

“MINISTER SPINS TALE OF MERCHANT KING”

By Helen Cooper

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He was the inventor of the price tag, a retailer who promised one price to all customers. He introduced Rural Free Delivery as Postmaster General and mailed the first parcel post package out of Philadelphia. He took over a Sunday school class of 27 at the age of 20 and built it into the largest in the country with an enrollment of 5,000 students. He also built four churches.

He started his career as the first paid secretary of the fledgling YMCA in Philadelphia at age 18 and saw its membership grow from 54 to 2,000 members

Give up?

He was John Wanamaker, “King of Merchants,” and Dr. William Allen Zulker of Wayne has spent three and one-half years poring over his papers (“He never threw anything away.”)

When Woodward and Lothrop bought out the Wanamaker store at 13<sup>th</sup> and Chestnut in 1987, all the Wanamaker memorabilia, over 100 large cartons of over one million documents, were moved out of his scrupulously preserved offices to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania a block away.

Dr. Zulker offered to help sort it out when he found out it was not available to the public. “I was halfway through a degree in library science at Villanova University. I asked, ‘Can I help you?’”

The ordained Presbyterian minister/librarian became so absorbed in the Wanamaker project that he retired as assistant to the president of Eastern College to pursue his research full time. He’s still at it.

On Friday John Wanamaker, King of Merchants will make its debut at the Wanamaker Store to the applause of representatives of the many organizations and agencies the Philadelphia giant was affiliated with. The biography is filled with lively anecdotes and quotations “Wanagrams” – from all that memorabilia. It spans 84 years of incredible success as a merchant, advertising pioneer, educator, Postmaster General of the United States, Sunday School superintendent, church builder and philanthropist - and devoted husband and father.

Wanamaker started his department store career by putting up his \$2,000 savings, which was matched by Nathan Brown, his brother-in-law, to open Wanamaker and Brown at Sixth and High Streets.

He defied the practice of the time, gauging the price by a customer’s ability to pay, and priced each item offering a refund, unheard of then, if the customer wasn’t satisfied.

Dr. Zulker says the store’s location was an indication of Wanamaker’s sense of history. It was a block away from where George Washington lived during the Revolution. It is now the site of the Liberty Bell.

Dr. Zulker also smiles at the name they gave the building: Oak Hall. Translation: “This little acorn will grow.”

And it did, to the 800 block of Chestnut Street, where there was a slightly better clientele. But the policy of one price for all, satisfaction and money back guaranteed prevailed.

“Before the Centennial of 1876, he had his eye on Market and 13<sup>th</sup> Street. He bought the old Pennsylvania Railroad freight station, another historic site. It was the original Central High School site, across the street from the U S. Mint.

“People said it was too far uptown; nobody would go. But it had been used by Franklin Institute in 1874 for a science fair.

“At that time trains came down Market Street from the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers with deliveries for the freight station,” Dr. Zulker relates, noting that that route was about to be blockaded by the construction of City Hall.

“He had an uncanny advertising ability. A group of evangelists brought Dwight L. Moody and his song leader, Ira Sankey, to Philadelphia, and they had meetings in the station for two solid months – 12,000 people a night in that unheated building in the coldest months of the year, December 1875 and January 1876. And John Wanamaker sat there with them.”

The store opened one week before the 1876 centennial as the Grand Depot. “When he started the store, public education wasn’t required. Boys and girls in their teen worked there. He started the John Wanamaker Commercial Institute, where reading, writing, arithmetic, bookkeeping and business practice were taught. A classroom was set up on the upper floor of the store, and thousands went there.

“He gave them two weeks’ free vacation at Camp Wanamaker in Island Heights at Barnegat Light. The boys and girls were cadets; it was set up like a military organization. Sousa led the cadet bands on several occasions.

“Wanamaker was also the father of the Sesquicentennial. He kept after President Harding to hold the Sesquicentennial in Philadelphia. He didn’t live to see it, but it was held in South Philadelphia beyond Oregon Avenue, where the sports stadiums are,” Dr. Zulker said.

The Wanamaker Eagle? The magnificent organ? The colossal paintings hung every Easter in the Grand Court? The tea room? They’re all in the book, a delightful read.

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*John Wanamaker: King of Merchants* by William Allen Zulker, 236 pp., published by Eaglecrest Press, P.O. Box 9, Wayne Pa. 19087. Hardcover edition \$21.95.