**MRS. HELEN WALTON’S CHRISTMAS WALLOP**

--I got into retailing because I was tired and I

 wanted a real job. When Helen and I met and

 I started courting her, I just fell right in love.

 She was pretty and smart and educated,

 Ambitious and opinionated and strong-willed

 —with ideas and plans of her own.

 Sam Walton, 1992

It was a lazy Sunday afternoon as I left my office (room 35) of the Geography/Geology building at the University of Georgia and leisurely drove to Kroger to purchase some peanuts and two tins of sardines to get me through the evening and the murder news on TV. The next day I would travel to Americus, Georgia, to visit Linda, my non-Clarke County girlfriend, with whom I would spend Christmas.

Upon entering Kroger, a middle-aged gentleman approached me from the side, some 25 feet from the sliding glass egress. He asked, “Do you live around here?” I said, “Yes.” He wanted to know where the bus station was as his 18-wheeler had “gave out” at Wal-Mart, some 4.5 miles away. “Someone at Wal-Mart told me I could catch a bus from here and get to the bus station. I walked here,” he said, “but I haven’t seen any busses.” He spoke with a solid Southern accent. “Is there a truck stop around here?” he inquired. “I need to get home to Cordele.”

I told him the bus station downtown and bus service from Athens would only take him to Atlanta, where he would have to transfer. It would be a prolonged ordeal. He then said, “There’s a truck stop in Madison [Georgia]. I’ll give you 20 bucks if you’ll carry me. I know that’s not enough. Then I can hitch a ride with a trucker to Cordele where my wife can pick me up. We live out in the country.” I replied, “O.K.,” as I really had nothing else much to do. I said, “I’ll drive you, but you can save your $20.”

He was Mr. Charlie Whitehead, quite an affable fellow and something of a character at that. He seemed impressed that I was a university professor, as his twin daughters were hoping to enroll at Georgia next fall. Did I have any pull to help get them in?

We warmed up to each other pretty fast. It was just a few days until Christmas, and he had been on the road hauling for Wal-Mart for several days. He then said expressively, imitating the words of a country song, “I could have a lot of women, but I ain’t like some of them guys.” He gave a loud guffaw, kind of a howl. He needed to get home to do some Christmas shopping--at Wal-Mart naturally.

Then turning serious, he related this story about the problem his wife was having with the manager of Wal-Mart. It seems his wife had bought a new toaster at Wal-Mart. When she took it home, it didn’t toast. In fact, it wouldn’t even heat at all. She called the store but was told the sale was final. She demanded to speak to the manager. He told her in an insulting and derogatory tone that they sell no defective merchandise. He said, “You broke it at home and now you want money.” She said, “No, just a toaster that works.” The manager was now infuriated, fuming and thundering at her over the phone to “Shut up, ‘cause we don’t want troublemakers like you in our store.”

What the manager didn’t know was that Mrs. Whitehead was recording the conversation via a voice copying device she had bought at Radio Shack next door to the Cordele Wal-Mart from where the manager was so hostilely shouting.

Well-well, well-well!

Mr. Whitehead—I now was addressing him as Charlie, though I was still Doc to him despite my protests—continued, now with serious amusement displayed across his face:

 My wife went to elementary school in Bentonville, Arkansas, with Helen Walton, before

my wife moved to Georgia with her family. Sam is dead now and she is the richest woman in America. Helen and my wife were best friends in school and they now exchange Christmas cards. We got hers just before I left on my last run. Well, my wife called her up and explained the problem. Helen said she had been wanting to visit my wife—*us*, I guess—for some time. She was going to fly in the next day and land in our front yard in a helicopter. We have a big yard. After the visit, they would go to Wal-Mart to see the manager.

I of course found this story to be extremely fascinating. I believed Charlie was being completely truthful.

It was at this instantaneous juncture that I rashly said, “Look, I’ll take you all the way to Cordele. I don’t need any taxi fare. I was going to Americus tomorrow anyway to visit my girlfriend. It’s on the way. I’ll just get a motel somewhere along I-75 for the night.”

He said, “Hey, you can stay with us. We’ve got an extra room. Besides, it’s a Christmas thing to do.” He was reminded of the old traveling salesman joke where the salesman’s car breaks down and the nearby farmer offers him an overnight stay, except he will have to sleep with his teenage daughter. Mr. Whitehead was roaring with laughter as he ended his licentious joke, “But this farmer said, ‘you’ll have to sleep with my teenage son,’ and the salesman said, ‘I must be in the wrong joke.’”

I indeed spent the night in my own bed and experienced the full and unfeigned array of vaunted Southern hospitality: collards, black-eyed peas, squash, country-fried steak, cornbread, sweet ice-tea.

The twins were eager to learn all they could about the University of Georgia, as their mother earned her B.A. and MBA there. I was eager to see Mrs. Helen Walton the next morning and discover how she was going to handle the tremendous toaster trouble.

The next morning, after sausage, eggs, grits, and buttermilk biscuits—but no toast—the wait was not long.

As promised, Mrs. Helen Walton actually landed in a helicopter in the front yard. As infatuated as I was, I of course had to stay in the background during the opening reunion of long-ago, childhood friends.

When I was finally introduced to Mrs. Walton, she inexplicably said, “You came with us, too,” meaning the visit to Wal-Mart, “We aim to intimidate as much as we can any employee of mine who behaves in such a despicable way.”

How did I, so innocently strolling out of Kroger, topple into what promised to be such a remarkable and momentous event?

We all drove to Wal-Mart, some 10 miles away, just off I-75. It took two vehicles, as the four Whiteheads, Mrs. Helen Walton and the two pilots/bodyguards, and I descended on the hapless manager at Wal-Mart.

We all jammed into his smallish office. Mrs. Walton impersonated Mrs. Whitehead, as the manager had never seen either of the ladies.

When he learned the conference was about the failed toaster, which Mrs. Walton had in hand, the manager, a Mr. Robert Tolbert, appeared slightly apprehensive and visibly perplexed. “What can I do for you?” he asked.

Mrs. Walton replied, “You talked nasty to me on the phone when I wanted to return this defective toaster.” Now Mr. Tolbert abruptly changed character. “You mean you’ve come back and brought all this riffraff for support over a toaster that you can’t prove worked fine when you bought it.” He now instantly became even more furious—he lost it big time—and screamed, “All of you [bleep] fools get out of here! Who do you think you are anyway?”

Mrs. Walton calmly replied, “I own this store. I’m Helen Walton.” And then she said, not so calmly, “You’re fired! Mrs. Whitehead here is taking over your job. You have two weeks to clear out this office. Here is the official letter of termination. Merry Christmas!”

And I say Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to all of you.