

Interview with Philip Witham by Bruce M. Stave and Sondra Astor Stave for the G. Fox Oral History Project, Connecticut Historical Society, September 5, 2006

BRUCE STAVE: Interview with Philip Witham by Bruce M. and Sondra Astor Stave for the G. Fox Oral History Project of the Connecticut Historical Society, September 5, 2006 at Mr. Witham's home in Newington, Connecticut. Okay, what we want to do today is talk to you about your experience with G. Fox. But we'd like to start by asking you a little bit about your early life, where you were born, your education, et cetera.

WITHAM: Okay. Well, I was born in Maine, little town of Washburn, which is up in Aroostook County. And I came down to Connecticut when I was about six and I grew up in the Hartford area.

BS: Whenabouts?

PW: Well, actually, all over Hartford because it was during the Depression and we moved around a bit. And—

SONDRA ASTOR STAVE: What year were you born?

PW: 1930, mm-hmm.

BS: Okay. And where'd you go to school?

PW: Well, I went to—I went to several schools in Hartford, Naylor and even Washington Street School. That was my first one. And I went to—I ended up in Weaver High.

BS: Okay.

PW: At that point, actually, I got as far as the 10th grade there and I ended up dropping out. Lucky I found the United States Air Force and I

went in and got my GED diploma. And—and since then, of course, I've had a couple college degrees. [chuckles]

SAS: Oh, nice.

BS: That's nice. Where—where—

SAS: Where'd you go to college?

PW: I went to Central Connecticut and Tunxis.

BS: Great.

PW: And graduated both.

BS: Ah.

PW: Mm-hmm.

SAS: What'd you study?

PW: I studied elementary education at Central and business administration at Tunxis.

BS: Oh, a good combination.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: Did you teach or—

PW: I substitute—did a lot of substitute teaching but never really—at that time, was 1973 when I graduated.

BS: Right.

PW: And the bottom fell out of the teaching market. So [chuckles] I couldn't get a job anywhere except as a sub. Some I enjoyed and some I could—I wished I were somewhere else. [laughter]

SAS: What grade levels did you—

PW: Well, I preferred the lower grades. I did my student teaching in second grade, which was the best experience and I—ever since then I preferred second grade.

SAS: Uh-huh.

PW: Because those kids are something. [chuckles]

BS: Now, when you were young—you said you came to Hartford when you were six years old.

PW: Yes.

BS: And when did you first become cognizant of G. Fox? When—what kind of experiences did you initially have?

PW: Well, originally, I'd been in G. Fox several times as a customer.

BS: As a—as a young person?

PW: As a young person, yes.

SAS: What do you remember, as a young person, about going to G. Fox?

PW: How big the store is—

SAS: Uh-huh.

PW: —and how beautiful the place was.

BS: Could you describe it all as you're remember it when you were young?

PW: Well, you walked into the store and just like it opened up wide, you know. And of course, I noticed all the pillars, that they were all decorated. And the thing I enjoyed most was riding the escalators. [chuckles]

SAS: Now, was it decorated all year round or just at the holiday time?

PW: Well, it was just a beautiful—beautifully decorated all year round but Christmas it was something special.

BS: Did you go to any special departments at all when you were young?

PW: Well, I went to the boys' clothing department. And of course, when I was a Boy Scout, when they had Boy Scout week I was over there at—when the—our troop had a—we had to take over at the Boy Scout department at that time.

BS: Uh-huh. Okay. Now—

SAS: And did you sell things there then—

PW: Oh, no, no.

SAS: —during that week or—

PW: No, we were—

SAS: When you said “take over”—

PW: Well, we were just talking Boy Scouts at that time.

SAS: I see, uh-huh.

BS: When did you start working there? What kind of job did you have?

PW: Well, in 1946 I turned 16 years old and I was still in high school. And I applied for a job at G. Fox and I still remember some of the people I met in human resources, like Mr. Trott, who was a very nice man. And he spoke to us during our orientation.

BS: Uh-huh. What kinds of things did had you tell you?

PW: Well, the most important thing he told us was Mrs. Auerbach’s policy was, “The customer is always right. [laughter] That was a very strict rule at G. Fox.

BS: Okay. Anything else? Any other instructions or help that he gave you?

PW: Well, they just told us, “Always be polite to the customers because the customers are important.”

BS: Uh-huh.

SAS: And what kind of work were you doing at 16 there?

PW: Well, I—I started as a stock boy. Unfortunately, it was temporary because I ended up—it was just Christmas and I was in the toy department. But I—as I said, I enjoyed that and I still remember my first boss there. It was a lady by the name of Mrs. Lunner.

BS: How do you—do you remember—

PW: I don't think I ever knew how to pro—how to spell her name.

BS: Lunner.

PW: She was a nice lady.

BS: And since you were so young and she was the boss, what kinds of things did she tell you, and did she train you at all?

PW: Well, not really. She was just there to run the department. And she did it very well.

BS: And this was a temporary job?

PW: Yes.

BS: Christmas job?

PW: Yes, Christmas.

BS: So how many weeks did you work there?

PW: Well, I turned 16 in October and I started working at G. Fox almost immediately.

SAS: So were you stocking shelves or—

PW: Stocking the shelves and counters. It was on the Eighth floor at that time. [chuckles]

BS: Do you remember any of the toys that you—

PW: No. [laughter]

BS: Do you remember any of the customers at that time?

PW: No, that was—there were so many.

BS: Uh-huh. Well, after you finished that—that job, did you—well, before we go into that, while you were there for that job, did you ever meet Mrs. Auerbach?

PW: Yeah. Oh, yes. You couldn't miss meeting her because she was—she always wanted to run the store. And my first impression of her was, “What a nice woman she is.” [chuckles]

SAS: What did she say to you when she—

PW: Oh, she just greeted, you know, like, “Hello,” and “How are you?” [chuckles]

SAS: She found out your name and so forth?

PW: I don't think so, but she just knew that—she was just very nice to the employees.

BS: Mm-hmm. Did you go—where did you eat in terms of lunches or—

PW: Well, I ate in the—of course, it was after school so I didn't really eat in the store.

BS: Uh-huh. Did you ever go to the Connecticut Room?

PW: Oh, I've—I've been there, yes. [chuckles]

BS: But at this time? At this particular time, did you start going?

PW: No, I think there was another section of the Connecticut Room, like a cafeteria—

BS: Right.

PW: —next door. That's where I ate.

BS: Uh-huh.

PW: On Saturdays.

BS: I—on Saturdays?

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: Okay, do you remember the kind of food they served or what it cost?

PW: Well, sandwiches and, of course, I always tried out their desserts. [chuckles]

SAS: Was the food good?

PW: Very—mm-hmm, very good.

SAS: What desserts do you remember them having?

PW: Well, the pies and, as a matter of fact, the more whipped cream on them, the better they looked. [laughter]

SAS: And they had lots of whipped cream?

PW: Mm-hmm. [chuckles]

BS: What about the expense? How much did it—did it cost?

PW: Oh, very little. Very little, because I think there was a—the employee discount too.

BS: Mm-hmm. Now, what did you get paid as a stock boy back in the 1940s?

PW: Fifty cents an hour. [laughs]

BS: Fifty cents an hour. Ah-ha.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: And you were only there for a few weeks at this time so—

PW: A couple of months, mm-hmm.

BS: A couple of months, so—

PW: Because right after Christmas they told us, “Well, we have to let you go.”

BS: Uh-huh.

PW: Mm-hmm.

SAS: And how did 50 cents an hour compare to wages working somewhere else?

PW: Well, I would say it was pretty good.

SAS: Uh-huh.

PW: Mm-hmm.

SAS: And how did you get there?

PW: I took the bus. Usually after school I would just climb on the bus and down off the Blue Hills Avenue bus, then go to the store.

SAS: And do you remember what the bus fare was?

PW: I think 10 cents.

BS: Where did you live at that time? You said you lived in Hartford—

PW: Well, I lived in the North End at the time.

BS: North End?

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: So about how long would it take you to get to work?

PW: Oh, about 20, 25 minutes.

BS: Were—when you got your job, did you know anybody who worked at G. Fox?

PW: No. No, not at the time.

BS: Uh-huh. So what brought you to—to getting the job?

PW: Well, to me it was the biggest store in downtown Hartford. And as I said, I'd been in the store so many times as a customer. I says, you know, "It looks like a nice place to work." [chuckles]

SAS: Oh.

PW: Mm-hmm, and it turned out to be.

BS: Okay. Now, what did you do immediately after that?

PW: Well, I went to a couple of other jobs. Matter of fact, I ended up working at the Strand Theater at one time. And I think this is what might—this was my undoing. [chuckles]

BS: [chuckles] Uh-huh, and why so?

PW: My grades started going down and—which led to my dropping out twice. I went back the second year and tried it and I says, "Ah, it's not going to work." So I tried, you know, the second time and then in

January I ended up in the Air Force, 1950. Six months later, the Korean War started. [chuckles]

BS: Oh. So how long were you in the service?

PW: I was four year—four and a half years.

BS: Did you go to Korea?

PW: No, matter of fact, during my first enlistment I never went overseas.

BS: Oh.

PW: [chuckles] Spent it all stateside. However, I was in Strategic Air Command, which is—I would rather have been overseas. [chuckles]

BS: Uh-huh. Were you in Nebraska or—

PW: Kansas.

BS: Kansas.

PW: Mm-hmm. Well, that was my last duty station.

BS: Uh-huh. Now, you—you came back after the four, four and a half years—

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: —to Hartford.

SAS: But you said you did go overseas someplace.

PW: In my second enlistment.

SAS: Where did you go?

PW: Japan.

BS: Ah. Now, was that contiguous? Was that continuous?

PW: No, I had a break of four years.

BS: A break of four years.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: So in the four years that you were back home, what did you do?

PW: Well, I worked at Pratt and Whitney as a photographer, because I went to photography school at—while I was in the Air Force.

BS: Right.

PW: Spent six months in Denver for that and that's why I had four and a half years. I had to volunteer an extension of six months so I could work in that career field for two years.

BS: I see. Now, did you ever go back to work for G. Fox?

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: What—can you tell us about that?

PW: Well, I worked a couple more times in different departments and then I worked over in the warehouse most of the time.

BS: Okay, so, for—when did you go back to G. Fox?

PW: Well, it was off and on during the years before 1950. And I still enjoyed it.

BS: Okay. And the kind of work you—were you a stock boy or—

PW: Mm-hmm, or stock clerk at that—

BS: Stock clerk.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: I see. And were you doing anything different than when you worked at Christmas time?

PW: Well, what I was doing then is I was working more in the warehouse. And I used to take stock from there over to the store, over to whatever floor it was needed.

SAS: How'd you get back and forth.

PW: Oh, then?

SAS: Yeah.

PW: Bus.

SAS: So, you know, you said you took stock from the warehouse—

PW: Oh, oh, oh.

SAS: —to the store.

PW: Over the bridge. We went over the—

BS: The warehouse was right close by then?

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: On what street would that be? Do you remember?

PW: I'm thinking Temple Street but that's not it. It's the one—

BS: Talcott?

PW: Talcott Street.

BS: Yeah.

PW: I think that's it.

SAS: Oh.

BS: You think Talcott Street?

PW: Mm-hmm. As a matter of fact, the building that's next door to—
that's now a parking ramp?

SAS: Yeah.

PW: That was the warehouse.

BS: Oh.

SAS: Oh. The Talcott Street Garage.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: Uh-huh, I see. Okay. And how many people did you work with in the
warehouse?

PW: Oh, several. Of course, I couldn't remember them now.

BS: You know, approximately. Was it five or a hundred or, you know,
what kinds of numbers?

PW: Well, usually around five. We had a small group.

BS: And this would be, essentially, carrying stuff back and forth?

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: Do you remember your boss there?

PW: No.

BS: Okay. And so this was—how many weeks or months would you say in that four-year period before 1950 did you do this?

PW: I would guess maybe two or three times I went back there and worked.

BS: Okay. And for how long a period?

PW: Well, it was short because there again it was—somehow, I have a thing about temporary work. [chuckles]

BS: Was it seasonal or just temp—

PW: Seasonal, yes.

BS: Okay. Was there any problem of getting rehired each time?

PW: No. No, not at all.

BS: So—

SAS: Well, did you apply to them or did they contact you?

PW: I applied there.

SAS: Uh-huh.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: So you went back.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: Okay. And were the same people working there that—each time or different—

PW: Different people.

BS: Different people.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: All right. Now, in that period of time, did you have much contact with the store itself, with anybody in the store, anybody who may have been selling, or Mrs. Auerbach herself?

PW: Well, actually—actually, when I'd bring stock over there and just, you know, "Where do we—where do I put it?" And—

BS: Who did you talk to? I mean, can you describe what—give me an average day in—

PW: Okay. Well, usually, if I'd take any stock over to the warehouse—you know, they had these little gurneys that—like, the canvas—canvas ones?

BS: Right.

PW: And we would take them over to—to the store through the freight elevators, of course. [chuckles]

BS: Right.

PW: And we would go to the departments and usually catch either the department manager or one of the clerks. And they would tell me where to put the stock.

BS: Okay.

PW: And sometimes they'd say, "Okay, why don't you set it—put it up on the counter and"—

SAS: Then they would put it away?

PW: Sometimes they would just put it out there for customers to—to buy. That's what I would end up doing. [chuckles]

BS: And what were you getting paid at that time?

PW: Oh, I think the pay went up there. That was a dollar and a half an hour.

BS: Oh, so substantially different—

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: —just in a few years.

PW: Oh, yes. Mm-hmm.

BS: Why was that?

PW: I think the—the pay just increased.

BS: Did you get any benefits or—

PW: Well, the store discount. As long as I worked in the store I got the store discount.

BS: Did you take advantage of that?

PW: Oh, yes. [laughter]

BS: What kinds of things did you buy?

PW: Oh, I'd buy clothes or maybe a book or something.

SAS: Do you remembers what the percentage of discount was?

PW: Ten percent.

SAS: Ten percent.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: Okay. Now, so these are in the four years before going into the Army.

SAS: Air Force.

PW: Air Force.

BS: Air Force, sorry. Sorry. Okay, into the Air Force. And when you came out of the Air Force prior to your second enlistment—

PW: Okay.

BS: —what'd you do?

PW: I went right to Pratt and Whitney Aircraft and worked as an industrial photographer.

BS: Right, okay. Now, so—and you had nothing to do with G. Fox at that time?

PW: Except as a customer.

BS: Okay. How often would you go back as a customer?

PW: Oh, as often as I could. I liked that store. [laughter]

BS: What would you say? Once a week or—

PW: Oh, yes. Then, of course, at that time Thursday night was shopping night in Hartford.

BS: Right.

PW: And I remember that.

SAS: And the store would be open until what time?

PW: Nine o'clock.

BS: So you would shop after work or—

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: Okay. Now, you apparently go back to the Air Force for another how many years?

PW: Four.

BS: Four years. You stay in the Air Force and—

PW: And I came back to Pratt and Whitney again.

BS: Okay. For how long?

PW: Well, for—I was there until 1971.

BS: '70—so that's from '54 or—to '71?

PW: Actually, '58 to '62.

BS: '58, okay.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: '58 to '62?

PW: That was my second enlistment.

BS: Oh, okay.

PW: And it was during that time in 1958 I went to Japan.

BS: Right, okay.

PW: Five weeks after I got married. [laughs]

BS: Oh. Oh, wow. Did you have any chance to see any department stores in Japan?

PW: Oh, yes.

BS: How'd they compare to G. Fox?

PW: They are different. [chuckles] I've been to the Dimaru department store—

BS: Right and—

PW: —in the city of Fukuoka.

BS: Uh-huh. Oops. [chuckles] Dimaru. Okay. And that city that you mentioned?

PW: Fukuoka.

BS: Okay, so you went to that department store and did you—did you think to, you know—did you compare in your mind? Did you say, “Boy, this is not like G. Fox at all?”

PW: Oh, yes.

BS: Uh-huh. What were the differences?

PW: Well, it's hard to tell. Of course, because everybody—as I said, every—everything there was Japanese so—

SAS: Oh. But did it—

PW: It didn't—

SAS: —sell the same amount—

PW: It did.

SAS: The kinds of merchandise?

PW: Mm-hmm. Oh, yes. But the difference is you walk in the Japanese department store and it was like—it was unlike G. Fox, which was wide open. This was one was sort of—

BS: Small?

PW: —small.

BS: Okay. And did you buy stuff there?

PW: Mm-hmm. Oh, yes. [chuckles] Although most of the stuff we bought over there we bought in the Base Exchange.

BS: I see.

SAS: Now, did your wife come with you to Japan?

PW: No.

BS: So, it—did you send stuff home?

PW: Oh, yes.

BS: From the department store or from the exchange?

PW: The department stores and places I've bought. For instance, I think I brought that home from—or I sent that home.

BS: Let's see. Let's see. Okay.

PW: I think that's supposed to be Mount Fuji right here. [chuckles]

BS: Alrighty. How would you say the merchandise compared to the stuff that was in—in G. Fox?

PW: I'd say—actually, the department I went to mostly was where they had the electronics. And of course, I—of course, I had a little funny thing happen with G. Fox.

BS: What?

PW: I can tell you after. You walk into the electronics department and they didn't have these record booths, like they had in the ninth floor at G.

Fox. [chuckles] As a matter of fact, when I was young, before—even before working at G. Fox, we used to go up on the ninth floor.

BS: Uh-huh.

PW: And go in the record booth. We'd take a record album off the shelf and go in and play the records. And there's one—one person who used to work there. And I—his name is Paul Hoha.

BS: Oh, okay.

PW: He was working in that department. Of course, he'd open the door and says, "Are you buying a record, buying an album?" And we'd say no. He says, "Well, you can't play the records here," and he'd throw us out. [laughs] So later on, I joined the Masons. And of all things, he turned out to be the secretary of the lodge that I joined. [laughter] And what I became master of the lodge he was my secretary. [chuckles] It was quite a thing. And I said, "Do you remember me?"

SAS: Did he remember you?

PW: And he says, "No, I don't." I says, "Well, you used to throw me out of the record booth all the time when I was a—a teenager." [chuckles]

BS: Was this common to go in and listen to the records?

PW: Oh, yes.

BS: The other kids too?

PW: All the kids did it all the time. [chuckles]

BS: Uh-huh. How were they treated? I mean, were they treated like you were or—

PW: Oh, yeah. It's very clear you can't play a record. If you—if you're not buying records, then you can't play them. [chuckles]

BS: So did you—

SAS: Did you ever buy any or—

PW: Oh, yes.

SAS: Yeah?

PW: Yeah, because I grew up with a love of music so—

SAS: Uh-huh. So who did you like?

PW: Well, I was into the big bands.

SAS: Uh-huh.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: Tommy Dorsey or—

PW: Tom—I met Tommy Dorsey.

SAS: Uh-huh. Where was that?

PW: At the State Theater in Hartford.

SAS: Uh-huh.

PW: That was my Saturday home before I started working. [chuckles]

BS: Yeah.

SAS: Did you play an instrument yourself?

PW: I took trumpet when I was young but I found I didn't have any talent for music. Mine was with a camera. [chuckles]

SAS: Uh-huh.

BS: I see. So—okay, so let's go back to Japan for a minute.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: So you did visit department stores there, and how often were you in contact with your family and with Hartford, such as that, while you over—

PW: Well, by letters and, of course, once in awhile I'd call my wife.

BS: By the time you returned to—to the U.S. in '62, you say?

PW: Yeah. Oh, now, I came back in 1960.

BS: '60?

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: Okay. In 1960, then—

PW: We went to Florida.

BS: Oh. You went—

PW: [chuckles]

BS: Well, can I ask this? Did you stay in the Hartford area at all?

PW: When I came back?

BS: Yeah.

PW: Oh, yes.

BS: Had it changed much in the—

PW: Oh, very much.

BS: What—what kinds of changes had occurred?

PW: Well, I noticed the downtown areas all torn up and all the stores are gone.

BS: This was in 1960?

PW: Uh-huh.

BS: Which—when you're talking about it, is that—

SAS: The Front Street area or—

PW: The Front Street area and Asylum Street. And you could see, little by little, they were tearing buildings down and I said, "This isn't good."

[chuckles]

BS: Uh-huh.

SAS: And what was going into what was torn down?

PW: Well, some of the places, like the corner of Asylum and Main, where they had the old Aetna building there, they had—I don't know what's

there now, but they had a little terrace there where you could—where they used to have entertainment at noontime. And I guess they've done away with that too.

BS: Okay. So this was happening in the interim—

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: —while you're away. Now, how long did you stay in the Hartford area before you went to Florida?

PW: Oh, I went directly to Florida from Japan.

BS: Oh.

PW: That was my next duty station.

BS: Oh, I see. Oh, okay. So you—

PW: And we were stationed in Orlando.

BS: So when did you leave there?

PW: '62.

BS: '62.

PW: Then I came back here.

BS: Okay, then you came back here.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: Okay. So what was it like coming back after the service of four more years and such?

PW: It didn't seem like home.

BS: Uh-huh.

PW: [chuckles]

BS: Where did you move to?

PW: Well, we moved into Hartford.

BS: Which street or—

PW: Well, our first address is on Webster Street and then we moved to, I think, Morningside Street and finally, to Elmwood, and then to Newington and we've been here ever since. Well, not in this house but we lived in another address in Newington. Of course, this was my duty's—my what they call “my home of record” before I went in my second enlistment.

BS: Okay. Now, so by the '60s, what do you do when you come back?

PW: Well, it was '62 and I went right back to—

BS: Pratt Whitney.

PW: —Pratt and Whitney.

BS: And you stayed till '71.

PW: Stayed there till '71 when I went to college.

BS: Oh, okay.

PW: Well, I started college before '71—'68. But I decided to study teaching and I had to give up my job and go to school during the day. And—and I finished in 1973. As a matter of fact, I was—let's see, 1968 when I enrolled in college, I was 38 years old [chuckles] and graduated at 43.

BS: What made you do that? Why—why'd you decide to go?

PW: Believe it or not, it was just a whim. I said, “I wonder if I could make it. What have I got to lose?” [chuckles] Because I had the GI Bill anyway.

BS: Right.

PW: So I figured, “Well, let's give it a try.” And I never flunked a course in the whole four years. [chuckles]

BS: That's good. Now, in that time period, how'd you support yourself?

PW: Well, I worked—I still worked at Pratt and Whitney up until 1971. But then after that I worked in, you know, Burger King and, well, then we had Hardee's in this area. I worked at that. But then when I did my student teaching I had to give it up. So my wife had to help. But I had military from—I had money coming from the GI Bill too.

BS: Okay. All right. And in that period, did you have any contact at all with G. Fox?

PW: Oh, yes.

BS: What?

SAS: As a customer or—

PW: As a customer.

BS: Did you see any changes in the store?

PW: Well, yes. I noticed, first of all—I noticed one thing was when the—I went to the toy department one time and it was on the 11th floor and part of—in Centinel Hill Hall.

BS: Right.

PW: And I think what they had—on the eighth floor was that furniture or rugs and carpeting. [chuckles]

BS: So they shifted around the—

PW: Oh, yes. I noticed a lot of changes.

BS: Oh.

SAS: Now, in 1965 it was taken over by the May Company.

PW: Mm-hmm.

SAS: As a customer, were you conscious of that?

PW: Not at first. But when they announced that they were going to close the store downtown, I was devastated because it was such a beautiful place. And even when I worked in the downtown area, I still loved

going into G. Fox and used to go in during my lunch hour. And—and one day they said they're closing. And what's—the guy with Channel 30. Was it Doug Green or Doug Griffin?

BS: I'm not sure. Doesn't—doesn't ring a bell.

PW: Oh, he's a blond-haired announcer or newscaster.

BS: Channel 30, I do watch it.

SAS: Now, what year would this have been?

PW: Let's see. It had to be in the late '60s.

SAS: Okay. We weren't up here until 1970.

BS: Yeah, so that's—

PW: Oh.

BS: That's right.

PW: And the store was already closed when you—

SAS: No.

BS: The store—the store didn't close till '92.

PW: Oh, '92? Okay.

BS: Yeah, that's—the May Company took it over in '65.

PW: Yeah. Well, that's—that's—I was going through there and then all of a sudden I saw this person from Channel 30, and also somebody from the "Hartford Courant" was there. And I got interviewed on TV for that.

BS: That's when it was—

SAS: Oh.

BS: —closing?

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: Yeah.

PW: And—

BS: Yeah, because I've seen an article that appeared in a newspaper that had your name in it.

PW: Uh-huh.

BS: So I think it was probably that time that you were—you were interviewed at that time.

PW: And I re—I think I mentioned the—one fact was—that was the fact that it was my first job when I turned 16.

SAS: Oh.

PW: And the other one was about when I was—before I was—even when I was a younger teenager, playing the records in the record booth. That—that was in that article.

BS: That was—exactly.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: Yes, I've seen that. But the idea back—as you came back to Hartford and as you were a customer there in the period that you're working at Pratt Whitney and whatever, do you—did you see changes in terms of, a., who—well, a., in service? b., in the quality of the materials sold? And c., in other customers? So let's take that one at a time. First of all, did you find any difference in the service as time went on?

PW: Yes, when they—there used to be they could deliver—they used to deliver your products if you couldn't get into the store. And that was eliminated. And then the—what was that second question? The—

BS: The—in terms of the quality of goods?

PW: That never changed. That was always good.

BS: Always good, okay.

PW: Yes, they were very strict about the quality.

BS: And what about the customers, the people who shopped there? Did this—

PW: There were fewer—fewer customers.

BS: Uh-huh.

SAS: Why do you think that was?

PW: Well, I think they were going to the malls instead.

SAS: Uh-huh. And as far as the customer always being right, when it was taken over by the May Company, was the customer still right?

PW: That never changed. That never changed.

SAS: Uh-huh, the customer was—

PW: That's been their policy. I even noticed now a few other companies have taken up that policy. Wal-Mart, for one.

SAS: The customer's always right at Wal-Mart?

PW: You take something back there, you are not dis—if you're not satisfied with it they will take it back. They're very good about it. As a matter of fact, there was a—I saw this joke on the Internet about it because it—a woman was trying to get rid of her husband. [chuckles] And she says, "Well, I don't want to kill him because I'll go to jail. And divorce is going to be too expensive." And her friend says, "Well, why don't you take him back to Wal-Mart? They'll take anything back." [laughter]

SAS: That's a funny joke. [laughs]

BS: In terms of when you first worked there, were there any minorities working at G. Fox?

PW: I never noticed.

BS: Of all the times that you were there?

PW: No, because mainly I was just—just going there after school. And of course, I didn't notice who was working there.

BS: But in the warehouse then.

PW: In the warehouse? Oh, yeah. There were a few.

BS: Uh-huh. How were they treated at the time? Do you have any sense?

PW: Well, I think G. Fox always treated their employees very well. And it didn't matter what color they were. They were very good to them.

BS: Any specific person come to mind or any—

PW: No.

BS: No. How about women? Were they—did you see much—many women working there?

PW: Well, you never saw any women working in the warehouse.

BS: Yeah.

PW: But when I was 16 in the toy department, of course, Mrs. Lunner—

BS: Right.

PW: My lady—my boss was a lady. [chuckles]

BS: Right.

PW: I can still picture her. You know, it's—she was—she had red hair. [chuckles]

SAS: And was it special to be working for a woman or—

PW: No. No, it was—me, I was just happy to be working. [chuckles]
Even now, I'm—I'm 75 years old now and I'm—I'm still working. I don't want to retire.

SAS: What do you do?

PW: Right now, I'm—believe it or not, I'm temping over at the American Radio Relay League.

BS: Oh.

PW: In the warehouse.

BS: Ah.

PW: And doing photography on the side. [chuckles]

BS: Oh, that—well, that's very good. Now, have you kept contact with anybody who worked in the store?

PW: No.

BS: No, no contact?

PW: No, I don't even know if those people are still alive.

SAS: So you haven't worked in the store for a very long time?

PW: No, a very long time.

BS: Okay. Now, the last time that you worked in the store, when would that have been?

PW: Oh, gosh. It had to be '48, '49.

BS: That far back?

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: Okay, so—

SAS: Now, when G. Fox went out into the shopping areas and so forth—

PW: Yeah, in the malls?

SAS: Yeah, did you shop at—

PW: Oh, yes.

SAS: —the G. Foxes there?

PW: Mm-hmm.

SAS: In preference to other stores or—

PW: Well, I—it was easier to get to the mall.

BS: But how—how did the downtown store compare to the suburban store? To the mall store, or vice versa?

PW: I—I think they tried to keep the decor as good as downtown Hartford.

BS: Do you feel that they achieved that or—

PW: I think they did.

SAS: And would you be more likely to go to the G. Fox in the mall than to a different store in the mall or—

PW: Mainly for convenience because parking is kind of tough in downtown Hartford.

BS: Hartford.

SAS: Yeah.

BS: Okay. Let's see if there's other things we want to ask you about. Do you happen to have any materials that you had gotten at G. Fox at all that you may have kept?

PW: I think the last item I bought at G. Fox, I still have it. It was a coffee mug. [laughter] Let's see. It's in the dishwasher. [chuckles] Believe it or not, here it is. I'm an avid golfer.

SAS: Oh.

PW: So this is what it says. [chuckles]

BS: Right.

PW: It says, "A bad day on the golf course still beats a good day at work." [laughter]

BS: When did you—when did you buy this?

SAS: But it sounds like you wouldn't necessarily agree with that?

PW: Well, there again, I—I joke about it because I always make a joke about my golf game anyway, because I'm not that good. [laughs]

BS: But what year did you buy that? Do you remember?

PW: 1992.

BS: Oh, when it closed.

PW: When the store was closing.

BS: I see.

SAS: And then it became—

PW: I only—I only paid a couple of dollars for it [chuckles] because it was—everything was marked down so much.

SAS: Uh-huh. And at that point it became Filene's?

PW: I think it was already Filene's.

SAS: Oh, okay.

PW: Yes.

SAS: And—and now it's becoming Macy's.

PW: It is, but not down there.

SAS: Ah.

BS: Not downtown.

PW: No.

BS: Well, it's not down—

SAS: Well, it's not downtown anymore.

PW: No, it's a college now. Yeah. [chuckles]

SAS: Yeah.

BS: Have you visited it at all to see the new building at the college?

PW: At the college?

BS: Yeah.

PW: No, I haven't.

BS: Yeah. What do you think of the changes that occurred in downtown Hartford?

PW: I don't like them at all. I'm very disappointed because I had these books that showed Hartford as it used to be. And that's when Hartford was a real great city. And I think Hartford has lost a lot when they tore all the good buildings down and—I mean, Asylum

Street was loaded with stores. And I remember State Street where they had the Regal Theater and Grant's and the Princess Theater and Sears.

SAS: Now, these theaters, were they live entertainment or movie theaters?

PW: No, movie theaters.

BS: Movie theaters, yeah.

PW: The State Theater had live entertainment and they had the big bands every week. And I got to see a lot of them in person. And as I said, my best friend and I—we were—we virtually lived at that theater on weekends. [chuckles] Because we—you know, we loved the music.

BS: Okay. I'd just like to go back to Mrs. Auerbach for—for a moment.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: You say that you may have, you know, run into her but you didn't know her very well.

PW: Well—

SAS: Well, he said that he did see her.

PW: I did see her.

BS: You did see her.

PW: Yes, and it is. It's—every—the experience of meeting her was very pleasant because, again, she was a very nice lady, extremely nice. And I think she treated the customers pretty much the same way she treated the employees.

SAS: What do you think accounted for that?

PW: I think that came down from her father.

SAS: Oh.

PW: That's the way her father set the policy and I just think she carried it right through. Because, as I said—as I said, she was a nice woman

and—and she treated the customers—employees right. And she wanted us to treat the customers right.

BS: Did you—you mentioned her father. Did you know about the club that they had for the Moses Fox Club?

PW: No.

BS: Oh, okay.

PW: Moses?

BS: Yeah.

PW: Oh, I thought it was Gershon.

BS: No, that would be her—

SAS: Grandfather.

BS: —grandfather.

PW: Oh, that's her grandfather.

SAS: Yeah.

BS: Yeah.

PW: Oh, I didn't know that. [chuckles] I—

BS: Yeah.

PW: —thought it was her father.

BS: No, no. He—that was the—he was the one who started it.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: And then the—

PW: Oh, Moses was—

BS: The father. And then—then she—

SAS: Then there was she and then—

PW: Oh, I didn't—I didn't know that.

BS: Yeah, because the store started in 1847.

PW: Mm-hmm.

BS: Yeah, all the way back. So—but—okay. Yeah.

PW: I'll tell you one thing though. I thought—virtually, I took it as a complete insult when Filene's took over the store. And when they opened up in the mall, I mean they closed the store in downtown Hartford.

SAS: Yes.

PW: And they opened up in the mall under their own name, that should have said G. Fox and Company.

BS: Company.

PW: That name should have been kept.

BS: Uh-huh.

SAS: Oh.

PW: Because without G. Fox, Filene—

BS: Would have never—

PW: Filene's wouldn't have gotten in here.

SAS: They're getting theirs now because now Macy's is taking over.

[chuckles]

BS: Yes. [chuckles]

PW: But Macy's is allowing them to use—Macy's, Filene's.

SAS: Just until people get—understand what's happening. Then Filene's will evaporate.

PW: Mm-hmm. Of course, to me, you know, taking away the name of G. Fox was an insult to the Hartford area.

SAS: Yes.

BS: Yes.

PW: Because that's been a total landmark in Hartford and it's been a big name in Hartford. Because I don't know if you've ever heard of Bill Savitt—

SAS: Oh, of course.

BS: Oh, yes. Yes.

PW: Well, there again, of course, he closed the store—

SAS: Yeah.

PW: —and retired.

SAS: Yeah. A lot—we came to the area in 1970 and so—

PW: He was another one, “Customer is always right.”

SAS: Yes, yes.

BS: Right.

SAS: I remember his motto.

BS: Satisfaction guaranteed?

SAS: Yes.

BS: That was—something of that sort.

PW: You know, his grandson owns a bicycle shop up in Vermont and he calls it the POMG Bicycle Shop. [laughter]

SAS: Oh, yeah. Peace of Mind Guarantee.

BS: Peace—right.

PW: Mm-hmm.

SAS: Yeah, I remember all that.

PW: Well, I—of course, I belong to the Ten-Gallon Club where they have blood donations.

BS: Right.

PW: And I went to the banquet and I met his son—his grandson. And I met his daughter. And of course, he was also a member of my lodge in the Masons. [chuckles]

SAS: Uh-huh.

BS: Oh.

SAS: Well, I'm only up to eight gallons but I'm working on it.

PW: Huh? Oh. I just started my 14th.

SAS: Oh! Congratulations.

BS: That's—that's impressive.

SAS: That's wonderful.

BS: That's very good.

SAS: Is there anything that we haven't asked you about having to do with G. Fox that you thought, 'Gosh, why didn't they ask about that?'

PW: No, I think you've covered everything. Yeah.

BS: Okay. And let's see. I'm just—did you know anything about Mrs. Auerbach's mansion on Prospect Street? Any—

PW: No.

BS: Her home or any of her homes?

PW: I know she had a farm out in Bloomfield.

BS: Yes, right.

SAS: Yes.

PW: I've gone by that many times.

BS: Right. But in—did you ever visit when you worked there?

PW: No.

BS: No, okay. All right. Is there anybody that you know who might be good to interview?

PW: About G. Fox?

BS: Well, yeah. You know, who may have worked there or—

PW: Not off hand.

BS: Okay.

PW: I can't think of anybody because—

BS: Great.

PW: Wait a minute. Maybe my wife'll know.

BS: Okay.

PW: Jean.

BS: Well, what we'd like to do is to thank you. And if you do have any other ideas, let us know.

PW: Okay.

SAS: Okay.

BS: So thanks a lot.

SAS: And it's been a pleasure speaking with you.

PW: It was a pleasure meeting you.

End of Interview