

BUCKHEAD HERITAGE SOCIETY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
RUTH DABNEY SMITH-ALLEN

Q: This is an interview with Ruth Dabney Smith-Allen of Atlanta, Georgia accomplished by Lynn's Centenarian and Buckhead resident since the 1900s. This interview is being conducted on August 8, 2009 at Lynbrook Square in Atlanta. The interviewer is Caroline Johnson (and Chad Wright) representing the Buckhead Heritage Society of Atlanta, Georgia. Okay Mrs. Allen, when and why did your family come to Buckhead.

A: I didn't understand. When and why what?

Q: When and why did your family come to Buckhead?

A: Come to Buckhead? Well actually they didn't. I came to Buckhead. They were long gone. We moved to Atlanta in 1915 from Raleigh, North Carolina where I was born and we lived in Ansley Park and then my husband inherited his family home on Stovall Boulevard so we moved there and then we moved here when he had problems physically and we knew he needed better taken care of and he was only with me a year here and then I lost him.

Q: When did you guys move to Stovall?

A: When did we move to Stovall?

Q: Yes ma'am.

A: I'm trying to think. I think it was in the – I really can't remember. We were there about 37 years.

Q: Okay.

Q: Describe what it was like growing up in Ansley Park.

A: Well yes I liked Ansley Park very much and of course I went to school at Washington Seminary which meant I could walk back and forth to school.

Q: Where was Washington Seminary located in Ansley?

A: On Peachtree Road practically next to the little station of the Southern Railway. It was a big white house with white columns all in front and then behind it were the schoolrooms and the buildings.

Q: Was that where the Amtrak Station is today right across the street there?

A: Right.

Q: Okay.

A: It was a station. Of course it was the Southern Railway then.

Q: Okay.

Q: Tell me about the time you met Margaret Mitchell.

A: The time what?

Q: The time you met Margaret Mitchell.

A: Margaret Mitchell?

Q: Margaret Mitchell, author of *Gone With the Wind*.

A: She lived just up the street from me in Ansley Park. She lived at South Prado in an apartment, the Del Atlanta and we frequently rode the bus back and forth to town together and then I remember the first time I guess I met her was when the little Northside News invited us both to go out. I was writing music for the paper at that time and it turned out to be a rainy, messy afternoon and Margaret and I sat on the backseat together and finally we just decided we would give up. The weather was just too bad.

Q: What was she like? Do you have any other memories of her?

A: Well I don't have anything special. She was just a very nice person.

Q: What was it like working in downtown Atlanta?

A: What was what?

Q: What was it like working in downtown Atlanta?

A: Well I had a studio in downtown Atlanta at the corner of Auburn and Peachtree and there used to be a big suit sticking out over the road and then behind it was a stairway that went up to the studios and John Hoffman had a series of studios up there and I rented one from him.

Q: And you play the violin, is that correct?

A: Right.

Q: And you were a concert violinist?

A: Well I wouldn't brag that much. I wasn't that much of a concert violinist.

Q: But you played with the symphony.

A: The symphony came later and I still have a student in the symphony and I did have two but one of them had an arm injury and she has been on disability.

Q: What was the Buckhead Summer Symphony?

A: The Buckhead what?

Q: The Buckhead Summer Symphony?

Q: The Buckhead Summer Symphony, did you ever play with the Buckhead Summer Symphony?

A: Yes I think I did and I know we played for the opera in Chastain Park.

Q: Tell us a little bit about that. I never heard of the Buckhead Summer Symphony. Was that a small ensemble?

A: Yes it was a mixture of professionals and I don't remember too much about the symphony but I do remember playing in the opera orchestra.

Q: What do you remember about World War I in Atlanta? What do you remember about World War I in Atlanta?

A: About what?

Q: World War I.

A: Well I wasn't in Atlanta during World War I.

Q: That's right were you still in Raleigh?

A: No I was in North Carolina and I remember being at Virginia Beach and seeing the battleships out there and then they hadn't honored our reservation and we couldn't stay but just a weekend and my father decided we would go to Richmond which was the capitol and I had never seen it so we went across the bay from Norfolk and my mother nearly had hysterics, she was so afraid of the water and I was enjoying it thoroughly.

Q: Do you remember when women got the Constitutional right to vote in 1920?

A: I remember when we talked about it and I was among the first that voted.

Q: Really. How did people in Atlanta respond to that?

A: I just can't hear you.

Q: How did people in Atlanta respond to women getting the right to vote?

A: I don't remember any special response. They just accepted it and that was it.

Q: Back to talking about when you were working with your studio in downtown, how has downtown Atlanta changed over the years in your experience?

A: Well now I haven't been downtown in so many years I probably would not know the place.

Q: Really? Well how do you remember it?

A: Well I remember Five Points because my studio was only a block away.

Q: What is your earliest memory of Buckhead and if you moved there in the 50s and you were living in Ansley would you ever go to Buckhead for any reason?

A: Buckhead was just not available then. It was just nothing. You could drive out to where Roswell Road and Peachtree met and that was called Buckhead but that is all there was out there.

Q: Would you shop up there?

A: No there wasn't anything.

Q: Really.

A: My husband said he rode out there on a bicycle one time.

Q: Tell me about going to church in Buckhead. What church did you attend?

A: I have gone to First Presbyterian all my life. I joined when I was about 8.

Q: Well tell me about that church and how it has changed over the years.

A: Well it has grown tremendously. Of course when I joined there was one pastor, Dr. J. Spruell Vines and that is the only pastor. Now we have five or six. Of course I am still a member.

Q: Do you still get up there to church?

A: I haven't been able to go but I do have the little box and so on Wednesday nights I can see the service from the previous Sunday.

Q: Oh really. How about that.

Q: What was First Presbyterian's involvement in the community like? What did they do to interact with the community?

A: What did they what?

Q: What did your church do to interact with Atlanta's community?

A: I don't understand I'm sorry.

Q: What sort of outreach services did the church have for Buckhead or Atlanta?

A: Oh well Buckhead wasn't anything in those days. It hadn't developed. The little point where they came together, the streets came together was Buckhead. There was nothing beyond.

Q: And as far as your church services and outreach, did you all help the homeless or work ministries?

A: Oh nothing like they do today. They do so much more now. But it was like a small church you know and it was -- a lot of the members lived in Ansley Park and ran the area.

Q: Tell me about your career as a musician in Atlanta.

A: Well I started the violin at 10 which is now considered very old to begin because they start practicing in the cradle now. But the teacher, we had two well-known teachers in Atlanta and my mother took me to the lady teacher, Mrs. Theodora Morgan Stunes and she said oh no she wouldn't take me until I had two years of piano so I took two years of piano and then I came back and started the violin and then she left town and so I went to the other well-known teacher, Mr. George Frederick Menya(?) who was head of the Atlanta Conservatory but he taught two days a week at Washington Seminary so I would go out there for my lessons and the next year they entered me at the Seminary so I would have my lessons during school hours and that's his picture right over there. The first one.

Q: This one right here?

A: Uh-huh. And, I was with him until I graduated from high school and started trying different ones.

Q: Was it rare for a woman to be pursuing a career in music at the time?

A: Oh no. Most teachers were women.

Q: Tell me a little bit about other things you did with music in Atlanta. I understand you were – I'm sorry, tell me about other things you did in the music community in Atlanta.

A: Well we had the first orchestra I remember was the Atlanta Philharmonic Orchestra and it was made up of – this was during the deep depression. Nobody had money for anything but Mr. Creeksharver(?) and Mr. Navrey worked at the Piedmont Driving Club got together and said they thought it would be nice that people who liked to play symphony music to could get together and play even if they didn't get paid and so they paid the conductor and at one point they offered to pay. I was concertmaster and I didn't accept because I knew they just didn't have the money. So that orchestra, the top picture up there is the Atlanta Philharmonic string quartet and it is made up of first chair people from the orchestra.

Q: Are you in that picture?

A: Yes, I'm the far right.

Q: The far right. I'll have to get this on camera here. Bear with me just a second.

A: My hair wasn't white then. I was just in my 20s then. And the one below it was taken at the Brevard Music Center where I taught for about nine summers and that was just an ensemble group on stage with faculty members.

Q: Now did you perform with any famous musicians?

A: Did I perform what?

Q: With any famous musicians?

A: I don't understand.

Q: Did you perform with any famous musicians?

A: No I don't think so. I soloed with Atlanta Philharmonic and I soloed later with one of my former students, Alice Oglesby who plays in the Atlanta Symphony now and we played the Bach [unintelligible] Concerto with the Community Symphony which I helped establish.

Q: Tell me a little bit about establishing that.

A: Well that was all in the papers. A year ago they celebrated their fiftieth anniversary and my picture was in with the conductor.

Q: Okay. You mentioned Atlanta during the Great Depression a little while ago, tell me what that was like as you observed it.

A: Well it was pretty horrible. Nobody had any money to do anything. My father fortunately had his same job all the way through with Southern Railway so we did not suffer during it as so many people did. But I couldn't establish my profession because nobody had money for lessons or performances or anything. It was a pretty bad time and I remember seeing the crowds in New York in the food lines waiting to get food.

Q: That's right because you studied in New York didn't you?

A: Oh yes I was in and out of New York a good bit and so of course I saw the worst of it up there.

Q: Yeah.

A: Atlanta wasn't that badly hit.

Q: Why do you think that is?

A: Well maybe because we were smaller. There were so many more people up there, they didn't have jobs, they didn't have anything.

Q: What was Atlanta like during the Civil Rights Movement?

A: I can't ...

Q: What was Atlanta like during the Civil Rights Movement?

A: What was it like when I what?

Q: During the Civil Rights Movement?

Q: What was Atlanta like during the Civil Rights Movement?

A: Well not anything very much went on. You know it was accepted, it was the law and there was no fuss about it.

Q: Do you remember – in your time living in Buckhead do you feel like there was a good support from the Buckhead community because certainly Buckhead changed by the time you moved out to Stovall. Do you remember when you lived in Buckhead, where did you shop, where did you like to eat?

A: Well let me see. I shopped at the – well there is a shopping center out here that has been there a long time with an A&P and a Food Giant and several other of those stores so that is mostly where I shopped.

Q: Did you and your husband have a favorite restaurant?

A: We loved Mrs. Oh what was her name, she was almost to the corner of Phipps and Peachtree. I can't think of her name right now but it was a real popular . . . like a tearoom and the food was good.

Q: What kind of food was it? Was it southern style?

A: Well yes but it was just normal food. It wasn't any special kind but it was just good food.

Q: Do you remember when Lenox Square was built?

Q: When Lenox Square was built, the mall?

A: Oh yes, we watched it come up.

Q: What was that like?

A: Well it caused a lot of traffic.

Q: A sign of things to come.

A: Right.

Q: Did you start shopping there? Was it a big to-do?

A: Yes, oh yes. We had the big stores were there, Rich's and Davidson's and then a lot of small shops too so I shopped there a good deal.

Q: Before would you go downtown to shop at those stores?

A: I guess I did because you had to shop somewhere and there wasn't – not until they moved out here – then they were closer so of course we used their facilities.

Q: Do you think as far as Buckhead now obviously we have had a lot more buildings and condominiums . . .

A: Oh yes. It is practically like living downtown.

Q: It is now isn't it? Do you like that or do you like the simpler way it used to be?

A: Well it doesn't effect me one way or the other because I'm in this room and in Lynbrook and I stay there. The only times I go out is for a doctor's appointment, a dental appointment or something like that and so I really don't go. Well once in a while I'll go out to dinner somewhere else. I have three lovely stepdaughters who all live here and they frequently come and get me and we go different places.

Q: How was it growing up on Stovall or raising – did you raise the stepdaughters on Stovall?

A: No they didn't live with me, they lived with their mother. See their parents were divorced and so they visited us back and forth.

Q: How were the neighbors on Stovall?

A: Oh very nice. All nice people.

Q: Any favorites that stand out in your mind?

A: No I can't – wouldn't want to make a comment because they were all nice people.

Q: Any funny stories that you remember, kids on the street or parents.

A: No, not really.

Q: Did you ever go see any films at the Roxie Theater? Did you ever go see any films at the Roxie Theater?

A: Did I ever see what?

Q: Any films at the Roxie Theater?

A: Oh yes.

Q: Really? What did you see?

A: Oh I couldn't remember that far back but we used to go downtown to all those theaters but of course once they started [unintelligible] and then with the TV you know, so many things came on it that we didn't bother to go downtown.

Q: The theater that is located in the triangle in Buckhead, it is now called the Roxie Theater, do you ever remember seeing a movie there?

A: Oh yes. Oh yes.

Q: I don't have any more questions. Can you think of any more questions?

Q: As far – we're trying to get some history Buckhead, how it has changed, I think you have given us some insight.

A: Oh yes because Buckhead was nothing in the days when I was growing up but of course now it's huge and it is spread all out.

Q: What would say you was the difference between living in Ansley was with your time living on Stovall?

A: When you lived in Ansley it was restricted. There was no business allowed in Ansley Park at all. So we would have to go to Tenth Street and it would be our best bet to go shopping.

Q: So you felt like Buckhead was more easier to shop and easier to . . .

A: Yeah. Now there were two stores down Piedmont, down below us and we occasionally shopped at those but the thing is that they were a little limited in what they had.

Q: What did your husband do?

A: He was an electrical engineer but he was in sales. He was a graduate of Georgia Tech. He had spent his first two years at MIT and then I think came the depression so he came home and finished at Georgia Tech.

Q: And where was his office? Where was his office located?

A: He had an office at home. We had such a big house.

Q: And you mentioned that the house on Stovall was his family's house?

A: Yes.

Q: And you guys moved into it.

A: So we inherited it and he used one of the bedrooms as an office and then he traveled a good bit.

Q: Okay. Do you remember the address on Stovall?

A: 1055.

Q: 1055 Stovall.

A: It looks like a Cape Cod cottage with the three dormer windows but there is an upstairs with three bedrooms and a bath and I understand the people that bought it put in another bath upstairs.

Q: Did you guys have a car in the 50s or did you guys take a bus.

A: Oh yes. We both always had cars. He had one and I had one.

Q: Okay. Would you ever take the bus around town?

A: Not after I grew up.

Q: So as far as public transportation out to Buckhead or Stovall, was it easy to access?

A: The transportation to Stovall was not bad. It came about two blocks from us, the regular bus.

Q: Do you remember the streetcars at all?

A: Oh yes I remember those and I remember going to the opera when I was a little girl, it was down at the city auditorium and all the cars would be lined up outside of that auditorium so that when it was over you went and found the one with the name you were looking for, you went on in and sat down and eventually they all left and took us home.

Q: Do you remember the plane crash in the 60s that killed a lot of the [unintelligible].

A: Oh yes that was a terrible thing.

Q: Did you have some friends on that flight?

A: No but I had some friends who did have but fortunately I did not have any.

Q: How do you think the arts in Atlanta have changed? Do you think it's a good . . .

A: Oh it has improved greatly.

Q: In what way do you think?

A: Well we now have a good art museum and we have a symphony; I think there is a tremendous difference.

Q: Not quite on par with New York yet. We still have a ways to go there, right?

A: What?

Q: Not quite on par with New York yet though.

A: Not up to New York maybe but it's on its way.

Q: Who were some of your students that you mentioned were playing or have played with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra?

A: Alice Anderson Oglesby is still there and Karen Stovall Mathews is the one that had an injury to her arm so she has been on disability and she is [unintelligible] and I have one in the Baltimore Symphony and one in the Boston Symphony and one in one of the big Texas symphonies. I never can remember which one that is.

Q: That is pretty phenomenal. Do you keep in touch with them still?

A: What?

Q: Do you keep in touch with them still? Do you communicate? Do you guys write letters or talk?

A: Oh whenever they come to town they usually come to see me.

Q: Okay, great.

A: But of course so many of them have lost parents now and they don't get to come as often because you know they don't have family anymore.

Q: Describe what Atlanta was like during World War II. Describe what Atlanta was like during World War II.

A: Do what?

Q: During World War II, describe how Atlanta was. What was the atmosphere, what was the environment, what changed during the war for your life?

A: Well I remember, you know the Metropolitan Opera always came for a week in the spring and they were not allowed to give any German opera.

Q: Really?

A: That was off the schedule during that war.

Q: Do you remember performing for any of the troops in Atlanta?

A: The performance of what?

Q: Would you ever perform for the troops in Atlanta?

A: Oh I think I did as a child.

Q: Really?

A: I remember going out to Fort McPherson and playing.

Q: Did you have any friends or family members that fought in World War II?

A: That what?

Q: Did you have any friends or family members that fought in World War II?

A: I can't think of any. I probably did but I don't remember right offhand.

Q: When you married your husband, what would you guys do on the weekends? Obviously you played violin a good bit, would you still want to go see an opera, would you want to go see a performance, would you try to get away and do something else?

A: Well I don't remember what we did. I'm sure we got entertained one way or another.

Q: Were cocktail parties?

A: What?

Q: Cocktail parties?

A: Sometimes. We weren't heavy into that but we were invited every now and then.

Q: Well we appreciate your time today very much.

A: Well I don't know whether I have helped you any.

Q: Oh you have been great. We have loved hearing your stories.

Q: It has been wonderful. Thank you for your time and your daughter-in-law – daughter – stepdaughter Tamara has been phenomenal with the Buckhead Heritage.

A: Well she had warned me that you all were going to come so I was ready.

Q: Well thank you again for your time today.

A: Well I enjoyed meeting both of you.