

Interview with Joseph Biancanelli by Bruce Stave and Sondra Astor Stave for the G. Fox Oral History Project, Connecticut Historical Society, September 12, 2006.

BRUCE STAVE: Interview with Joseph Biancanelli by Bruce M. and Sondra Astor Stave for the G. Fox Oral History project at Mr. Biancanelli's office on Pratt Street in Hartford, September 12, 2006. [tape turned off/on] Okay, let's begin a little bit with your early life. Can you tell us where and when you were born and a little about your education, where you lived?

BIANCANELLI: Okay. I'm Joe Biancanelli. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, raised on Long Island. My wife's from Hartford so that's how I wound up in the Hartford area, went to college at a SUNY school, State University of New York at Oswego, so Upstate New York, and got a—just a, you know, BS degree. And right out of college—I graduated college in 1975 and worked in Manhattan, in lower Manhattan, actually, right across from the Trade Center for about two years until I got into the travel business and went to work for American Airlines. I worked for—like I said, out of college, I worked for Merrill Lynch in the financial world for two years, decided to work for American Airlines. They actually—in Manhattan. They moved their corporate headquarters in the late '70s to Dallas, decided not to move, stayed in New York, met my wife, who was with American Airlines, who was from the Hartford area, and wound up in Hartford.

BS: Okay. What kind of work did your parents do?

JB: Parents were—my mother was a secretary, to start. And in her mid-40s she went back to college and became a licensed LPN. I think that's what it's called.

SONDRA ASTOR STAVE: Licensed practical nurse?

BS: Practical nurse.

JB: Yes, two-year degree nurse.

SAS: Yes.

JB: She got a two-year degree. My father didn't graduate high school but did get his—I guess it's a GRE—

SAS: GED.

JB: GED, rather.

BS: Right.

JB: And he was a baker, was—did Italian—Italian bread.

SAS: Good for him.

JB: And then after—when he was in his—probably almost 50 years old he actually went to work for the Post Office and was a mailman.

Unfortunately, both my parents died before they retired, one at 59 and one at 60.

BS: Oh.

JB: So they—they died early. So that actually was one of the key reasons, you know, I couldn't leave that—

SAS: Couldn't leave.

JB: You know, the New York area.

BS: Where in Brooklyn did you grow up—

JB: Bush—well, I was born in the Bushwick area, Bushwick Avenue.

BS: Right.

JB: My sister's nine and a half years older than me and I was only four when we moved and she was 13 at the time. So high school was getting—was getting a little bit of rough, high school. So they decided to move way out to Long Island in New Hyde Park, which is on the Queen's Border. [chuckles] But back in those days they treated it as far.

BS: My brother lives out there, actually. [chuckles]

JB: What part?

BS: Manhasset Hills.

JB: Oh, right—one town away.

BS: Yes.

JB: Manhasset.

SAS: And Bruce grew up in Brooklyn also.

JB: You did?

BS: So that's why I asked where you were from. But—so you went into the travel business through American Airlines—

JB: American Airlines. I was an airline person, yeah.

BS: Yes, what—what did you do for American Airlines?

JB: I actually—they have a saver reservation system. I used to train people and actually sell it to travel agencies and corporate accounts. And I did that in the late '70s and early '80s.

BS: Okay. Were you trained for any of this in school or—

JB: Basically, I was a—when I—when I got out of—I was a business major at college. I went to work. I was a systems analyst for Merrill Lynch. Back in those days—that was that post-Vietnam era—I wanted to get into something that was not—you know, more finance-related. I wanted to do something more—have fun and what have

you, a little freewheeling back in those days. So I wanted to try something either sports or travel, and it turned out to be travel and wanted to be a—well, I wanted to be an analyst. You know, I wanted to work on numbers. I'm a numbers guy. And it turned out that they had an opening. They—they actually trained me. They actually sent me to Hartford—that's how I got familiar with Hartford—to work in their reservation office. So I got involved with the Cole Center. And then a few months later—about, like, nine months later I went back down to New York to—actually, I was a—got into that part of the business.

BS: So the familiarity with Hartford was before your wife.

JB: That is correct. Yeah, so we—we actually met—we were—we both worked for the company for a couple years before we started dating and eventually got married.

BS: Okay. Now, when you came to—to Hartford, where was the office located?

JB: Which? American Airlines.

BS: Yes.

JB: Right there.

BS: Right—

JB: That building right there.

BS: Can you describe that building? [chuckles] The tape isn't going to—

JB: Okay.

BS: Where is that building?

JB: That building is the old EJ Korvettes building that they moved in in February, I think, of—winter of '77. And so I—when they came in, I worked there for, I think it was about eight or nine months. And

they've been there—you know, they were there for 25 years. Their lease was just up a couple of years ago and they moved up to Windsor on Day Hill Road.

SAS: Hmm. I remember that.

JB: Oh, maybe three or four years ago. My wife is still with American Airlines.

BS: I see.

JB: She—actually, February will be her 30<sup>th</sup> year.

SAS: Wow.

BS: Now, what was your connection at all to G. Fox with—

JB: Well, I was in the travel business in New York and I—my mother had just died. My father died back in the early '70s. My mother had just died. I was actually selling this computer system to travel agencies and corporate accounts. And I was doing these presentations. And anyway, to make a long story short, I wound up getting pretty good at that. So I said, "Gee, I'm doing this for these—these agency owners. I could probably do it on my own and so—and land corporate business." Well, that got me into doing it and I was either going to open up my travel agency—I was either going to open it up in New York, because that's where we were working at the time. Or—my wife said she really wanted to move back to Hartford to be with her family. So we decided to, you know, come back to Hartford and I would open up the agency from scratch here in Hartford. And they were just building the Richardson building, which is right next door to G. Fox. So in 1982 I started—I started looking for space. I think that was—my mother died in January and in February I started looking for space. And by March, I had moved in. I started my agency in the

Richardson building, which is the old Brown Thompson building, as you guys probably know. And, you know, that was the beginning of my business.

BS: Okay, so did you have—now, at that time, the May Company owned—

JB: That was correct.

BS: What relationship did you have with them?

JB: I was in the building right next door. My agency was called Capitol Travel, like the Capitol of Hartford.

BS: Right.

JB: And I was trying to land them as a corporate account. So, you know, probably—but I probably started looking at them in '83, once I had a month to get my feet wet and what have you. Started talking to them and they weren't interested. They had their own agency, even though they weren't a hundred percent happy with it. And I think it was probably in '85—1985 was when I was able to start talking to them seriously. And then they said, "Well, instead of you staying in the Richardson, we want you to move over from the Richardson into G. Fox, take over G. Fox Travel as well as we want you take over Ticketmaster." So I actually had a dual role. The agency—the travel agency was the primary piece of business that I was managing but I also had the Ticketmaster. And they had two Ticketmasters, one here and one in Westfarms Mall.

BS: So did you stay with that till it closed?

JB: Yes, I was there from late '85 all the way through to the last day.

BS: Okay. So—

JB: So I was there probably almost eight years.

BS: What kind of clients did you have? I mean, anything unusual or—

JB: It's fifty/fifty. And as far as—there was—you know, there was leisure and then there was corporate. And so me, being the corporate guy, I used to sell corporate accounts. And it was very unique. We used to put people—corporate accounts on a G—on a corporate G. Fox credit card account. It wasn't a credit card but it was just a corporate account, which was very unusual and actually gave me a little bit of an advantage. So that was—that was nice. And the other 50 percent of my business was walk-in business.

SAS: What was the advantage of putting it on the G. Fox card?

JB: The—well, people could float the money more than they could if they did it directly with me. So if you were a small, start-up type of company or whatever it is and you really didn't want to lay out the money right away and, you know, I would bill you almost immediately. You could put it on a corporate account and just—you know, work through there and at least you get a 30, 60-day float or whatever it was. So if you start doing some significant travel—you know, a few thousand dollars, or even more so in some cases, you know, it can add up pretty quickly. So that was actually a nice little advantage that I had, that I felt that I had. And for the most part, except for one company, I—just about every company, you know, enjoyed it and what have you. We had a real estate company in the mid-'80s that kind of struggled a little bit with that. But—I'm sorry.

BS: No, go ahead.

JB: And the other piece of the business was leisure. I did a lot of tours, had a lot a business people that worked in the downtown area that I got to know. Travelers Insurance, I had a big base from, because they

would eat in the Richardson building, in the food court, or they'd shop at Sage Allen or G. Fox. Or they'd come to Ticketmaster. I think in the beginning it was called Ticketron and it eventually became Ticketmaster.

BS: Who wanted you to come over to G. Fox? Who are the people you were dealing with at that time?

JB: I was dealing—my primary contact was Harry Black. And Harry Black was in charge of—at that point, he was in charge of all the vendors. I think that's what we called them. I don't remember but—

BS: Right.

JB: Whatever we were called, that's—he was in charge of them. So all the tenants of—there was the coin place, the optical place, the shoe repair guy and all of us. He was—he was kind of overseeing that whole piece of it. So he was my, you know, first point of contact.

SAS: So these were independent businesses that were housed—

JB: Right.

SAS: —in Fox?

JB: Right, that is correct. So the base—most of us were—well, even the jewelry department was an outsource. So, you know, it was a—you know, you had all the—you know, like the—I think at one point they even had a jeweler, a hair cutter at one point but not when I was there. But anyway, they had many of these—these tenants or vendors or what have you. A lot of us were in the basement of—the headquarters of the main building here. And it was—like you said, it was—he was in charge of—he oversaw all these guys.



BS: Okay, now, do—would you know if this outsourcing kind of thing was different when G. Fox was G. Fox, before the May Company owned it and such?

JB: As long as I was there it was always May Company.

BS: Right.

JB: So I—I—

BS: Yeah.

JB: I can't answer that.

BS: Do you know—do you know about anything beforehand?

JB: No.

BS: Okay.

JB: Especially me. I'm—you know, I'm a native New Yorker so when I was a kid I didn't shop at G. Fox and what have you.

BS: Had—did you hear any stories about Beatrice Fox when you were there?

JB: Oh, yeah. Over the—there were still people there that had worked directly for Beatrice. And we had people that, you know, working 30, 40 years.

BS: What kind of—what kinds of things did you hear?

SAS: What did they say about her?

JB: Oh, she was just—I mean—I mean, back in those days—

BS: They're pretty, you know, different from now.

JB: You know, back in those days, I mean, they—I mean, you would hear stories that, "Well, when she was running it, this wouldn't happen," and, you know, these certain things. So depending on the strategy of the particular person that was running G. Fox at the time, you'd hear folks, you know, just say different things that when Mrs., you know,

Beatrice Fox was there, you know, this wouldn't happen or that wouldn't happen.

BS: Any specific instances that come to mind where something that, you know, happened that she wouldn't have done or she would have done differently?

JB: I—I can't think of one off the top of my head, to be honest.

BS: Yeah. Do you know how they handled travel before you—before—in her day [unclear]?

JB: Yeah. No. No, I—I'm not even sure if they had travel at G. Fox prior. I think they—you know, they had sporting goods and they had—I think at one point they had appliances over there and things of that nature. I'm guessing or speculating. I mean, some of the things that my wife had, you know, shared with me when she was a kid, when she shopped there back in the '50s and, you know, her mother took her there in the '50s and '60s and what have you.

BS: Okay. Now, the business—I need some explanation here. Maybe I'm being picky about the G. Fox credit card and such. It was outsourced. You ran your own business there, right?

JB: Right.

BS: Okay. Now, did you—what kind of financial exchange did you have with G. Fox?

JB: It was—it was sort of a—like a management thing. And basically, there was a percentage of the sales that they would obtain. And all of us, based on the type of volume that we did, it was all different. It was different structure. You know, if you worked in the optical area versus the travel, the Ticketron—you know, the Ticketron—you know, the—it depends on the fees—the revenue that was coming in.

So agencies—it was commissions. So it was a percentage of the commissions that we--yeah, we reimbursed G. Fox in lieu of rent. And it was part of a monthly settlement, which was very nice.

BS: And was there any minimum or—that you had to come up with?

JB: No, no, no. It was actually very fair. It was a very fair deal. You know, I—one thing I could—you know, I could say that, as a—as a landlord, you know, they treated me pretty well. I—I never felt that, you know, there was ever—you know, if I ever had a problem or they had a problem they were a very easy group to work with.

BS: How many people did you have working for you at one time?

JB: I think the most I had in Hartford was nine. I think—I think—with me, it was nine, I believe. I think I had eight people, eight employees and me. That was the most.

BS: Okay, now, did those employees—did they live in Hartford or did they live—

JB: Both.

BS: —in the suburbs?

JB: Both. I would say—if I remember, I would say maybe one or two lived in the Hartford area—Hartford, you know, city and the rest were suburbs of Hartford.

BS: In terms of clients, would you say that the leisure clients were mostly from the city of Hartford itself or were they from external areas?

JB: Both. The leisure people, like I said, if they worked at Travelers, had a big—for some reason, Travelers people used to go to lunch, you know, where we were. And they would come visit. It seemed like, you know, 20 percent of my volume of my leisure business was from

the, you know, employees of Travelers. And they were all from the suburbs, you know. They were all over the place.

BS: What happened when there was the determination in, what, '92 to close it? How did you find out about it and what effect?

JB: It was on September 11<sup>th</sup> that we got notified. It's my daughter's birthday. That's why I remember. We—I—just—and just so that you know, I had a two-week—and the reason why I—this is vivid, my—the last two weeks of August I was on vacation. I did two weeks in the Caribbean. We had a wonderful family vacation, two families, my sister-in-law and brother-in-law and their two kids and my wife and my three kids. We—nine of did this fantastic two weeks vacation during the slow season. We came back. We worked, you know, 10 days, whatever it is. All—I was all refreshed. I was charged up, ready to go for the busy season. And then we get the news. It was—I believe it was on a Friday, September 11<sup>th</sup> of '92. Try—I think my memory's pretty sharp. I could be wrong but I believe it was a Friday. And, you know, I used to get in around 8:30 in the morning. And I think they—they called us, the vendors, into a meeting. And I think they had just advised their—their leadership team. And they brought a bunch of their—you know, they—the vendors, as well as some of the associates, into one of the meeting rooms and, you know, advised us of what, you know, was going on.

BS: This was the first you—

JB: This was the first that I've ever heard of it. And then some of us—you know—you know, were they going to offer us opportunity to move our businesses into some of the malls is what we were hoping

for. And that—that never—that never came about. That was the only disappointing thing for me.

BS: So how long a period did you have to—

JB: Till the end of the year.

BS: Till the end of the year.

JB: So they advised us on September 11<sup>th</sup>.

SAS: So you had three months.

JB: So we basically had till the end of the year and—which is three months. And at that point, they were going to go through their—I believe we had some time in early January to pretty much kind of, you know, get out. But I think I got out at the end of the year because the—the retail business—they're busy in, you know, Christmas time, whatever. We get very slow, travel. So for me, it was—you know, I think I was out of there December 31<sup>st</sup> or some time around there.

BS: What did you do, actually, to get out? What—what plans did you make and how did you go about—

JB: Well, I decided to move my—you know, the remaining piece of my business, we moved down to West Hartford Center. And we changed the whole name. You know, obviously we had G. Fox for—from '85 through, you know, '92. And it was—you know, we moved to West Hartford Center. And, you know, I—I started—you know, basically, I moved what I had and did that for about another year or so and elected to sell at that point. So I sold it.

BS: Did you—what was the name that you used?

JB: We used Connecticut Vacation Center. And so the corporate accounts that I had all moved with me and—

BS: They did.

JB: Oh, yeah. But, you know, G.—just—G. Fox was also my largest customer, from a corporate client perspective. So they were—you know, they—they traveled, you know, pretty extensively. It was a pretty good size account. They probably were, oh, a good 10 percent of my overall volume.

SAS: Well, there were still G. Fox, or Filene's at that point in the malls.

JB: But they moved all their corporate travel to Boston.

SAS: Oh, okay.

JB: So basically, all the buyers that, you know, were—that were here either got displaced or they were asked to relocate to either Filene's or other May Company locations.

SAS: Okay, so there was no more—

JB: There was no more business travel—

SAS: Oh, out of here.

JB: —in the—in the branch—in the mall, you know, locations.

SAS: I see.

JB: They don't travel.

BS: I was going to ask you who the travelers were. Was it only buyers or—

JB: No, it was actually—it was the corporate executives that did a lot of the travel.

BS: Where would they go to? What kind—

JB: They would go to St. Louis, obviously. That was their number one market. The buyers would all go to New York so they would do a lot of Amtrak. And then just various—depending on, you know, what your—if you were selling bedding, you might go out to Michigan. If you were a buyer where your steel case and your—you know, your—

your furniture and manufacturing type of companies are, and depending on what products you're involved with.

BS: Now—

JB: There was—there was some international travel to Hong Kong and places like that. So they did quite a bit, you know, for—you know, for a department store type of environment.

BS: For St. Louis. That was what? The center of—

JB: Headquarters of May Company.

SAS: May Company.

JB: So we did quite a bit out there.

BS: Okay. Now—so you stayed in West Hartford for a year, you said.

JB: Yeah.

BS: And—

JB: Well, I think—the agency stayed. I just—I—at the end of December of the previous year, I—actually, I started looking to sell in probably October. And we closed the deal in—I think in December—middle of December of '93.

BS: To whom did you sell it?

JB: A friend of mine, Henry Wrotniak.

BS: Great. And so is it still active or—

JB: Yes, it's actually—Henry—Harry and I, you know, go back a long time and it became Sanditz Travel. Yeah, yep. So Sanditz Travel is—Mrs. Sanditz is, like, you know, Beatrice Fox was a—a woman now that—were in the business. Henry and I bought that together. And—

BS: Bought which? Sanditz?

JB: Sanditz. We—I brought him in. He was with American Airlines and I brought him in and—as a partner. And then, eventually I sold the whole thing to him.

BS: I see. And why did you decide to sell?

JB: I wanted to do something—I wanted to get back into corporate America. Had the agency. I did my deal, had my own business for, you know, 12 years, whatever it was since '82. It was—11 years, whatever it was. And it was time to, you know, move back into the, you know, corporate environment.

BS: So, what did you—what did you do then? Where did you go?

JB: I landed at American Express.

BS: I see.

JB: So, took a little bit of time off. Took a few months off. Traveled a little bit, went to England. Visited my brother-in-law, who was on sabbatical, with the family, did some—you know, did that, and then basically got—came to work for American Express and been here ever since.

BS: And what did you do for American Express?

JB: I ran their call centers.

BS: Uh-huh. Is that what you're still doing now?

JB: And I'm still doing it. Right, different degrees and from where I started and where I am.

SAS: How many call centers are there for American Express?

JB: Well, on the travel side we had a project. We—I think we started with a 104 centers and we're down to 13 now.

BS: Why is that? Is—

SAS: Consolidated?



JB: Yeah. With—with electronic ticketing and with all the, you know, e-everything that you have these days—

BS: Yeah.

JB: The need to be right next door to people—you know, as long as they can get to you by phone, it doesn't matter where you are.

SAS: So are most of the call centers in the United States or are some—

JB: Yes. We do outsourcing work to India but that's a lot of our support work and back office work.

BS: Did you go back and forth to India or—

JB: No, no. That—that reports into a different group.

BS: And in terms of the call center, now, how different was this for you from what you were doing before?

JB: Bottom line, same type of call. So, you know, somebody needed to go from point A to point B. They needed a car reservation and they needed a hotel. So as far as the core component of the product, same thing. As far as the science behind it, it's a lot different.

BS: What's the difference?

JB: It's very, very technical. I mean, in—you know, in a—in a smaller, you know, mom and pop type of environment, you know, very personalized service, hand-holding or whatever, here, you know, we—we're a public company. You know, we measure productivity. You know, we look at seconds. We—we live in seconds.

BS: Okay.

JB: And what that means is, you know—you know, we can look at—you know, for every 20 seconds, I need one extra head to service the volume of calls that come in, things of that nature, where in—in a different environment you've got leisure, you've got, you know—you

know, you definitely have a lot more personal touch when you—when you have a much smaller environment.

SAS: So are the employees under the gun to get things done quickly or—

JB: No, no. They're—they're under the gun to do it as efficiently, as effectively as we can possible do it. So that's kind of a—technically, I can't talk about American Express to you guys.

SAS: Okay.

BS: Oh, I—there's—I was going to ask how they were trained. Can you talk about that?

JB: Really, no. I should have said that, you know, technically, I probably shouldn't even be in this office doing this, you know.

SAS: Okay.

JB: I should have done it in—you know, outside of American Express. Now, with a public company, we have guidelines in talking to media or talking to, you know, anybody that's doing—I mean, you're doing, you know, this Historical Society for G. Fox. You're talking to previous people that were affiliated with them.

BS: Right.

JB: That's—then there's no conflict there. But once you start talking about other, you know—

BS: Is—yeah.

JB: Given the differences and the variances.

SAS: Yes.

JB: You know, whatever.

BS: Okay, so, going back to your leaving the building in G. Fox and going to West Hartford, so there were no hard feelings or anything of that sort on your part or anyone else?

JB: More—more disappointment than—I mean, it was a—you know, if you look at it, you know, I think emotionally I was—you know, I mean I had my life and blood in there and everything. But I think from a business decision and where I am today and what I do today, you know, I saw—I saw the rationale for the business moving. So you—as far as did I want that to happen? Absolutely not. Did I—was I disappointed? Yeah, tremendously disappointed. You know, I had a lot of people that I worked with because I—prior to G. Fox, I was right next door in the Richardson building. And I knew a lot of people even prior to me moving in. So from '82 to '92, I—you know, it was 11 years of, you know, knowing a lot of these folks. You know, working with them day—because a lot of the folks at—that—actually, the employees of G. Fox, many of them used me for their personal travel.

BS: I see. [chuckles]

JB: So—

BS: Makes sense.

JB: So that's—and that's actually how I started getting some of the leads into talking to Harry Black and that group to try to, you know, land their corporate account. So—so that was the, you know—you know, that was the premise, you know, behind that. And those were the leads and, “Hey, why don't you do our business travel? You know, why don't you see what you can do there?” And then—but there was an agency in there. And in addition, I had—I had the Ticketmaster, which was another piece of it.

SAS: Could you talk a little bit about your perceptions of Hartford from the times that you first came up here and through—up to yesterday or—

JB: Now? Ah, well—

SAS: —tomorrow or [chuckles]—

JB: That's actually—you know, that's very interesting. You know, I—first time I stepped into Hartford, you know, to work was in '77 when I first, you know, came up here for that year—little over a year or whatever—little less than a year, actually, of training.

BS: Training?

JB: Okay? And, you know, it was a—it was, you know, a very small town, from my perspective. You know, I was this guy, you know, from this congested area in Long Island, you know, Brooklyn and New York and Manhattan and all that. And I came up here and the city—you know, everybody knew everybody. It was like—you know, it was like the hicks to me. And—oh, and I fell in love with it. I mean, I really enjoyed the—you know, the smallness of it. But yet, it was big enough and, you know, what have you. And I was very proud of it because it was the insurance capitol of the world. You had, you know—there was a lot of white collar work here, which was, you know, my type of work that I—you know, I was involved with. I used to wear a—you know, when I worked at G. Fox I had a suit and tie on every day, unlike today's environment. And, you know, I looked at Hartford. You know, American Airlines was making a big investment into Hartford, you know, back in the '70s, you know.

BS: Right.

JB: They had 1,500 employees in the Korvettes building right here. So it was a—you know, it was one of those things, saying, “Hey, this may be an area that I'd like to, you know, eventually, you know, settle in.” You know, it's close proximity to my family, you know, in New

York, as it was. So, you know, from that perspective, I looked at opportunity. And then, you know, went back to New York for awhile and then came back here in '82, you know, with my wife. And that was my—as a business owner, I was involved with the Chamber of Commerce. I was involved—I started getting involved in the city. And, you know, was, you know—really enjoyed, you know, the early '80s of being part of the city.

BS: Where did you live?

JB: I lived in—well, I lived in Hartford for the first year. My in-laws lived in Hartford. As our house was being—I live in Rocky Hill and I still live in the same town that I first, you know, moved into. But in '82 we lived in Hartford by Elizabeth Park while our house was being built. And like I said, the early '80s, you know, Hartford was—you know, it was hopping. Things were going on. You had the Whalers. You had the civic center. You had, you know, good things that were going on. And, you know, it just seemed like there was a lot going on in the city. And, you know, so I felt like—this was like—you know, this was like perfect, you know, city, you know, environment with, you know, beautiful, you know—I'm nine miles away, takes me 17 minutes to get to work door to door. I used to commute, you know, an hour and a half each way living in Long Island. This was like—you know, oh, man, this was like quality.

BS: Much easier?

JB: Oh, yeah. Yeah, the quality of life was—was tremendously different. Tremendously. So anyway, from—from my perspective, this was, like—this was, like, perfect environment.

BS: Now, how—this is—that was '82 or so or whenever.

JB: Right, early '80s.

BS: Yeah. Now, it's 2006. What changes have you seen over that period of time?

JB: Well, I think the biggest change that kicked in was when you started seeing all the real estate investments in the late '80s really take a, you know, toll on the city. And then the other piece that kicked in—you know, Travelers was then purchased by City Group. Travelers Group, they became and you had—you know, some of the companies started to, you know, kind of move away from the city, downsize. You know, Travelers went—I don't know what the population of, you know, their employment was. But they had massive layoffs, you know, that we saw in the late '80s and early '90s. So the city started to take a turn. You know, you saw Sage Allen close. And then, you know, a couple years after that, you saw, you know, G. Fox close. So the shopping aspect of it, you know, changed. And people just weren't in the city. So it was kind of one of those things where, you know, unless you worked in the city, you know, you'd stay there as long as you worked and then you got the heck out. And so the night life and whatever was a lot different. And so it's—I think in the—as you got into the '90s, you know, people—it was a very, you know, commuter type of [unclear] city. People'd come to work. They'd work and then they'd go back to the suburbs and what have you. And—and then I think—and what's going on now, I think, is—is very refreshing. You've got, you know, corporate apartments coming in. You've got—you know, they're trying to really, you know, have people live in the city. And I hope—and there's more restaurants. It

looks like the city is on the verge of, you know, starting to, you know, come back. And I feel good about that.

BS: From a travel perspective, do you ever have people who are trying to begin to have tourism in Hartford?

JB: What do you mean?

BS: Do you ever—from the travel perspective—

JB: No.

BS: —do people come—no. Is it a destination at all?

JB: The corp—we have corporate clients that bring in—you know, they bring in a lot of—they do a lot of meetings where they train, because a hotel in Hartford is a lot cheaper than a hotel in New York or whatever. So we see that. But as far as, you know, whatever—whatever the Convention Bureau's doing and, you know, the Chamber of Commerce and what have you. You know, that's—it really doesn't impact us. The way we—way American Express works is it doesn't matter where your company is. You can be serviced, you know, in any center, pretty much.

BS: Okay. How did you travel to work when you first started out? How has that changed at all, your—what they call the journey to work?

JB: You're talking about in Hartford?

BS: Yes, you yourself.

JB: Always drove.

BS: Always drove.

JB: Always drove and parked in downtown Hartford. Started that way and did it this morning.

BS: Where do you park?

JB: I park in the building downstairs.

BS: Okay.

JB: So I—but I've parked all over. When I was in G. Fox I parked in the G. Fox garage. When I was in the Richardson I parked in the Richardson garage. I usually parked pretty convenient to, you know, where I worked.

BS: Have you found driving, commuting any different or has it remained—

JB: Much better.

BS: Much better now?

JB: Much better. Oh, yeah. I remember in the early '80s before they fixed the interchange of the 84 and 91—I don't know if you remember that but—

BS: Yes.

JB: —that was a nightmare. The reason why we're living in Rocky Hill is because we didn't want to live east and north, because the traffic coming in to Hartford from those two locations was lousy. So we heard that—when I first moved up here, we heard that south is the best and living west would be the next best, as far as traffic goes.

SAS: Oh, interesting.

JB: So that's sort of how I got to Rocky Hill.

BS: I see.

JB: So, somehow—so, from New York, so I figured I'd be a little south of Hartford. So I could, you know, avoid, you know, being north or whatever.

BS: Okay. Let's see. Is there anything that you—

SAS: I don't have anything further. Is there anything that you think relevant to any of this that we didn't ask that we should have asked?



JB: Well, yeah, as far as G. Fox goes, I mean, I think—you know, I—I see people periodically. I think when G. Fox closed, it actually—it took a toll on a lot of people, people that gave their, you know, blood and guts. Not somebody like me with seven years over there. You know, there were people there—we talked earlier—25, 30 years—

SAS: Long-term employees.

JB: —or whatever. And you just—you just—I saw people just, you know, change careers. I mean, you know, that, you know, did things that they never thought about doing. You know, they had a nice—you know, nice job at G. Fox. And all of a sudden they became—you know, they bought a little cleaning business, Merry Maids or, you know, something like that. And just—you know, people got very creative and whatever. But, you know, deep down they had retail in their blood. And with Brown Thompson closing and, you know, being closed for awhile and Sage Allen, you know, recently closing, all of a sudden the retail end of it was gone. And so unless you were a—you know, affiliated with the malls somehow, it was—it basically—I think when G. Fox closed the city of Hartford took a big, big hit. And, I was, you know, knee-deep involved in that. I mean, it—it—I felt it and I wasn't even a local guy. I mean, I had seven years. It wasn't like I had, you know, my whole career or what have you. I mean, I—you could just see the faces and the expressions. The shoe repair guy. I don't know if—

BS: Oh—

JB: Sir Allo.

BS: Yes, right. Sir Allo, right.

JB: You know, Tony was—there’s a shoe place right—I don’t know if it’s 54 Pratt, whatever the number is. And Tony moved to there. And he was there. His whole—his father and uncle, you know, started that business, you know, 40, 50 years ago, whatever it was. So they—his family was very involved with G. Fox and Brown Thompson for many years. And, you know, he—he still had a bunch of the old timers. So we’d hook up on a regular—we’d sit there and have coffee. And, you know, you’d hear some of the old timers, you know, talking about things. And it pretty much, you know, let a lot of wind out of everybody’s sail.

SAS: So these were people who assumed that they were going to retire out of G. Fox—

JB: Yeah, yeah.

SAS: —sometime way in the future.

JB: Right. And I don’t think people were ready. And, you know, it was one of those things where—and I think, you know, nobody’s ever ready. I mean, you said earlier, “How much time did they give you?” They gave us, you know, September the 11<sup>th</sup> till the end of the year. So they gave us, you know, a little over three months, which is—you know, I think, as an employer, I think that’s fair. But, you know, not when you’re dealing with—you know, it’s—it’s—

SAS: It’s supposed to be there.

JB: It’s supposed to be there. And it’s—you know, again, I understand the rationale. We’ll support the rational. It still hurts.

SAS: Yes.

BS: Do you remember any conversations? You know, what they'd be talking about when they sat down, thinking back 30, 40 years or something like that? Do you have any—

JB: I think they felt that it was—you know, this—you know, this very prestigious, you know, little department store in Hartford that was run locally and whatever, to support the needs of the community, was going to be lost. And it—and it went from this real, you know, hands-on, hand holding type of environment to basically, you know, corporate run and whatever. And I think that transformation was, you know—it was—it was vivid, you know, for a lot of people.

BS: Do you know anyone who you think might be good to interview? Any—anyone who comes to mind that may still be around that was there for a length of time?

JB: I think Harry Black would be—he was there a long time. He knew—he actually—Harry—I don't know if he's on any of your lists.

BS: I don't have his name.

SAS: No.

JB: Harry Black actually was—he was in—he was head of security. He was head of a lot of different areas. And he would be very—he was with all the presidents—he knew them, you know, very well. They would hunt together. They would, you know—

SAS: Do you know what town he lives in?

JB: Simsbury.

SAS: Simsbury.

BS: Okay, great.

JB: And I—and I—we have a common friend. My daughter is—is very good friends with his nephew. His nephew's from—from Rocky Hill.

And so I just saw him at my—a year ago, I saw him at my daughter's—at my daughter's friend's graduation party, his nephew's graduation party from high school. So he's still in town. I don't know if he's listed but he's—but he—he was there—he was there awhile.

BS: Oh, good. Okay.

SAS: Okay—

BS: Does anybody else come to mind?

JB: Sir Allo would be—Sir Allo would be wonderful.

BS: Oh, okay.

JB: But I—

BS: What's his actual name?

JB: Ciraulo. That was his full name.

JB: Yeah.

BS: I didn't realize. Okay.

JB: Yeah. So they—his uncle or his father (they were partners)—one of them said S-I-R to make it kind of royal or whatever.

BS: [laughs] That's—okay.

JB: But anyway, he's—and it's Anthony. And he lived in West Hartford but I heard that—I think he bought a place in Florida. So he might have moved out of Fort—he—I don't know if it was Fort Lauderdale, that he could be renting. I don't know. But he was—he was in West Hartford and I think I heard that he went to Florida.

BS: Okay. Anybody else come to mind?

JB: No, not off the top of my head. I tell you, I mean, there were people. But I can't even think of their—you know, their names. And I really—you know, the folks that—the other vendors, they didn't—

they didn't—they didn't travel. I don't think they made a lot of money and I think they—you know, so they—if you don't travel—I knew the people that traveled because they spent some money and whatever. And I got to know them a little bit. But—

BS: When you were at G. Fox for the, what, seven years?

JB: Seven years, yeah.

BS: Was the Connecticut Room still open?

JB: Yeah.

BS: Where did you eat?

JB: Yeah. Could be—well, there's—the Connecticut Room was the dining room?

BS: Yeah, right.

JB: On the second floor? Or was that the one upstairs on the—

BS: Upstairs, upstairs.

JB: Yeah, that was still open.

BS: Still open. Did you eat in these—in that place or—

JB: I've eaten there but I—not on a regular basis.

BS: I see.

JB: We would eat in the food court or, periodically, we would go to the—the second floor there at G. Fox. But the Richardson Food Court, most of us ate at.

BS: Mm-hmm. Would you say that, in terms of dress and things, that you would wear a tie and jacket?

JB: I wore a suit and ties—

BS: Suit and tie.

JB: —every day at G. Fox. Every day. I still think of that. Actually, when I first started—

SAS: Now, did they ask you to do that or you just realized—

BS: Or was it custom—

SAS: —that was the way you were supposed to—

JB: It's implied. I don't think—I don't think it was—I don't think it was in my contract. I don't think it was, you know, whatever.

SAS: But if you looked around, that was what everyone was wearing.

JB: Everybody—you know, back in those days, everybody used to wear a tie, you know, for the men. Women, it was a little different but, you know, the men, it was a tie. You know, everybody at G. Fox wore a suit and tie. And it was—and they offered us—you know, to be honest, in August they would have their—their men's group come in, you know, there, the suits. And they would just—there would be material out there. We would get suits, you know, at a ridiculous price. So they enticed us to wear nice clothes, which was nice.

BS: Okay, that's about—were there any—any other benefits that came with your job? I mean, you were an owner, in a sense.

JB: I was an owner. Obviously, the—you know, the benefits that you just talked about would be the employee discounts. That was—that was a benefit.

SAS: And you got a discount on everything or—

JB: Yeah.

SAS: Oh.

JB: We—we were treated like employees.

SAS: I see.

JB: Even though, you know, we were vendors, we weren't on their payroll, we were still—we were contractor and we got full employee benefits when it came to that.

SAS: Was there health insurance?

JB: No, no, no. That was—that was done individually. I had mine from my wife but—so, no. From the payroll side of it, you know, 401K, no that was there. But the employee discount was a big benefit. They—they gave us parking. I—

SAS: Parking is nice.

JB: Nice thing—

[end of side 1, tape 1]

BS: Okay, why don't you—

SAS: Okay, we were saying that—

BS: Why don't you pick up—

SAS: —by being downtown you didn't have to work evenings.

JB: Nope, I—our hours were pretty much—we—I mean, because of our corporate clientele, we were open at 8:30 in the morning.

SAS: Right.

JB: But we technically needed to be open from 10 to 5:30, which was—which was great. I mean—I mean—

SAS: Very civilized.

JB: I mean, that's like normal hours. And that's not even—less than normal hours.

BS: What are the hours? What were the hours when you moved out into your own business in West Hartford?

JB: I think it was pretty close; 8:30 to 5:30, I think I was open. And I think even prior to moving to G. Fox, I was 8:30 to 5:30. And I—half a day on Saturdays. And I did the same thing in G. Fox. I mean, they were open all day but I think I was only open 10 to 2 on Saturday.

SAS: Yeah. The Hartford businesses, though, open earlier, I think, than, at least, New York. Didn't they? Or—

JB: I didn't see that. I mean, I believe—

SAS: Yeah.

JB: —it was 10 o'clock for most of them—

SAS: Oh.

JB: —around here. You know? Downtown.

SAS: Yeah.

JB: For the retail. I mean, the—you know, food vendors and everything else. Some of them, you know, breakfast or whatever, opened a lot earlier. But I—I think we were open at 10. I mean, I was open earlier.

SAS: Yeah.

JB: But not for the walk-in business.

SAS: Right.

JB: You know, for our phone volume.

BS: When you first started, computers were sort of in their infancy.

JB: Yeah.

BS: PCs and such.

JB: They were.

BS: How have computers changed your job in the kind—and travel, generally, the approach to travel?

JB: Well, you know, back in—you know, believe it or not, the same, you know, airline reservation system that we used back in the '60s and '70s haven't changed that much as far as the formats go and whatever. The big—the big issue is the Internet. And that has given us ability to, you know, really—really, you know, have information right at our



fingertips as far as maps, as far as the—you know, especially from an education standpoint. You know, training our travel counselors. You know, in the old days, you know, in the airline business, the way our travel agents used to get trained was basically getting experience and taking fam trips, familiarization trips. So the airline would offer them a deal. They'd fly to, you know, some location. They'd visit it for a couple of days and get very familiar with, you know, the hotels or the particular location they were visiting. The—you know, nowadays, you know, with the Internet, you know, you have everything at your fingertips. So the—the education process is a lot—is a lot easier these days.

BS: Is it—does it make a substantive difference whether you go to the place or whether you're looking at it at the Internet and reading brochures and maps and—

JB: It—I think—I think it helps when you're talking about—you know, if you're looking at—and there's two types of business. You got leisure business. In your leisure business, I think it helps to be there—

BS: Right.

JB: —to understand, you know, that. In corporate travel, I don't think it matters.

SAS: Hmm.

JB: I think it—you know, I think if you just have a pretty, you know, good handle on how to use your—the tools that you have, you can—you can get by. So I think that's the big difference. Leisure, you still need to understand the places. You know, seeing a five-star hotel versus a four—four-star hotel when, you know—where your customer is, you

know, could be a big difference as—for trying to make a sale. So I think that's probably, from my perspective, the biggest difference.

BS: Are there anything else that have changed besides computers in the business?

JB: The biggest thing is the delivery of tickets. So, I mean, to me, I think—you know, from—I look at all the major changes and, you know, the delivery of tickets, because we used to—you know, that was—that was the number one problem. How do you get the product in the hands of the traveler? Nowadays, everything's online. You know, you book it. It's sitting there in the computer and you move on. And that's how we get all of our tickets, whether it's baseball tickets for, you know, Red Sox or Yankees or, you know, UConn tickets or, you know, whatever, it's all online now and you do it. Same thing with, you know, the airlines, which is—which is great. In the old days, you know, we used to have to factor in as huge costs, you know, on—on getting tickets to people. So, you know, now we don't have that cost. But there's—there's other challenges. We have airlines that are not paying us as much because they're struggling financially and what have you. So I think, you know—so I think, you know, from that perspective, that's been, you know, a major, major thing. I—

BS: Well, I was going to say that we mention 9/11 as the closing date for G. Fox—that is, the announcement date for G. Fox. What—how did 9/11 affect—

JB: Oh.

BS: —your business?

JB: Unbelievable. We basically—you know, some of our accounts that we have, you know, they went from—they probably—50 percent of their travel—and I'm not talking about just the—

BS: Corporate accounts?

JB: Corporate accounts. I'm not talking about just the couple of weeks following 9/11. I'm talking about maybe a year later. Their—you know, their travel, you know, was—because people just were afraid to travel. If they didn't have to travel, they really didn't want to. I mean, the country was, you know—definitely was significantly impacted by—you know, by that, the turn of events. You know, people were—terrorism was impacting people's decision to fly.

BS: Has this lasted over the five years or—

JB: I think it's changed. I—I think the nice thing—I think what—the good that came out of it is we all have a pretty good feeling, when we go to the airport now, that we feel that they're—you know, you can't just, you know, sneak on a plane and, you know, do a name change or, you know, go with somebody else's ticket. I mean, it's a—and I think we have a, you know, sense of, you know, feeling pretty secure. I mean, we've seen that recent, you know, accident, that Delta Com air flight a few weeks ago, the one in Kentucky.

BS: Oh, yes. Yes.

JB: You know.

BS: Right.

JB: And that—you know, that was, you know—we don't know what the final conclusion is but we think it's pilot error because they went on the short—

BS: Runway.

JB: —runway. But, you know—but, you know, from a terrorism standpoint and the safety of the people, you know, air travel's getting—is safer now than it's ever been. You know, so—the amount of airplane crashes that you're seeing now are—you know, unfortunately, the ones that we're seeing are usually pilot error and not mechanical or what have you. So, you know, I—so I think the traveling public feels good. If we can ever, you know, win this war on terrorism I think we'd all feel pretty good. And as companies are more and more global and they travel internationally, that's when you start to feel—I think domestically, I think people are okay traveling.

BS: Okay. Anything else? Okay, anything that you wanted to add?

JB: No, just kind of curious on, you know, the length of your project and—

BS: Okay.

JB: —you know, what are the next steps and—

BS: Okay. [tape turned off/on] Coming back on. I wanted to ask you, as were winding up here, the G. Fox building was transformed into the Capitol and Community College. How do you see that change? And did you follow it as it was happening?

JB: Yeah, I had. You know, and obviously, you know, deep roots to G. Fox. You know, I wanted, you know—obviously, I would like for another department store to, you know, fill the shoes of G. Fox. But that didn't happen. So the next best thing is to bring in, you know, young, you know, people coming into the business world that are, you know, being trained. So I looked at a community college as, you know, something really good for the city. You know, the money that was put into G. Fox, they just spruced it up and I—I really believe that

they—they did a great job at Score, just looking inside. I like walking in there, the little food court and, you know, just the—you know, the mezzanine level and what have you. They did a really, you know, nice job. And so I think, you know, from my perspective, you know, having young people, you know, go to college here—you know, take advantage of, you know, some of the restaurants or some of the, you know, places, you know, while they're going to class or in between classes or what have you, just keeps the city alive, especially with younger people. And you take the—these younger people, hopefully down the road, maybe they'll live in downtown or else, you know, they'll work in downtown as they—as they graduate or, you know, move on or what have you.

BS: Okay. Do you see many of them around? You—we're speaking at 64 Pratt Street where your office is. Is there a change in terms in dynamics?

JB: Yeah, you see—yeah, they're young—that's a young bunch of folks that, you know, go to school there. So a lot of these kids are 18, 19—whatever it is. But you see them walking, you know, on Pratt Street. Pratt Street, in the summertime, is a beautiful street. You've got the UConn Husky Shop right here. So you see them, you know—you know, taking advantage, walking over to UConn Husky Shop or else they—one of the, you know, places to get food, they'll—you see folks coming over, even though they have a nice food court right in the G. Fox building. So you do see, you know, some of the kids come around and a good group of kids. You know, never had any problems, you know, with any of them, you know. Just, you know, a nice—I think it was a really good thing for the city.

BS: Okay. Well, thank you, on that note. [tape turned off/on] Okay.

SAS: We were talking about the young people being on the streets.

JB: Yeah, I mean, it brings—I mean, it brings a lot of activity back to, you know, Hartford. You know, in the—in the area of Main Street where you had Sage Allen and Brown—and Brown Thompson and G. Fox it was always busy. There was a bus stop right there. There was always people in front of the—you know, any of those stores and it felt like there was a lot happening in downtown Hartford. And now with the—you know, the emergence of the community college, you've got that activity back. The people are, you know, hanging out, waiting for the bus, waiting for a ride, you know, walking around. So you feel like there's, you know, activity happening again in Hartford. And it makes you feel good. So—

BS: Okay. I'm going to stop again. [chuckles]

End of Interview