

A woman ahead of her time



Each and every morning, upon her arrival at work, Mrs. Auerbach's personal hairdresser would arrange her long hair into an attractive updo.

and departments for stamps and coins, party supplies, storm windows and blinds, dolls, art supplies, and shoe repair.

And it wasn't just the

way everything gleamed, Hale told a group of 50 at an event at Gather in Ivoryton co-sponsored by Essex Books last month.

The shiny brass knobs at

the entrance. The highly polished marble floors. The sparkling wall cases. It was also the magic of an escalator ride and the 11th floor with an array

of toys at Christmastime that seemed to dwarf anything the North Pole could offer. "You felt like this is what life should be," said Diane

Blackstone of Hartford. "An enchanted world."

To appreciate fully the experience that was a

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The story
of Beatrice
Fox Auerbach

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

LONG BEFORE Sam Walton made Walmart a household name, there was Beatrice Fox Auerbach, chief executive of Hartford's legendary G. Fox and Company, a department store of such vastness and splendor that women shoppers would don their Sunday-best hats and gloves for the occasion.

It wasn't simply that you could buy anything there, not just clothes and furniture like an ordinary retail store back then. According to Virginia Hale, author of the meticulously researched "A Woman in Business: The Life of Beatrice Fox Auerbach," the 11-story neoclassical structure designed by New York architect Cass Gilbert housed, among other things, a yarn shop, a book store, a lending library, a camera shop,

Local Feature

G. Fox: *When ladies wore gloves shopping*



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shopping trip to G. Fox & Co., consider what awaited anyone passing through the Deco-style entrance in the department store's glory days of the 1950s and early 60s. 3,500 G. Fox highly trained employees served 21,000 shoppers during an average business day, each with an eye toward satisfying every customer, regardless of cost, regardless of social status.

"It was a chance to feel wealthy without buying anything," said Lee Smith of Old Saybrook, who lived with her mother in an East Hartford housing development. "We were just people but there was always a saleswoman willing and eager to help us."

No wonder, writes Hale, at a time when "the object of the retailer was to provide the highest quality of service." And for Beatrice Fox Auerbach, who was known to sweep her white-gloved hand over and under counters for lurking particles of dust in her afternoon inspections of the store, that lofty standard extended to the sheer range of services offered to the customer.

Hence, the 45 experienced stylists in the hair salon, including eight manicurists; the 15 registered pharmacists filling 3,000 prescriptions per week; and a full-time staff of 63 people in the alteration department. The fur-storage department handled 20,000 fur coats every year.



There were also the six registered nurses to attend to sick customers, new and expectant mothers, and the occasional faint corset shopper; the 80-person maintenance staff handling 300 to 400 calls a days to make such rescues as a ring lost in a restroom toilet bowl, a wallet dropped in an escalator and somebody stuck in a zipper. Two men on that staff did nothing all day but change light bulbs. The third floor alone had 3,000 bulbs.

And then there was the majestic Connecticut Room, with its pastel murals of Connecticut's past, its dainty finger sandwiches and the languorous richness of its chocolate ice cream, and the fashion models drifting about with baskets of Helena Rubinstein lipstick and perfume samples.

Most extraordinarily, the director of this massive production was 40 and a widow with two daughters when in

Top, Beatrice Fox Auerbach is fondly remembered by women who shopped the legendary store. Beatrice (left rear) at Hartford's North School learning to knit. She often joked that she hadn't graduated "even from Sunday school." Below left, employees meet on the Main Floor at G. Fox. Below, right, the operators at the busy switchboard at the store which was the largest privately owned department store in the country in the 1950s and 1960s.

1938 she took over the company in the wake of her father Moses' death. Yes, she had retail in her genes – her grandfather was Gerson Fox, founder in 1847 of the single-room Hartford storefront that bore his name – but the figure who stood barely 5 feet tall in her size-4 heels still was "a woman in a man's world," said Hale. She was, moreover, a Jew catering to a mostly Christian clientele without so much as a high school degree.

And yet, until she transferred ownership to the May Company for \$30 million after almost three decades at the

helm, she transformed G. Fox & Co. into a vehicle for conveying culture as well as merchandise, all the while growing the business into the largest privately owned department store in the country and an anchor in the lives of not just Hartford residents but in those living throughout the region.

"College wouldn't have done her diddly squat," said Smith, who worked in lingerie at G. Fox & Co. when she was 19. "She was a woman ahead of her time." Smith might have been referring to the well-traveled Auerbach's open-mindedness in hiring blacks

for meaningful jobs as early as 1942, the first retailer in the nation to do so. Or to the ample advancement opportunities she afforded to women. Or the way she re-employed returning World War II veterans and trained the rest of her employees to assist them as they readjusted to the latest retail practices.

What's clear is the woman who would become a grandmother of 12 and an important philanthropist in the Hartford area had more than a sharp eye for what merchandise would sell. She was also a visionary, instituting a series of employment reforms for her employees that became a model for the industry.

Just ask Joan Hammeal of Clinton whose father started at 19 and advanced

steadily from repairing radios to heading the music and stereo department. Such was her father's loyalty to 'Mrs. A.,' as she was referred to, that "he left not long after May Company took over in 1965."

There was a reason for his loyalty – and for the more than 500 bronze plaques that were displayed prominently in the main hall, each bearing the name of a G. Fox & Co. employee who worked at the department store for more than 25 years.

G. Fox staffers enjoyed sick pay and paid vacations, no matter their position, and such innovative benefits as a scholarship program for their children and a non-contributory retirement plan that included free medical check-ups for veteran employees. There were also interest-free loans for workers in the midst of personal emergencies and "bed

funds" at local hospitals for access to free hospitalization when needed. Not least, the so-called grand dame of service made it a point of knowing each of her employees – and their children – by name.

Which probably explained why, when she died in 1968, her funeral was the largest ever held in Hartford for a private citizen.

"What a presence she was," said Kathy DiMugno, 68, of Old Saybrook, recalling the murmurs of "she's coming, she's coming" that circulated through her department in advance of one of Mrs. Auerbach's famous afternoon inspections. "But a benevolent one."

As both customer and employee, Lee Smith agreed. "People like her don't come along very often. Department stores like hers don't either, that's for sure."

