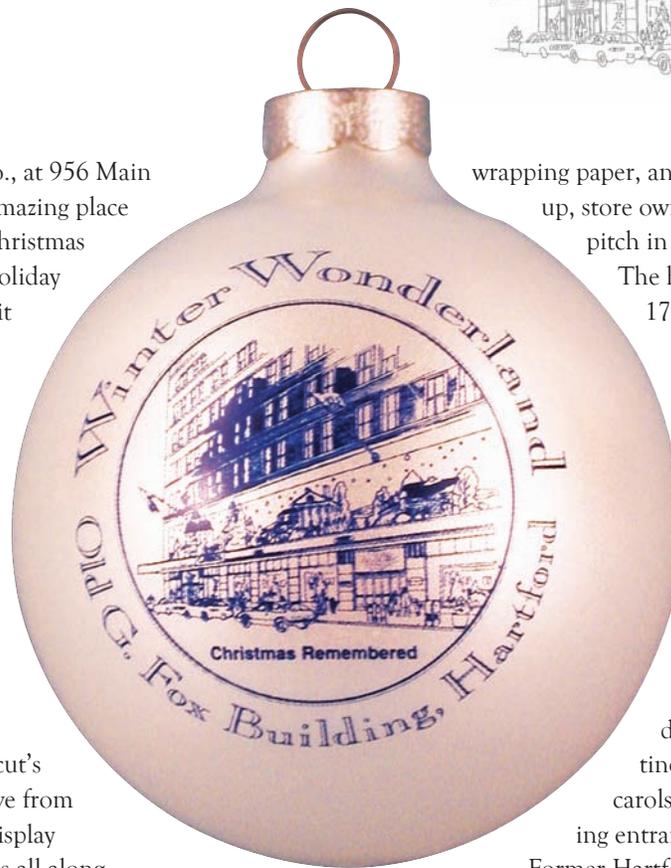


Buygone Days

Hartford's G. Fox Department Store once welcomed more than 30,000 shoppers each day during the holiday season.

In its heyday, G. Fox & Co., at 956 Main Street, Hartford, was an amazing place to shop, but during the Christmas holidays it was magical. The holiday season didn't begin until a visit was paid to Fox's. Decorated from top to bottom, inside and out, the store was alive with Christmas spirit. In the 1950s, the marquee overhanging the main entrance was lit with giant candles and wrapped packages. In the 1960s, the scene changed to represent a peaceful colonial village blanketed in snow, with each structure representing one of Connecticut's historic buildings. People drove from all over the state to view the display downtown, causing traffic jams all along Church Street.

In those days, the 1950s and 1960s, the Christmas season didn't officially start until the day after Thanksgiving. When it did the store became a swirl of shoppers and sightseers. "During the holidays more than 30,000 people a day flocked to Fox's either to shop or just enjoy the ambience," says Elizabeth Abbe of the Connecticut Historical Society. The store's workforce rose from a normal 1,500 to 5,000 employees, with all the sales clerks wearing white Merry Christmas badges. "In the stationery department alone, there were one hundred salespeople," Abbe notes. That meant lots of Christmas cards,



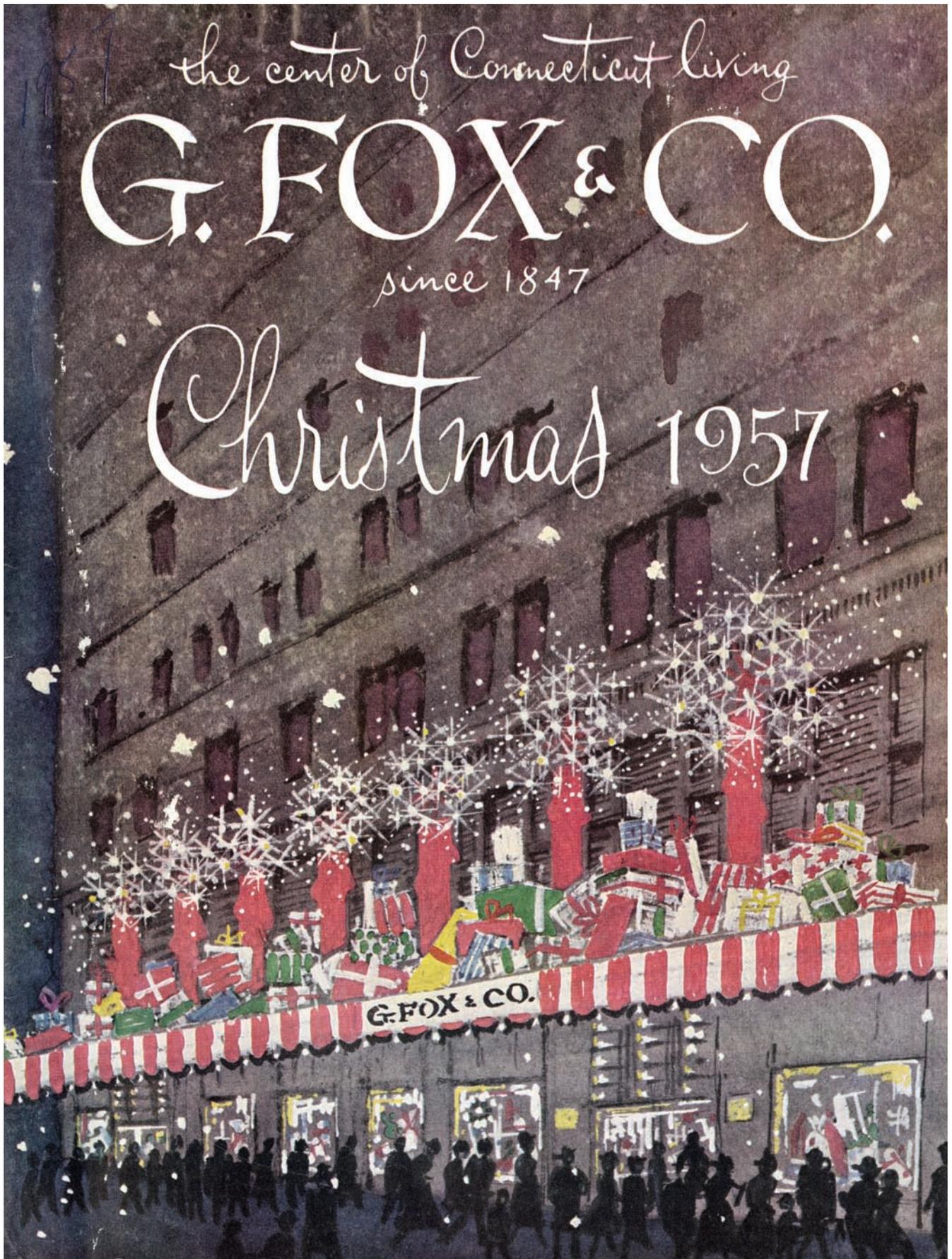
wrapping paper, and bows, and if things got backed-up, store owner Beatrice Fox Auerbach would pitch in and start ringing up sales herself.

The holiday season accounted for 17% of the store's annual revenues.

Mrs. Auerbach, the granddaughter of the store's founder Gerson Fox, who established it in 1847, was exceptionally customer-oriented and understood the importance of the season to shoppers. On the morning of Christmas Eve she ritually held a holiday sing. All employees were required to assemble in Santa Land, known during the rest of the year as Sentinel Hill Hall. They sang Christmas carols to the throngs anxiously awaiting entrance for last-minute gift shopping.

Former Hartford Mayor Ann Uccello, who was once a Fox employee, shared her memories of the department store's Christmas during an oral history interview by the Connecticut Historical Society. She said, "Mrs. Auerbach would always have someone leading us [in song]. One year it was a Jewish fellow, Alvin Goldberg. Another time it was Carl Candels. And if she didn't think we were singing loud enough, she would say so!"

Throughout the year, Mrs. Auerbach strictly adhered to a five-day work-week. The store was always closed on Sunday and Monday, but during the holidays it opened on Mondays to accommodate shoppers who came from throughout the



A 1957 Fox Christmas catalog cover.



Top: Mrs. Auerbach and grandchildren under the tree at her Prospect Avenue home. **Right:** G. Fox shopping bag

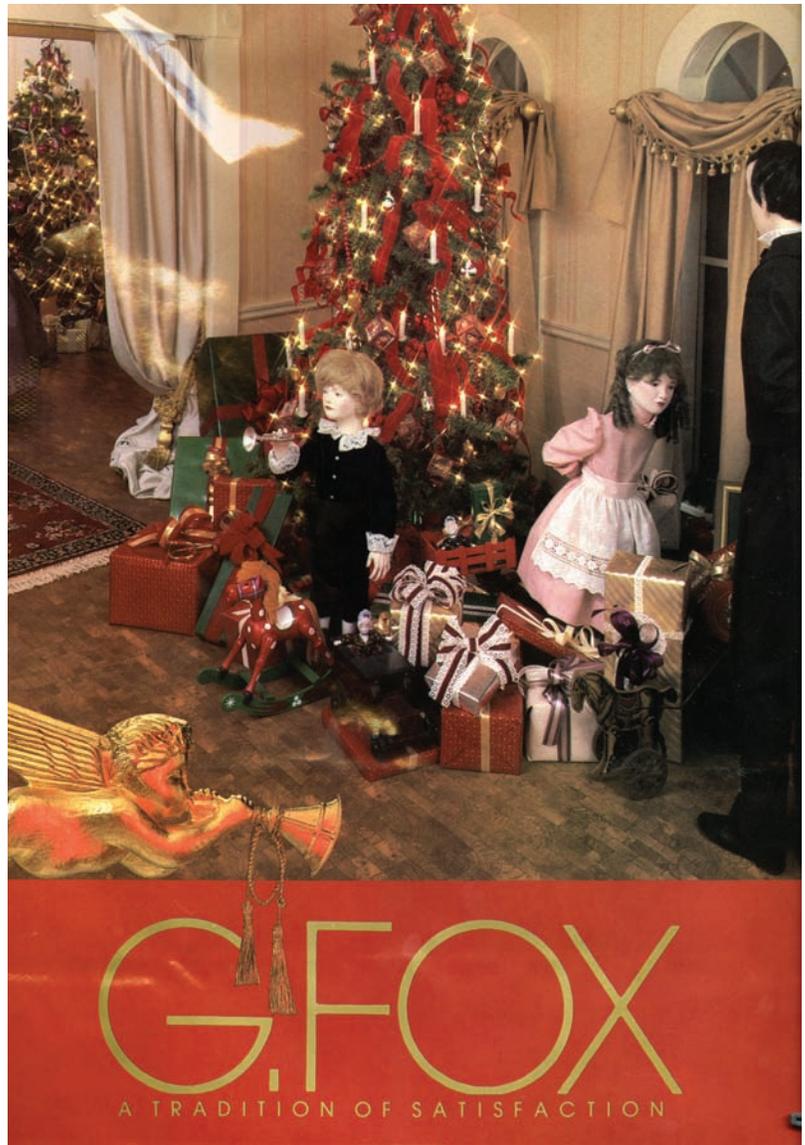
state. Customers were always a top priority. If a telephone order was placed by six p.m. on Christmas Eve, the store guaranteed to deliver it by midnight, at no extra charge, in time for it to be placed under the tree.

Jim Elsner of West Hartford was the credit manager at Fox's for 35 years, retiring in 1974. He remembered the holidays as "a big undertaking," with the display department painting the huge pillars throughout the store a bright red and decorating them with lights and ornaments. Fresh poinsettias and live music filled every floor.

In the Connecticut Room on the second floor, Uccello recalled, "At Christmastime, it was always a special treat to eat there. It was elegant. The big thing was to shop and stay for lunch or supper. The restaurant would be open late and there would be candlelight and delicious food that included Fox's famous pot pie."

The highlight for the youngest shoppers was a visit to the 11th floor, also known as Toyland, where Santa warmly welcomed the children who scrambled to his lap and patiently listened to their wish lists. In the 1950s, that would have included a Shirley Temple doll, a Roy Rogers holster set, or a Lionel electric model train, one of which sped around curves and through tunnels in a retail display. The store offered toys to appeal to every child's imagination. On Christmas morning, children all over Connecticut rushed to open boxes with the G. Fox logo on them.

The Hartford store that had been the cornerstone of Connecticut's retailing world since 1847 was sold to the May Company in 1965. In 1993, it finally closed its



beautiful revolving doors and branch store names were changed to Filene's. G. Fox's original Hartford building now houses Capital Community College, which held its autumn Changing Lives fundraising gala in the Gerson Fox ballroom of the former department store. A display in the college's gallery, free to the public, will showcase historic artifacts from G. Fox & Co.—including holiday decorations—commemorating the retailer's role in making Christmas in Connecticut so special for so many years. 📖

Sharon Hazard is a freelance writer specializing in historical topics and is currently working on a book about the history of the department store in America.