional club to raise money and send out mass mailings.

Gardner discusses his disgust at "gutter politics" such as when the General Assembly changed his district to minimize the likelihood of his re-election. Thus, he decided to run for Governor in 1968, a year with a "weird campaign," best symbolized by George Wallace's third party bid for the presidency.

Gardner's actions at the Republican National Convention, and why he supported Ronald Reagan instead of Richard Nixon.

JH: "Why didn't Richard Nixon appeal to you?"

JG: He'd "never look at you, he'd look out here and there... like he's talking to someone else." Also, philosophically and emotionally, Reagan held far more appeal.

Watergate and its impact on Holshouser and Helms.

Jesse Helms and his Congressional Club and how they built on Gardner's earlier efforts

Impact of Goldwater campaign in bringing in young, dedicated activists that turned North Carolina's Republican party around. "When I ran for Lt-Governor in '88...the same people [who started out with Goldwater] ... had stayed in." Estimates that two-thirds of the leadership in the 100 counties had started off with Goldwater.

Charlie Jonas--not really "Mr Republican." He didn't get involved in party matters much beyond his district.

Jesse Helms "is a lot like that. He doesn't get involved in primaries. . .very often."

JH: Was it the Congressional Club's involvement in primaries that helped to lead to Helms' break with the Club?

JG: Helms hates to get out and campaign. He's always in Washington and the Club "pretty much did what they wanted to." There is resentment in some quarters of the Club over how much money they raise. . . . Helms didn't know what was going on in those primaries. His focus was Washington.

Tape 1, Side B

JH: How well did you know Jesse during the 1960's? I've seen letters discussing your dinners with him at I Beverly Lake's house and he nearly endorsed you in the WRAL VIEWPOINT editorials, contrary to his "iron clad" policy.

JG: I saw a lot of Jesse Helms in the 60's, trying to get him to join the GOP. "Our philosophies were so...almost totally similar." Cooley made a bad mistake, threatening to sue WRAL.

Difficulty in earlier days of winning conservative support from a lot of Democrats "who agreed with me but couldn't get over the hump of my being a Republican...that Herbert Hoover [thing]." some people refused "to shake my hand."

JH: How important was Ronald Reagan in Eastern North Carolina? DOM once reported that the GOP in that area was changing its Lincoln Day celebrations to Reagan Day dinners.

JG: He's the most popular Republican in North Carolina. party registration has grown more since Reagan and is starting to even things out a bit.

Jesse Helms's editorials helped too. Jesse didn't change parties for a long while, saying "I can be more effective where I am and I'm more believable as a Democrat."

Difficulty of 1968--appealing to Wallace voters, keeping Republicans happy, and fighting a battle with the media.

JH: Was it wise to antagonize the press so badly?

JG: "I hit them because they were doing the same to me." Gardner continues, "I'm too much of a fighter."

Race and the Southern strategy of Richard Nixon.

Strategist Brad Hayes and his role in Jim Martin's campaigns.

JH: How important has race been for Southern Republicans?

JG: "...very hard to answer." "something to do with it because the parties changed on their philosophy. Nothing to do with Goldwater ... or Reagan, probably had some influence in 1968" but not in '72.

JH: Even with busing?

JG: It's always an underlying theme. . . . But McGovern was just too liberal for this part of the country.

Discussion over Barry Goldwater's and Ronald Reagan's use of race as a campaign theme

Riots as a theme of disorder.

Gardner's viewing of Newark riot and death threat.

"Law and Order" in 1968 campaign; Durham anti-poverty project; Ramsey Clark, the media and Gardner's use of adversaries.

The press as "totally unfair and dishonest" and N & O pledge: "Were going to get him."

Lt-Governor's race and press's response to anti-drug efforts; Gardner's response to the Legislature stripping him of powers

Bill Clinton and the '96 race. Dissatisfaction and shifting of anger toward Raleigh, not just Washington.

Role of religious right in primaries: "people like George Little [get thrown] out on the street."

Lloyd Baley, an elector who flouted N.C.'s Nixon vote by casting an electoral vote for Wallace, and his John Birch Society ties. Role of John Birch Society.

Tape 2, Side A

John East's '66 campaign for Congress and role as US Senator; his suicide. The Congressional Club. Symbolic impact of East's wheelchair. Role of the state chairman in candidate recruitment; Republican efforts to woo eastern North Carolinians.

Lag between presidential and local Republicanism.

Why Clinton is so reviled.

Cooley-Gardner debate and Cooley's snub of the young candidate that made him "so mad."

Gardner's 1968 Campaign and Ronald Reagan's 3 supporting visits; Charlotte Observer's use of Gardner's switch from Nixon to Reagan at the '68 convention.

Tension between old-line Republicans and "Johnny-come-lately-Goldwater-Democrat-turned Republican-from-the-East."

Impact of uneven ideological intensities among Republicans.

Gardner's use of SCLC blackmail scheme and emotional issues that frightened moderates.

Why Gardner loses Charlotte.

1968 as a difficult year.

Golden Frinks' black boycott of Hardee's--and bafflement at his endorsement of Gardner in '68.

1972 primary loss to Jim Holshouser.

Republican inability to win black ballots. Jim Martin's efforts and "he didn't get any more of the black vote than I did." Holshouser and Brad Hayes attempts to get African American votes.

Jack Hawke and 92 split in Gardner team. Bush's poor standing and its impact on local races.

Tape 2, Side B

A long lag lasted before the voices start up. (I probably turned the tape over during a lull, thinking it was almost done, and did not rewind it).

Jack Hawke was too stretched as state chairman and gubernatorial campaign manager--so he had to give up managing Gardner's gubernatorial campaign in 1992.

Sim DeLapp and his "absolute personality clash" with Gardner. Old Guard GOP clash with Gardner in Randolph county.

Patronage clashes; East-West split in GOP.

1994 election as a great surprise--GOP takes over Congress and the NC Legislature. Heineman, Funderburk races. "I was as surprised as Dan Rather."

The Perot vote did not support Jim Gardner.

Jim Hunt campaign.

Jim Gardner's lack of interest in political office.

Jim Martin--"the renaissance man" and Jim Holshouser administration; Gardner's role in Martin administration and public disagreement over tax policy.

Key advances of Holshouser and Martin administrations

Contract with America; NC Legislature.

Hunt is like Clinton--"a chameleon." Swing to conservative stances. Shift of responsibilities to localities from Washington.