

Buckhead Heritage Society

Oral History Project

Interview with Sam Massell

In the offices of the Buckhead Coalition, Atlanta, Georgia

February 14, 2012

Interviewer: Erica Danylchak

ERICA DANYLCHAK: This is an interview with Sam Massell. Mr. Massell, a native Atlantan, served twenty-two years in elected offices, including eight as president of Atlanta's Board of Aldermen, and four as the city's mayor, from 1970 to 1974. He subsequently ran a tourism business in Buckhead, and then in 1988 founded the Buckhead Coalition, an organization he continues to helm. He currently serves on the boards of both the Atlanta Historical Society and the Buckhead Heritage Society. This interview is being conducted on February 14, 2012, at the offices of the Buckhead Coalition. The interviewer is Erica Danylchak, representing the Buckhead Heritage Society of Atlanta, Georgia. And that's the formality.

SAM MASSELL: And let me correct a technicality. You said I founded the Buckhead Coalition. I'm the founding president but actually I can't take credit or the blame for creation of the Buckhead Coalition. Actually Charlie Loudermilk is the main one that came up with the idea. They retained the services of a headhunter to find somebody to run it, and that's where I came into the picture. They wanted to give me a one-year contract and I wanted a three-year contract. We agreed on a two-year contract, and twenty-four years later we still haven't drawn it. There was work to be done and we hit the ground running.

DANYLCHAK: I imagine that you shaped the vision for the organization coming on right at the beginning as you did.

MASSELL: Well, they asked me to do just that. They are busy people. The membership is limited to CEOs of major firms, by invitation, 100 in number. They frankly don't have the time to do it. They wanted somebody who had experience in different fields that could contribute to the work that we planned.

DANYLCHAK: And what was the work that you planned? What did you see the Buckhead Coalition getting involved in from the beginning?

MASSELL: Well, the purpose is sort of to be a supplement to government, feeling that we shouldn't take the progress and prosperity of this community for granted, and that City Hall can't do it all by itself and that strong citizen partnerships should be a meaningful help. And that's the direction we undertook, adopting a mission that's to nurture the quality of life of Buckhead. Buckhead's 28 square miles, 76,000 people. It's a community of 40 neighborhoods. It is very much like a city, but not a separate city. It's all within the city of Atlanta.

DANYLCHAK: And what accomplishment are you most proud of regarding your work at the Buckhead Coalition over the last 25 years?

MASSELL: One of the most important undertakings was right at the beginning when we were the lobbyist, or a major lobbying effort, for the extension of Georgia Highway 400 through Buckhead. From its termination then at Interstate 285, north of here, the Perimeter, and tying it in from there to Interstate 85 south of here. So to lobby for that, which was a program that had been under way for about 20 years, to be able to take city councilmen in helicopters up over the route, to run full-page ads in the Atlanta daily newspapers, to get petitions together and all the work that it took to successfully persuade the council to support something that had been repeatedly discussed and attacked for at least 20 years. So that was one of the most important.

DANYLCHAK: What's the effect been of GA-400 on this community?

MASSELL: Well, I can go outside my door and get in my car and get on that four-lane, limited access highway and get out at the airport and get on a plane and be in London in no time at all, you know. It connected us to the rest of the world. It cemented our economic strength and ties to the rest of the city. That's when our boom in brick and mortar really took off, after we had GA-400 connecting us to the city south, but also connecting people to the north of us to Buckhead, because it goes both ways. It's interesting, incidentally, because where I point out that as being one of the most important achievements where Buckhead Coalition played a major part, it's a good illustration of our partnership with the Buckhead Business Association. Because where we had the money and the wherewithal to do those things I outlined, like full-page ads and helicopters and so forth, when we needed warm bodies, when we needed volunteers to wear buttons saying "Vote Yes" at city hall, whereas we rented the buses and bought the sandwiches, the Buckhead Business Association was the one that filled the seats. So that partnership was a very meaningful relationship, working productively for a cause like that. I started to say that it's interesting twenty- some years later, again one of the most important achievements has been the successful negotiations with Mayor Kasim Reed and Governor, then-Governor Perdue of Georgia to get confirmation for the missing ramp between GA-400 going south and Interstate 85 going north and vice versa, which will not only improve the flow of traffic going on those two highways, but it will decrease the congestion on the surface streets underneath, Sidney Marcus and Buford Highway and Piedmont and other arteries. So that was extremely important, and it's one of which we're very pleased.

In between those twenty-something years a lot has taken place. We were the first organization in the United States to put portable defibrillators that shock people's heart rhythms back in event of a sudden cardiac arrest where the people are rather than on ambulances. The American Heart Association said it will save a lot of lives if you can get there within six or seven minutes. With growing traffic, as we experience, an ambulance or a fire truck or a police car usually won't get there within six or seven minutes. So we arranged in partnership with Piedmont Hospital to place about 60 of them in Buckhead, in churches and hotels and office buildings and other large places of assembly. It's now very common all over the United States, where the people are rather than in ambulances, but we were the first in the country to do that. We were the first in the country to do something else which has now been outdated because of the cell phone it's no longer needed, but to put portable, to put 911 emergency telephones in a community other than on state highways and college campuses. No one else had put them in the community and we did that, particularly around our nightclub area. But there were other places where there was a congregation, pedestrian traffic particularly, where this could expedite response time and be a safety measure for the public. We've been creative, you might say, in that manner of undertaking

anything that comes to mind because with that mission I mentioned of nurturing the quality of life of the community we can do just about anything and still come within our bylaws. I'll think of other things as we go. We've paid a reward, we paid rewards for information leading to the conviction of heinous crimes. We paid a \$50,000 reward to a young hairdresser, the largest reward ever paid in Georgia. But we have not only the strength and the power of our individual members because of their stature but we have the money because of the same people so we can do things like this where others are not doing it. I'm just in the throes of preparing an agreement I should say that will provide an incentive, just \$10,000, to a gas station to put in compressed natural gas so Buckhead can provide that for the few cars today and more tomorrow that will do something like that for the environment. And we've recently put out dog waste disposal stations through the neighborhoods. We've paved sidewalks in neighborhoods. We have a tree planting incentive program. We'll think of more as we go along.

DANYLCHAK: I have one other particular project that I wanted to ask you about. In 2006 the Buckhead Coalition fought to preserve access to Piney Grove Cemetery, which is an African-American cemetery off Canterbury Road. Why did the Coalition get involved? Why did you feel it was so important to do so?

MASSELL: Well, it was one of the, part of the heritage of our community. It was mostly slavery burials in our community that stood the chance of being landlocked and forever forgotten. So we took on the task, when we learned about the developer who was planning that use of it, to block that purpose which we did successfully. Subsequently the recession changed everything too and he never did build, but when he does come back, he's got covenants now running with the land.

DANYLCHAK: We jumped right into the Buckhead Coalition but I wanted to back up for just a minute. After leaving fulltime public service you entered the tourism business in Buckhead where I read you operated for thirteen years under the name "Your travel agent, Sam Massell." Why tourism and why Buckhead? What brought you to Buckhead?

MASSELL: Well, actually, Buckhead was *the* place to be long before Sam Massell took credit for it. It was already a class act on a much less dramatic scale you might say. Actually when I got married was when I moved to Buckhead, which was 1952, and it's interesting that we looked for the best that we could afford, a new building, post-war, that is, of course post World War II, and found a little apartment on Adina Drive at Lindbergh for, I say \$50 a month, my wife remembers it as \$60 a month. At any rate, an interesting anecdote is that just a few years ago, I broke ground at that same location for \$500,000 condos they built in that place where that little \$60 a month apartment was located. But I came to Buckhead because Buckhead was what it was. And that was the place to be, either to work in whatever field I pursued, and the travel business just happened to be sort of a sabbatical I undertook that I didn't make any money but I enjoyed the challenge. It was sort of an ego trip. I know this doesn't fit in your interview but I could learn and experience with all kinds of business that I had never done before. And sell dreams and travel the world. My wife and all three children could work there at one time or another. So, like I left off, we didn't make any money, but we had a good experience with it, and I would probably still be there if they hadn't started this Buckhead Coalition. I wasn't complaining.

DANYLCHAK: So you moved here in 1952. What effect did the annexation have on Buckhead?

MASSELL: Well, it was a good thing for Atlanta for a bad reason. It was, I think, mostly racially motivated. But it did give the people of Buckhead the voice in their destiny, maybe, because before that they had no vote on their government. They had no local government except for county commissioner. Here you became a part of the city with representation on the city council. You had all the benefits of city government, which I think are pretty important. I spent twelve years, well, twenty-two altogether, although two of those were in Mountain Park, Georgia, which is not part of Atlanta.

DANYLCHAK: I want to talk to you about the building we're sitting in. You were at the groundbreaking of this building, correct, when you were mayor of Atlanta? And then when you came to establish your tourism business, you had an office in this building. What's the significance of Tower Place to you?

MASSELL: Well, it started the skyline of Buckhead. Charlie Ackerman was the developer, whom, incidentally, I had hired when he first came to Atlanta, at Allan-Grayson Realty Company. I taught him everything I knew and he learned a lot more. He became very successful. But when he broke ground on this, it was interesting, he asked me at the time, he said, "Sam, do you think anybody will be able to top this?" And my office is here and I look out the window, and people have topped it in all directions, you know, the Sovereign's only a few hundred feet away and it's fifty stories tall. This is thirty. But it did start the skyline of Buckhead with the additional office buildings, with high-rise multi-family buildings, with hotel buildings. Before that there was actually, not a written law, that I know of, but a governing agreement by then-Mayor Bill Hartsfield that buildings in Buckhead would not be over six stories tall. Which we think was done to prevent competition with downtown. The other downtown. You know, Buckhead is now a downtown. When I meet with the staff of the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau, I make sure they know, when a prospect calls in and says they're coming to Atlanta, and they ask 'em where they want to stay, if they say downtown, you better ask 'em which downtown 'cause Buckhead is very much of a downtown as the old central core.

DANYLCHAK: Can you describe kind of broadly the changes you've seen in the built environment in Buckhead, we've already gotten into this a little bit, since you first established your business here in the 1970s? High-rise development . . .

MASSELL: If I understand your question, the big change that took place in that period, not only, one was the development of a skyline, high-rise buildings, but another very important change in the profile of Buckhead in that period has been the entrance of the condominium. Actually, pretty much in high-rise multi-family we had some rental apartments, but nothing of any major size. Buckhead was a place of homes, of single family homes and very few rental properties. The Park Place, which was the first major condo building, was and may still be the largest single purpose condo building in the United States. And it's very successful still. It's well occupied and well maintained. But the take on condo use was unique.

DANYLCHAK: What spurred that development?

MASSELL: I think easy money. Because, frankly, as a former realtor, I don't think condos have a place in a community like Buckhead where rental units are available. Now if you want to be on the beach in Miami, where you can't rent a unit, or on Fifth Avenue in New York, where you can't rent a unit, or some other major artery, then I understand the condo. Actually we had two,

excuse me, we had one co-op building, which is similar to condo, where you own, not really a unit but you own part of the stock in the whole building. And that's one called, sorry, not in Buckhead, but on Briarcliff Road in Druid Hills, which was built in the World War II era, when there wasn't any construction and we had rent control, so you could not rent. So, again, yes, there was a purpose. If you wanted an apartment, there was a way to get one. A group of guys got together and built a co-op. So I've repeated, my opinion as a professional real estate broker, I don't think there was ever a need for 'em, and I don't think there will be any more built. But during the heyday of the loose money a few years ago, everybody was building everything. And there was easy money and everybody made a profit, and prices kept going up until all of a sudden it came to a screeching halt. I don't think you'll see any more condos built. Incidentally, this is not the place maybe on this tape, but when I talk to real estate people I lecture them that they don't the definition of condo. The public thinks of it as a type of construction. It's not a type of construction, it's a type of title. We have in Buckhead a condo office building. That's on Roswell Road, a little three-story building called the Cotton Exchange, which, historically, we have to admit, was the home where the Ku Klux Klan sold their sheets and hoods. But today it's a very nice addition to Buckhead. In Athens, Georgia, there's a condo parking lot, where people pay for their parking space for their automobile and then a monthly fee for the joint driveway, using the little concession building with the restrooms and so forth.

DANYLCHAK: You talked about how GA-400 changed Buckhead. I want to talk about MARTA for a minute. As mayor, you structured the sales tax funding to win the MARTA referendum, and I've heard you say on other interviews that creating MARTA is one of the proudest things you've done. How did it affect Buckhead?

MASSELL: Well, I'm glad you mentioned it, because I should have. When we lobbied for the GA-400 extension, it was on the condition that MARTA be included at the center of GA-400, and if not we were going to oppose GA-400. Whereas most of the verbiage was about GA-400, we felt just as strongly about the need for mass transit. And today we have three stations in Buckhead and twelve bus lines. MARTA is a very important part of Buckhead. Any mobility is meaningful, and MARTA's not perfect, but it's one of the best in the country.

DANYLCHAK: How has Buckhead's growth changed the way you live your life?

MASSELL: Incidentally, I want to go back to something for fun just to share with you. When I was in real estate, and with that same Charlie Ackerman, when he came to work with us, although we were a commercial company, leasing and selling office space primarily, we had one residential track of fifty acres called Parian Ridge, running between Northside Drive and Mount Paran Road, with fifty lots that were divided that we sold. I put Charlie out there in a little trailer on Sundays. He got his baptism by fire on Sundays. It was a hard way to make a living but it was a good experience for him, I still insist. Anyway, that wasn't what I wanted to tell you. The fact that Buckhead, like the rest of Atlanta, didn't have any public transportation, and trying to show that our subdivision was better than any other, and had this amenity that was missing, I got the routes of Greyhound busline and Trailways, which was a competitor of theirs, which came down the four-lane Marietta Highway, just a few hundred feet from Parian Ridge, and put their schedules in our brochures, because you could go out there and flag it down, and you could ride downtown in the morning and you could come home from there, you could get off every evening. So if you worked downtown like most people did then, we had public transportation. No other neighborhood thought of that.

DANYLCHAK: That's a great story. How has Buckhead's growth changed the way you live your life? Have you had to make any adjustments?

MASSELL: One story that brings to mind, which maybe is not a direct response to your question. I live on Peachtree, right near West Wesley. There's a MARTA busline at the front door on Peachtree, but until the Buckhead Coalition went to work on it, and we lobbied this for about three years, with MARTA, in order for me to go from my home to the Fox Theatre, I had to transfer buses, which didn't make any sense at all. Except, I'll take the blame for it, because when we developed MARTA, we purposely designed all of the bus lines to feed into the train stations, to the rail stations. And it made sense then. But since then, so much development has taken place on Peachtree, office buildings, apartments, doctors' offices, other important facilities, that it makes sense to be able to go from there downtown or to midtown. So we lobbied MARTA for three years to get them to finally run a bus, it's the only one, for thirty-five years you couldn't do this, but it's called "the Peach." It's a MARTA bus, Route 110, and you can get on it in Buckhead and go all the way down Peachtree to Midtown, to downtown, and vice versa, daily, seven days a week. We're very pleased and proud of that, frankly. That didn't answer your question, I don't think, how it's changed my life. . . I don't know.

DANYLCHAK: Has the growth, this tremendous development that we've seen in the last twenty to thirty years, have we lost any historic resources that you wish we hadn't?

MASSELL: In Buckhead.

DANYLCHAK: In Buckhead.

MASSELL: Right off the top of my head I can't think of any that we knew about that we were losing. We would surely go to bat to protect and preserve any that we thought were threatened. But I don't think of any offhand.

DANYLCHAK: What do you see for the future of Buckhead in the next ten to twenty years?

MASSELL: More of the same. The business corridor will continue to grow. It will outstrip Midtown and downtown. It will continue definitely to be the retail center, the retail core of the south, the mecca of retailing. We have 1,400 retail units in Buckhead. It will continue to be the dining room of Georgia. We have 300 places where you can eat and drink now. There's no reason that would change. As far as nightlife, that's sort of a fickle thing. It could move. Actually, there's more in Buckhead now than people realize because it's being operated in an orderly way. There is co-existence, which is desirable in my opinion. But that we could lose. Nightlife could move away entirely. I don't think we'll get more, we don't have any area for more single-family homes. We'll have more high-rise multi-family occupancy. As traffic increases, people are more likely to want to live within walking distance of their place of work, and so this lends itself to high-rise, multi-family development, and it becomes a buffer between the single family and the commercial core. I think, I don't ever see a streetcar in Buckhead, and that's a controversial issue. Some of our members are very much in favor of it, some are very much opposed to it. But I don't see that happening. I think more of the same, in an orderly fashion. We don't need to be a boom. You know, having supply is important when demand increases. And maintaining your balance is the magic button for the investor.

DANYLCHAK: You've been quoted as saying that if there was a public cemetery in Buckhead you'd stay here forever. What is it about this community that inspires such a strong sentiment?

MASSELL: Well, it has everything for everybody. You know, I guess that is a throwback to my political days, that I won't accept Buckhead being an elitist location. I'm delighted we have Saks and Tiffany's and stores like that, but I also am very pleased to have Filene's Basement and other budget buying. I think having something for everybody is very healthy. I think having increasing, ever-increasing diversity in population is healthy, race-wise, religious-wise, you name it. I welcome one and all. So the way I see it, Buckhead is milk and honey, it's a place for everybody. I can't think of anything missing. You know, we don't have professional sports in Buckhead, but we just don't have the room for that. Now, we could use some more of the performing arts in Buckhead. And if I were to draw a picture of anything lacking, I guess that would be the one thing. But that Peach bus will take you right down to the High Museum and all the other parts of the performing arts.

DANYLCHAK: Well, thank you. I really appreciate your time today.

MASSELL: You surely are easy. Thank you.

DANYLCHAK: I didn't want to grill you today. I really appreciate your insights on the growth of Buckhead. This is very important for us to preserve your thoughts on that growth over the last twenty to thirty years.

MASSELL: Well, you know, I gave a speech to Lifespan, their annual meeting, the other day, a nice audience, at Peachtree Road United Methodist Church. And everything went very well, with my telling all about the progress and the prosperity and the growth and the predictions for the future, when one lady, and I'm sure she is a lady, asked me wasn't it true that with this growth that I was bragging about came more traffic and congestion. And I had to confess, indeed it does. And all kinds of ailments. More crime and more pollution. You name a problem, and density exacerbates it. And there are two schools or thought. Do you try to stop it? I don't know if you can. I don't know who's been successful in just maintaining the status quo of no growth. But until somebody convinces me differently, I am in the growth school.

DANYLCHAK: Thank you. I really appreciate you taking the time to share your thoughts with me.