

Interview with Irma Sobol by Bruce M. Stave and Sondra Astor Stave for the G. Fox Oral History Project, Connecticut Historical Society, September 25, 2006 at the home of Ms. Sobol in Newington, Connecticut.

BSTAVE: I'd like to begin with just asking you about where and when you were born – a little bit about your early life.

SOBOL: I was born here, in Hartford.

BS: When?

IS: September 23, 1924.

BS: Happy birthday!

IS: Thank you! It was Saturday.

BS: Tell us a little bit about your family – what they did and where you went to school?

IS: I went to school in Hartford. Hartford schools. My father died before I was born. My mother was pregnant with me – two months – when my father died. I have a brother that was six years old when my father died. I went to school, and then I started working. I went to work at G. Fox & Company.

BS: What schools did you go to?

IS: I went to Hartford High and the Annie Fisher School.

BS: That's still there, isn't it?

IS: I think so. I haven't been down that way in years and years!

BS: So, what year did you graduate from high school?

IS: I quit high school in my second year.

BS: Second year?

IS: Yes.

BS: So, is that in 1937 or 1938 – some place around there?

IS: Around 1940.

BS: Okay. So, you left school. What exactly did you do then?

IS: I went to work.

BS: Immediately after, or did you have a number of weeks or months in between getting work?

IS: No. I went and applied and got a job.

SAS: At G. Fox?

IS: Well, actually, my mother worked at Wise, Smith & Company, and she worked in the Sportswear Department, so I went there. I was working on the main floor. They had a Sweater Department, and I worked there. And then it became Christmastime, and I got my little pink slip, and –

SAS: After Christmas?

IS: Yes. My mother spoke to the Personnel man and he said, “Tell her not to worry about it. Tell her to come in.” But I was a little on my high horse and I said, “No, they fired me. I’m going over to Fox’s.” I had two aunts that worked there. I had cousins. My brother worked there. So, I went over there and I got a job!

BS: I see. Okay.

IS: And I stayed there until I retired!

BS: How long was that?

IS: Forty-two years.

SAS: Wow.

BS: Okay, that’s good. You’ll have a lot to tell us about Fox’s. Did they help you get the job, or did you just get the job on your own?

IS: I got the job on my own. I started as a desk girl – a bundle girl – and then I worked in the Candy Department.

SAS: What does it mean to be a bundle girl?

IS: Well, you wrap all the bundles – in other words, you buy this and you're sending it, and then it comes to the desk and you wrap it and you send it – pack it. And that's what I did for a while.

BS: About for how long did you do that, approximately?

IS: Oh, I think it was about a year or so – a year or two. And then I worked in the Candy Department. There was an opening there.

BS: What did you do there?

IS: I sold candy. They had a counter that sold lollypops and --

SAS: Was it loose candy that was sold by the pound?

IS: No. And on this side over here they had lollypops and things, and on this side they had the candy cupboard, with chocolates. And there was another girl that was there, and we covered for each other during lunchtime. I stayed there for a while, and then I went over to the Stationery Department, and I worked in the Stationery selling. And then I went upstairs – after a while, I went upstairs, and I worked for the buyer in the office.

BS: The buyer of stationery?

IS: Yes. I worked for him – Mr. Borr.

SAS: Now, did the Stationery Department do personalized stationery?

IS: Yeah, they did that, also. They had a special girl that took care of that. And then I worked on the regular counter, and then I went upstairs, and I worked for Mr. Borr in the office.

BS: How did you get that job? Was that a promotion?

IS: Yes. And then, after that, I worked up in the office in the Housewares Department. Then I went to the night school and I took up shorthand,

and then I worked for the Warehouse Superintendent after that, and I stayed with that job.

BS: Was that in the main store or was that in the warehouse itself?

IS: Well, his office was in the warehouse, so I was with him until he retired, and then there was a couple of other men that came over. His assistant took over.

BS: What was his name?

IS: My boss?

BS: Yes.

IS: Eugene Addison.

BS: When did you start working for him in the Warehouse Department? Do you remember?

IS: I don't remember the exact date.

BS: Would it be in the 1950s or 1960s or 1970s?

IS: To be very honest, I don't remember. [laughs]

BS: That's perfectly okay. When you first started working – very beginning, when you were the desk girl – bundle girl – what was Fox's like at that time? What was the store like?

IS: Oh, it was nice. It was nice.

SAS: In what ways?

IS: Well, I don't know. I can't describe it. It was just like a family, you know? Mrs. Auerbach would come down – she was a little, petite woman – and she'd come down the escalator. Everybody in the morning was dusting their counters, and getting ready for the customers to come in, and she'd come down the escalator and say, "Good morning" to everyone. And she'd walk around and you think

you'd got all the dust off, but she would come around and she would go like this, and she'd find some dirt.

BS: [laughs]

IS: But she was very, very nice. She was a real lady.

BS: Did she know your name?

IS: I don't think she knew my name, personally, until maybe I went into the Twenty-Five Year Club. To have that you had to be there for twenty-five years.

BS: Is that the Moses Fox Club?

IS: Yes. I got a solid gold watch, and she gave you gifts. There was a gift at your place setting. Everything was done in the Centinel Hill Hall on the eleventh hall, and it was set-up beautifully. Absolutely beautiful. There was an orchestra there, and at that time, we had the elevator operators, and they were all waiters, with the white gloves. And it was really nice. And it just so happened that my boss and I went in together, at the same time. Mrs. Auerbach's son-in-law, Mr. Schiro – he led us in. Everybody stands, and you walk in around the table and take your place. It was very, very nice. Very nice. And then afterwards, the bakers wheeled out the big cake, and the new help – the new inductees – went up, and each one of us lit a candle. It was very, very nice. And it was all decorated. One fellow in the Decorating Department did all of the arrangements.

BS: Do you remember who that was?

IS: Dick Kardys. He was very talented.

BS: Did that happen only one time, on the twenty-fifth, or were there other celebrations, too, after you got into the Twenty-Fifth Club?

- IS: No, it was once a year she had that. In other words, I went in this year, you went in next year, and everybody – you still went.
- BS: Okay. So, once you're in there --
- IS: You go every year.
- BS: Every year?
- IS: Yes. And it was formal. Men came in tux and women came in gowns. And they had the orchestra.
- SAS: So, you had to buy a formal gown for the occasion?
- IS: Well, I didn't. I made mine.
- SAS: Oh, okay!
- IS: I made my outfit. But it was very, very nice.
- BS: So, every year from 1965 until 1982, when you retired –
- IS: I retired in 1983.
- BS: So, you would go to these --?
- IS: Well, after she sold it to the May Company, they did it a couple of times. One of the main men came in from California, and they did it a couple of times. Then, they went to a luncheon, and they had it at the hotel.
- BS: Which hotel?
- IS: The Hilton. The President, at that time – I remember saying to him, because the drivers had a big mouth then. The drivers would have to come in, if they wanted to, off the road. And when you're lugging furniture and stuff – you're in your work clothes. I was in his office one day, talking to his secretary, and he came in and he said, "That was a nice luncheon." I said, "Yes it was. It was lovely." And you still got a gift. Everybody still got a gift. Of course, the new ones get

the watch. I said to him, "I feel sorry for the drivers. They have to come in." And then I said to myself, "Shut your mouth."

BS: [laughs]

SAS: [laughs]

IS: But then it petered out. They didn't have it anymore.

BS: If you joined in 1965, that's the year she sold the May Company.

IS: I'll tell you when I joined. 1966.

BS: 1966?

IS: Yes. And that's the watch I got.

BS: So, she was still there. Let me take a picture of the watch. So, she lived until 1968, I think. She died in 1968. So, in those three years or so – between the time that they sold to the May Company and her death – did things change very much at all?

IS: Oh, they started changing – yes.

SAS: In what way?

IS: A lot of the Merchandise Managers were let go.

SAS: Did they substitute their own people, or did they just have fewer employees?

IS: I don't remember them really replacing the Merchandise Managers. But they did it all differently.

SAS: So, less service for the customer?

IS: Well, no. They still gave you service, but it changed. It changed. You could see it changing. Of course, they said – they had a mass meeting, and someone was there from California, from the May Company, and they said, "Nothing's going to change, everything is going to be the same." And it was changing right in front of her eyes.

BS: How do you think they reacted to it? Did you get a sense?

IS: I don't know. You see, her children didn't want anything. She had two sons-in-law, Mr. Koopman and Mr. Schiro, that were there. And they both worked in the store with her. The daughters didn't want any part of it, and the grandchildren feel – Mr. Koopman's oldest one, I guess, didn't want it. So, she sold it.

SAS: Did the daughters come in at all?

IS: Not to partake in any part of the business.

BS: What did it mean for you for the change to occur? How did it affect you, personally?

IS: Oh, it didn't affect me at all. I just did my job and stayed with my boss, and then when they built the warehouse in South Windsor, Mr. Addison was gone by then, and the assistant to him took over, and we went out – he took me with him. And then I stayed out in South Windsor, and I was there for several years. And then, that boss left and another one took over, and he was there with me, and then he became a Vice President, and he took me back with him to the main store.

BS: At this time were you working as a secretary?

IS: Yes.

SAS: Were you living in Newington during all of this?

IS: No, I lived in Hartford. I didn't move here – I got married in 1955, and we moved here in 1972, and I've been here ever since.

BS: Where in Hartford did you live?

IS: Well, when I was single, I lived in the North End. Then, when I got married, I bought Max Savitt's house in Hartford.

BS: And where was that located?

- IS: That was on Manchester Street. Do you know where Mt. Sinai Hospital is?
- BS: Yes.
- IS: It was the street before that.
- BS: How did you get to work?
- IS: Took the bus.
- BS: Is this from the beginning?
- IS: Yes. I took it until I got my driver's license. My husband – after I moved, my husband would take us down in the morning, and my aunt worked in the Cosmetic Department and she lived with me, and my mother did, too. We took the bus. We walked up to the corner and took the bus. Snow, rain, sleet – whatever. And then, after a while, my husband had his own business, but he took us in the morning, and then we took the bus home at night.
- SAS: But when you were working in South Windsor, did you have to drive out there?
- IS: Yes. By that time, I had my license, and I had a car. The first gas shortage was going on and Frank lived in Wethersfield, too and, he said to me one day, "Would you like to carpool?" I said, "Sure." Because from here – two seconds away. And we'd carpool. I'd drive a couple of days and he'd drive a couple of days. Sometimes, if I came and his car wasn't out, I'd stay there. I didn't park where I could park, and he'd come out and say, "No, it's my turn to drive." And I'd say, "No. My car is running. What's the difference?" And we never had an argument. We never had an argument.
- BS: Is this Frank Laraia?
- IS: Yes. And I still hear from him.

BS: Great.

IS: Another girl that worked in the warehouse with us – her son took her car and he had an accident with it and cracked up the car. So, until she got another car or got this one fixed, she rode with us, and then we were three that carpooled.

BS: But the carpool thing was not common until the gas prices – the 1970s?

IS: Yeah, when it was hard to get gas. And, of course, seeing that Frank and I worked at the same place --

BS: Oh, he was in Windsor, also?

IS: Yes. Well, they moved out. They were in Hartford in the warehouse building on Talcott Street.

BS: Okay. Now, when you first started working, what was your pay?

IS: Twelve dollars a week. And then I got a raise – when they finally gave you a raise, I got a raise of fifty cents.

BS: [laughs]

SAS: How many hours a week were you working?

IS: Nine-to-six.

SAS: Five days a week?

IS: Six days a week. And then they went to five days a number of years later.

SAS: So, fifty-four hours a week for twelve dollars?

IS: Yes.

SAS: Now, how did that compare with other places? Was that reasonably good wages?

IS: That was about what everybody was getting. And then, of course, it went up as I got to do different work there.

- BS: Did you have any benefits when you first started, other than your salary?
- IS: No, not really.
- BS: Did you get benefits as you --?
- IS: Oh, yes. Yes.
- BS: What kind of benefits were they?
- SAS: Were there discounts if you bought things at the store?
- IS: Oh, yes! You got your discount. You got your discount.
- SAS: And what would that be?
- IS: Twenty percent.
- SAS: And that was from the beginning?
- IS: Yes, you got your discount. And they gave you, I think it was, ten percent on electrical things.
- BS: Any other benefits, besides discounts?
- IS: Well, then, when the May Company took over, you put so much in, and the store put so much in, and that went toward your retirement.
- BS: So, you began to build up a pension?
- IS: Yes, a pension.
- BS: But nothing else?
- IS: Yes. You had your medical, and they took out so much from your pay.
- BS: But this is with the May Company? Not before then?
- IS: I can't remember whether we started it with May or before.
- BS: What salary did you end up with? I hope you made more than twelve dollars a week!
- IS: Almost four hundred dollars a week.

BS: So, this was quite a difference. And over the years -- if you started in 1941, the war had just started -- broken out.

IS: Yes.

BS: Was the store affected at all by the war? What happened during World War II?

IS: Well, there was a lot of the men that were going into the war.

BS: What impact did this have?

IS: Well, they hired other people.

SAS: Did women get jobs they might not have gotten if there were more men there?

IS: She was the first one that would hire a colored girl. She was the first one that hired -- well, other than the elevator operators. And Charles Berry was the head starter, and Jean Drew -- her father was Lawyer Drew -- she was the first one to get on the floor -- the first colored girl to get on the floor and sell.

BS: Do you remember when that was? Was that during the war or was that another time?

IS: I really don't remember.

SAS: Did you get a sense of -- among the other employees, did anyone have a problem with that?

IS: No.

SAS: Did the customer seem to have any problem with that?

IS: No, they had no problem. She was a lovely girl. A lovely girl.

BS: Did other people follow her -- other African Americans follow?

IS: Yes, afterwards. But she was the first one to start it -- Mrs. Auerbach.

BS: Did you have any sense of why she did this? Why she opened up?

IS: No.

BS: Did you know Jean Drew personally?

IS: Oh, yes. Yes. As a matter of fact, when I was single, I lived up at the North End, and they were all apartment buildings, and there was one house on the street. It was a three-family house, and Lawyer Drew lived on the first floor. There was the mailman that lived on the second, and I think the dentist – Dr. Hinston – lived on the third floor. And they were lovely, lovely people. As a matter of fact, Jean always – as kids, she always hung out with us. I mean, we'd go to the movies, and go downtown, and she was always with us.

BS: Was she in your class at school?

IS: No, not in my class. Her brother was.

BS: Her brother?

IS: Yes. Howard was.

BS: Do you know how long she lasted at G. Fox?

IS: Jean?

BS: Yes.

IS: I think she was there for a couple of years.

BS: What department would she be in? Do you know?

IS: She was selling – I don't remember if it was the Handkerchief Department or where. But she was on the main floor there.

SAS: Was there a hierarchy of the different departments? Was it better to be in certain departments than others?

IS: Do you mean in selling?

SAS: Yes.

IS: No, not really. Not really. There was Radio & T.V. And there was Housewares. And Refrigerators & Stoves on the seventh floor, and Housewares was on the seventh floor.

SAS: So, did people tend to stay in the same Department, so they'd build up expertise?

IS: More or less. And on the fifth floor, they had the nice Specialty Shop and nice sportswear departments.

SAS: With regard to clothing, for instance, was there a range? I mean, was it all arranged by type of clothing, or did you have some floors that were –

IS: Sportswear. On the third floor, you had your Better Coats.

SAS: So, there were Better Coats?

IS: Yes. And then, of course, the Specialty Shop, which was on the fifth floor. They had a Hat Department.

BS: Was there a big Fur Department?

IS: Oh, yes. They had furs.

BS: Was there a dress code for employees?

IS: Oh, yes.

BS: Can you talk about that?

IS: You had to wear either black or navy. No sleeveless. I think I had on a sleeveless dress or blouse – I had to go get a sweater.

BS: [laughs] Who remarked on that? Was it your boss or somebody else?

IS: No, no. It was direct from – you didn't go on the floor with sleeveless. And then, of course, afterwards, the dress code changed later on – much later on. And it took me a long time before I would put a pantsuit on.

BS: [laughs]

IS: I would wear a dress or I would wear a skirt and blouse.

BS: When did this change come about, approximately?

IS: Oh, I don't remember the year.

BS: Was Mrs. Auerbach still around?

IS: I don't remember. I'll be very honest.

SAS: When did the store get air conditioned?

IS: The store was air conditioned, but the warehouse wasn't. And that's where I worked. And I'd come home and my clothes would be wringing wet.

SAS: So, even in the warehouse, though, you couldn't wear a sleeveless top or something?

IS: Well, I really didn't. But I always wore something with short sleeves or long sleeves.

BS: And the code for men? Did they have to wear certain suits?

IS: Oh, yeah. You wore a suit and tie. Not the way it is today.

BS: [laughs] Do you know when that changed at all? By the time you retired, were they still wearing suits and ties?

IS: Most of them. The older ones would wear them. They didn't come to work in jeans. And if you came and you asked, "Do you have this in white?" somebody would show you. But after they changed hands and everything, I remember one time I was looking for a blouse for my sister-in-law for her birthday, and I saw one I liked, but it wasn't the size I wanted. So, I said to the clerk, "Do you have this in size fourteen" or whatever the size I was. She said, "What you see is what you get."

BS: [laughs]

IS: So, I put it down and I said to my aunt, "Let's go." I went into Sage Allen, I found what I wanted, and that was it.

BS: [laughs]

IS: But I didn't get my discount.

SAS: Right.

BS: So, you did a lot of purchasing at the store?

IS: Yeah. I purchased a lot of things at the store because I got my discount. But towards the end, I really went into Sage Allen. I liked Sage Allen. I did a lot of shopping there.

SAS: What was the difference between the two stores?

IS: Well, they didn't carry all the departments that we carried, you know? Mostly clothing.

SAS: Mostly clothing?

IS: Yes.

SAS: But, as far as the clothing was concerned, how would you distinguish one from the other?

IS: Well, basically, they were the same. Except we had the Specialty Shop and Better Coats. But they had nice things in there. Really nice things.

BS: Was the service any different from Sage Allen to G. Fox?

IS: Well, the service was about the same at the beginning. Once they changed hands, it started to change.

BS: Which one changed hands?

IS: Fox's. When Mrs. Auerbach sold, you could see little changes.

BS: An example?

IS: Well, like, some of the help that they got in. It just wasn't the same.

BS: Who were the customers? Did the customers change over time, from the time that you started in 1941 and the time you finished in 1983?

IS: Well, of course, I wasn't in the – when I left, I was still in the warehouse in South Windsor.

BS: Right. But just your impression of what you knew of the store and such?

IS: Well, towards the end, I guess it did change a lot. And now, we always said that if she ever came back and looked to see what they did with her store, and they made a college out of it – we went down one time. They had a bus from the Jewish Center – they had a bus going down, and a few of us took the bus down and walked through --

BS: Which Jewish Center?

IS: The one on Bloomfield Avenue.

BS: Okay, yes.

IS: We went down to the store, some of my friends, and we'd walk through. And we'd say, "Do you remember what was on this floor?" And I'd say, "Yes, there was the Coat Department here, there was the Shoe Department here." But it's so different. It's so different. When they had that nice concave window in the front, and at Christmastime, this Dick Kardys – and on the marquee, they had the whole Christmas, with the mannequins and the little children and everything – on the top, and the windows were just beautiful, all decorated. That's long gone.

BS: [laughs]

SAS: How do you feel about it being turned into a college?

IS: Well, you know, Hartford has changed. Downtown has changed so much, and nobody wants to go down. The only ones that were down there that actually, towards the end, were the insurance companies. Luettgens went out from the Civic Center.

SAS: Yes.

IS: A lot of places went out. There is nothing.

BS: Could you describe Hartford when you were first starting out, and what was it like?

IS: Oh, Hartford was nice! You went downtown years ago, and you took the bus. You went downtown. You were dressed up. You had your little gloves on, you know? It was nice.

BS: Did you go to G. Fox – before you started working there, did you used to go there? You said you had relatives there.

IS: Yeah, my mother used to take me down.

BS: Just for shopping, or anything else?

IS: Yes, to shop and to go down and have lunch or something.

BS: When you were working there, where did you eat, usually?

IS: Well, we had our own cafeteria. We couldn't go into the Connecticut Room. We weren't supposed to go into the Connecticut Room. But they had the luncheonette on the second floor. My mother worked over in Wise Smith, and sometimes she'd come over – she went to lunch at eleven o'clock, and she'd say, "Meet me for lunch." I'd say, "Ma, I don't want to go to lunch at eleven. That's like having breakfast."

BS: [laughs]

IS: But I would meet her – we'd meet, and we'd have lunch there. Most of the time, we ate – we had our own group – and we ate in the cafeteria.

SAS: How was the food?

IS: The food was good. The food was good.

SAS: And the prices?

IS: The prices were good.

BS: Was it subsidized?

IS: No. She had her own chefs, and the counter girls were there.

SAS: Do you remember what would it cost for lunch, when you first started there? Do you remember?

IS: I don't remember. It's a long time ago! [laughs]

SAS: Yes.

BS: Now, for the different jobs that you held there, who trained you? How did you get trained?

IS: When I went on the floor, they had this one gal who would train you how to use the register, and you'd have a register there, and you'd have to do all the things – make change and everything – so that you knew what to do, once you got on the floor.

BS: But there was one person to do that? Was this her job, to train people?

IS: Yes, yes.

BS: Now, as you moved up – as you became the secretary – how did you get background in training on that?

IS: They just put me in the – I was supposed to go to someone in the main store, and I guess Mr. Addison needed a girl, and they sent me to him, and I was with him until he left.

BS: So, you didn't have any special training before you went?

IS: No.

BS: But then you said you took shorthand?

IS: Yes.

BS: How many other people were working with you, actually, in the office that you were in? You and him, and anybody else?

IS: Well, there was his assistant. He had charge of the whole warehouse, which was for the packing, the delivery, the stock rooms. Mr. Addison had charge of all that.

BS: And the notion of delivery – G. Fox was well-known for its deliveries.

IS: Oh, yeah. I mean, if you called up and wanted, say, a spool of thread, they'd send out the spool of thread to you, you know?

BS: At no cost?

IS: No cost. No charge. Whatever you had delivered, there was no delivery charge. Now there is.

BS: [laughs]

IS: All the stores are doing that.

SAS: Yes.

IS: And I doubt they would deliver a spool of thread and not pay for it!

BS: [laughs]

IS: And at Christmastime, they had two deliveries. I mean, they would go out in the morning, and then they would finish that load, and they'd come back and go out again. Because I remember I got married December 24th, and that was on a Saturday night, and my boss, Mr. Addison, sent a gift to me, and that was delivered, I think, at eleven o'clock at night?

BS: By G. Fox?

IS: By G. Fox & Company. Because they had to get all the packages out. That doesn't happen today, in any store, I don't think.

BS: No, it doesn't.

IS: But it was fun working there. It really was. And I made a lot of friends there. I still keep in touch with some of them.

SAS: Well, actually, could we get some names?

BS: Yes. Actually, if you know anybody – we got your name from Frank Laraia. Anybody who would be good to speak to, such as we're talking to you today.

IS: Well, I know one person, but she's leaving shortly for Florida. She just lost her husband.

BS: What's her name? Maybe we can pick her up when she comes back. In other words, is this just for the winter?

IS: She goes for the winter.

[Demographic information deleted to protect privacy.]

BS: Anybody else that comes to mind that might be a possibility?

IS: No, because most of them have gone. My ex-boss just died. I'm trying to see who I've got in here [address book]. As they go, I delete them. [laughs]

BS: In terms of your own work at G. Fox, how would you summarize it, in general? What would you think described the forty-two years or so that you were there?

IS: I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it. I had very nice bosses until the very end. The only way I could describe this man – I hope you don't come from New York.

BS: No.

IS: He did. I don't know. I call it one of those schlock places. He thought he was king of all kings. I don't know. I always said I wouldn't have retired when I did if I had some of the bosses that were there earlier. I just couldn't stand him.

BS: So, that was a factor in your retirement?

IS: That was one of the factors. Some of his assistants I didn't care for, either. And I kept saying to my husband, "I can't stand it anymore." And he kept saying, "So, quit. So, quit."

BS: [laughs]

IS: He kept telling me to quit.

BS: What did your husband do?

IS: He had his own drug sundries. Not as far as drugs itself, but shampoos and cosmetic things.

BS: A business in Hartford?

IS: Yes. At the finery one day I said to him, "I've had it," and I went in to see the gal that took care of retirements, and I told her exactly why I was leaving. She said, "Do you want me to put that down?" I said, "No, I'm just going to stay home and be a housewife – retire." I gave them two weeks' notice. And it's a funny thing. You work under such tension and stuff, and then when I did decide to go I could feel a weight just coming off my shoulders, you know? I told her I was leaving. I gave my two weeks' notice. I came home and I said to my husband, "I'm going to give my two weeks' notice. If she doesn't want it, I'll just pick up my things and out I'm going, and that's it." I stayed my two weeks. They gave me a party. They gave me a television and that was it.

BS: How long had he been your boss, that you'd been having that difficulty?

IS: Well, he was nice. But some of his ways and the things that he did – it just didn't strike me. I was from the old school, so to speak.

[end of side one]

BS: Please go ahead.

IS: We were talking about the old school?

BS: Yes.

IS: Well, I had nice bosses, like Mr. Addison and his assistant, Mr. Nick Sacerdote. Sacerdote is gone. He just passed away.

BS: So, you had different bosses, but what kinds of things would happen at work, or what type of things --?

SAS: What was different about them and the new boss?

IS: Well, the last one I had – as I say, I didn't care for him. His manners were very –

SAS: Less polite?

IS: Well, I don't know how to describe him. I mean, he came into my office one day – I mean, my office was here, and then you had to go around, and his office was there. And he came in and he was smoking a cigar. I mean, I don't care. My husband smokes cigars. But he was standing over me, giving me some work, and he's puffing. And by that time, I didn't care. I said what was on my mind, and that was it. Because years before, I would never open my mouth and sass back. I just looked at him and I said, "Cigar smoke doesn't bother me. My husband smokes them. But he doesn't blow it in my face."

SAS: Oh, wow.

IS: And that was it. But he never said anything to me – just looked at me.

SAS: But did he stop doing that?

IS: He never came in my office smoking a cigar again! I mean, he would come in maybe smoking, but he never came near me! But when I decided, I went in to him and I closed the door and I gave him his

mail and I said, "I'd like to talk to you." I said, "I'm going to give you my two weeks' notice." And he had just lit up a cigar and I thought he was going to choke on it. He looked at me and said, "Why?" I said, "Because I'm losing money by staying here," and I was. With the pension plan – I don't know what they were doing. One of the fellows told me, "That's why I got out when I did, Irma." He said, "If you can get out," so I said, "And that's one of the reasons." I didn't tell him the real reasons.

SAS: You didn't tell him that you didn't enjoy working with him?

IS: No, not that I didn't enjoy working with his assistant that he had. She was a humdinger.

SAS: In what way?

BS: Can you give me their names?

IS: Well, she's married now – I don't know. And I don't know where this guy was.

SAS: What was there about her that you didn't like?

IS: If you didn't have this going [tape machine], I would tell you.
[laughs]

SAS: All right, we'll find out later.

IS: Then, when I went into the Forty Year Club, I got this ring. Well, I got it – it was a disk, and it had the sapphire and the two stones in there.

BS: That was from G. Fox?

IS: Yes, from the Forty Year Club.

SAS: How many people would have been in that?

IS: When I went in there was probably, maybe, a half a dozen or so. But then I got that ring at another time, and I had the stones put into the

ring. I think there were six or eight of us that went in. And you could pick whatever you wanted, so I picked this ring, and then I took the disks – the gems – from the stones, and I had them put into – I brought it up to a jeweler.

BS: Do you have a sense of how many total people there might have been who had stayed there for that long?

IS: Oh, I have no idea. I have no idea.

BS: Do you keep in contact with those people, too?

IS: Well, like Frank – I keep in touch with him. At Christmastime – actually, he sends me a Chanukah card. I send him a Christmas card. Barbara – we keep in touch when she comes here. We manage to have lunch. Some of the others – a lot of them have passed away.

BS: Right. Do you ever go to G. Fox in the malls?

IS: Oh, yeah.

SAS: Filene's.

BS: Well, it became Filene's.

IS: Well, it's Macy's now.

SAS: Yes.

BS: Yes. What did you think of what they had in the suburban malls and such?

IS: Well, I'll tell you one thing. Macy's took over, and they've cleaned the aisles up. You went into Filene's, and they had so much that you had to go sideways.

SAS: Yes.

IS: I mean, everything was just cramped and everything. Now, when I went in there since Macy's took over, I was up on the – I needed a

toaster, so I was up on the upper floors. It was cleaned. There wasn't anything around. Your merchandise was where it was supposed to be.

BS: Which mall was this?

IS: Westfarms. I haven't been down to Meriden in a long time. But they really did a nice job of cleaning up – Macy's did.

BS: But how about when the malls first opened up? How did you feel about it then, when you were working in either the warehouse or the downtown store, and then they started opening up in the suburbs?

IS: Well, that was nice.

BS: Did it have any impact on you at all?

IS: No, no.

BS: Did you shop there, rather than in the store downtown?

IS: Well, after I left the store, I would go to the mall if I didn't want to go downtown anymore, because downtown was changing considerably. It was changing.

BS: So, you chose to go to the mall?

IS: I would go to the mall. But Brown Thompson's was a nice store, Wise Smith was a nice store. Steiger's was a nice store. And they're all gone. They're all gone.

SAS: Wise Smith must have closed before 1970?

IS: Oh, yeah. It closed. They were Federated. My mother worked there for quite a while. She worked in the sportswear department. And Steiger's was nice. And then Wise Smith became – some New York outfit took over. I can't remember the name now. My mother was out by then.

BS: When you were working at G. Fox, were there any unions?

IS: No. They tried to get in and they couldn't get in. They would stand out, and I remember when I came out one door – of course, after I went into the Twenty-Five Year Club, I got an extra week's vacation. First you start with one week, then you get two weeks, and the longer you were there – and he said – I don't know. He was trying to hand papers out and I said, "No," and he said, "Well, we can give you three weeks vacation." I said, "You can't give me anything that I don't already have!" And I just walked away.

BS: [laughs]

IS: But they couldn't get in at all. Even the drivers wouldn't sign up for it. But they had quite a to-do about it. But they never got into Fox's.

BS: Do you remember if Mrs. Auerbach had any views on the unions? Did she say anything about the unions?

IS: No.

BS: So, this would have been later?

IS: What?

BS: When you had this occur to you – when they told you that –

IS: Well, the union men were all out on Talcott Street as we were going home, and --

BS: But would this be in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s? When were they trying to unionize, approximately?

IS: I think around the 1970s.

BS: The 1970s?

IS: Yeah, they were trying to get in.

BS: Okay. Is there anything that we haven't asked that you think we should ask?

IS: No, I don't think so. As I say, as they pass away, as I see it – there's one – he was my boss for a while, Joe Tine. He lives in Middletown.
[Demographic information deleted to protect privacy.]

BS: Oh, great. Thank you very much.

IS: He was one of my bosses. He was very, very nice.

SAS: Wonderful.

BS: He was in the warehouse?

IS: He took over after Nick Sacerdote left. He was my boss for a while. He was the one that became a Vice President and took me back and forth. I went back and forth with him. He was very, very nice.

SAS: Wonderful.

BS: We appreciate that.

IS: As I say, I had some very nice bosses.

SAS: It makes a big difference.

IS: Yes. From the time I started as a desk girl, all the way up until the last one I had – they were all very nice. And I said to my husband, "If I would have stayed until the very end, but" –

SAS: Well, you were fifty-nine when you retired?

IS: Yes.

SAS: So, how much longer do you think you would have worked?

IS: Until the store closed. You know, if I was still downtown.

BS: Another ten years or so?

IS: Yes.

SAS: That's too bad.

IS: I was there forty-two years when I left.

SAS: Yes.

BS: What was your feeling when it closed, by the way?

IS: It was sad. It was sad.

SAS: End of an era.

IS: Yes.

BS: Did you go down to the store?

IS: No. The only time I ever went downtown was when I had to get rid of some telephones, and my girlfriend and I went down. Her sons had a business, or her husband had it until he passed away – now her sons have it. It's Government Surplus. She'd park in their driveway – in their lot – and then we'd walk down. But that's it. It's been years since I've been downtown. You know, you go down and you just ride, going someplace, but I haven't even been over to see where East Hartford is.

BS: Okay. Well, we thank you very much.

IS: Oh, you're welcome.

BS: I don't know if you have any materials or anything, but the Historical Society would probably enjoy getting it if you have anything to give from your G. Fox experience. They're interested in collecting things.

IS: Let me think about that.

SAS: Yes. And we thank you.

BS: Yes, we really thank you very much.

IS: Oh, you're welcome.

End of Interview