Ironically, a memorable Christmas trip

My earliest Christmas memory dates to December 1953, when I first saw America’s most beautiful store — John Wanamaker’s, across the street from Philadelphia City Hall.

My mother kept me home from kindergarten one frosty morning so we could ride the train from Reading to experience Center City Philadelphia at the most magical time of the year.

Leaving the Reading Company’s massive train terminal and descending down the escalator to Market Street, I gazed in wonder at the long lines of storefronts and throngs of people crowding the sidewalks along the street, with bell ringers at every corner.

But the most awe-inspiring sight was the grand court at the John Wanamaker building, with an atrium soaring seven stories high and a glorious pipe organ playing at one end.

My first elevator ride, guided by a uniformed operator, took us to the vast toy department on the ninth floor, where I rode a monorail suspended from the ceiling, giving me a bird’s eye view of the sales displays below.

Then it was time to see Santa, a plump, jolly fellow greeting awe-struck children who lined up to talk with him one by one.

Just before it was my turn, however, there was a shift change, and an emaciated new Santa took the fat fellow’s place. My mother always said she was peeved, but I didn’t notice.

While life now is better in many ways than it was in the 1950s, the demise of downtown shopping is a loss for civilization. There’s not much magic in mundane big box stores surrounded by acres of parked cars.

Fortunately, the Wanamaker building, now Macy’s, is still with us.

Commentary by Thomas Hylton

YOUR COLUMNIST with a very thin Santa at Wanamaker’s Department Store, Philadelphia, Christmas 1953.

THE GRAND COURT AND ATRIUM at Wanamaker’s century-old Department Store (now Macy’s) decorated for Christmas, 2019.

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