

COMMENTARY

The one and only

By Joanne C. McHugh

One of the gifts of the Christmas season is the nostalgia and childhood memories it brings back. When I was a girl, one of our holiday traditions was a trip to John Wanamaker's in Center City to see Santa.

Unlike today's shopping mall Santas, who sit right out in the open, Santa at Wanamaker's resided on a throne that was hidden, only to be reached via a journey along a holiday lane. Excitement built as each turn brought you closer to the man of the moment. Would you be able to remember everything on your Christmas list when it was your turn to sit on Santa's lap?

For years, I was oblivious to the fact that numerous stores in the Philadelphia region, and indeed across the country, hosted Santa. I suppose that the Wanamaker's store was so grand and the setting so imposing that I just assumed it was the only place that the real Santa would come to entertain requests.

After our picture with Santa, we'd take the elevator to the eighth floor to visit the toy department. The wide array of Barbies, dolls, and games wasn't what interested me though. I was there for my annual ride on the monorail, which looped around the toy department, suspended from rails in the ceiling.

Though the tin cars were dented and a little drab by the time I was climbing into them in the 1970s, I felt extremely grown-up, shepherding my younger brother up the ramp and into the compact cars while Mom and Dad milled around the aisles.

Our trip to Wanamaker's always ended with the stunning Light Show in the Grand Court. Who can forget the Philadelphia tradition of lean-



CHARLES FOX / Staff Photographer

ing against a display case and craning your neck to see reindeer, snowmen, and Santa on the screen far over your head, while the enchanted fountains danced in the foreground?

The grandeur of Wanamaker's Pageant of Lights was years in the making. In the mid-1950s, Frederick Yost, a Yale-trained theater-lighting specialist, started to amp up Wanamaker's tradition of magnificent holiday displays. The Enchanted Fountains — 3,000 gallons of dancing water illuminated by colored lights — soon accompanied the Christmas music emanating from the Wanamaker's Grand Court organ.

The magic Christmas tree and its montage of color combinations — created by Bert Medland, a self-taught electrical engineer from Drexel Hill — began twinkling in 1959. More than 23,000 lights, some custom-tinted for the show in

shades of pink and purple, graced the original tree.

For a time, just like any homeowner looking to impress his neighbors with his Christmas light display, the Wanamaker's masterminds added new features. The March of the Toys first paraded in 1961, and Frosty the Snowman appeared in 1964. By 1968, Rudolph had arrived, Santa had a train, and ballerinas from the Nutcracker twirled around.

Besides delighting shoppers, the Light Show provided a huge gift to the Philadelphia Electric Co. The finale required 288,000 watts of electricity — enough to reportedly help heat the store's Grand Court.

The 13-minute show served its purpose of getting multitudes of shoppers to flock to Wanamaker's. During the peak years, more than half a million people would thrill to the music, lights, and booming voice of legendary Philadelphia sportscaster John Facenda.

Today Wanamaker's has morphed into Macy's. The monorail is gone, but you can see some of its cars on display at Philadelphia's Please Touch Museum. (It's no longer possible to ride on them, but you can always pretend!) No word on whether the real Santa still chooses the store as his holiday home. But you can still see the Light Show, now powered by nearly 100,000 LED lights.

The show now has a different narrator, but if you listen closely in the Grand Court, you can still hear Facenda bid Frosty the Snowman goodbye and sign off, "Christmas, in the grand tradition. Our holiday greeting card unfolds before your eyes as John Wanamaker wishes you the happiest holiday ever!" Here's wishing the same to you.

Joanne C. McHugh is a writer and professional personal historian. Visit www.PersonalChronicles.net.