Like many who grew up in Worcester, Christopher Sawyer has fond memories of the Denholms department store. Unlike those who recall shopping trips, however, Sawyer remembers going behind the scenes with his grandmother, the late Josephine Carbone, who worked there for 25 years.

Christopher Sawyer’s collection of memorabilia from the former Denholms department store includes a directory, mannequins, products and packaging. The collection fills a room in his Boston home.
“I got to visit the display department. To a 5-year-old, everything in that department was magical,” Sawyer said.

As the divisional merchandise manager, Carbone was able to introduce her impressionable young grandson to virtually every corner of the store. To this day, he can visualize the Denholms’ origins in offices that now occupy the building. Visiting United Way of Central Massachusetts, which occupies the front section of the third floor, Sawyer noted that the kitchen area was once home to displays of Capezio shoes. Down the hall was the store’s iconic fur salon.

The Denholms of the 1960s made a lasting impression on the young Sawyer. When he grew up, he made a career of creating window displays for department stores such as Jordan Marsh and Niemen Marcus. He went on to become creative director for Ralph Lauren, responsible for 18 of the designer’s stores.

In 1973, Denholms, the merchandising focal point of downtown Worcester for a century, closed. The building was sold and was being gutted for office space when he and his grandmother walked by one afternoon. They persuaded workmen to let them view the remains of the ground floor. Sawyer, a teenager at the time, returned with his Polaroid camera to record what was left of displays.

“I still have the pictures,” he said.

Sawyer asked if he could have some of the signs and was given the go-ahead to take whatever he wanted. Thus began his Denholms collection, which now includes mannequins, posters, light fixtures and an array of department store memorabilia.

Sawyer estimates that he has about 5,000 items, including newspaper clippings, photos and fragments of the building.

“I have the first sales receipt from the day Denholms opened in 1871 and one from the day it closed in 1973,” he said.

One of his favorite items of the collection is a vintage mannequin made by DG Williams, premier manufacturer of mannequins in the 1950s and ’60s. Denholms used DG Williams mannequins in the better dresses department, according to Sawyer.

The Denholms aficionado started a blog about the department store seven years ago; it attracted the notice of a book publisher who offered him a contract to write a history. Sawyer partnered with Patricia A. Wolf, whose father, Harry, was president and general manager of the store. Their book, "Denholms — The Story of Worcester’s Premier Department Store," was published by The History Press in 2011.

Five years ago Sawyer, who lives in Boston, was in Worcester to do research for his blog.

“I walked by the (old Denholms) building — the windows were empty and looked so sad,” he said. “I called the building manager and offered to re-do the windows at my own expense.”

Sawyer occasionally gives presentations on the history of the Denholms building. In the audience at one of these was Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester. She persuaded Sawyer to join a committee to do holiday decorating for the organization’s house tour. That led to his being nominated to work on Preservation Worcester’s 2016 gala event, "Denholms for the Holidays."

On the night of Dec. 10, the ground floor of the Denholms building was transformed to an approximation of the department store’s heyday in the mid-20th century.

“It was a night of glitz and glamour,” said Packard. Among
Christopher Sawyer stands under the original sign from the Denholm Gourmet Shop.
the highlights were items from Sawyer’s collection that spurred memories from people who worked or shopped at Denholms. Models wearing vintage costumes and couture from the James Hogan collection descended on the store’s rococo decorated escalator. The escalator was a first for the city when it was installed in 1964.

“All evening people were reminiscing about visiting Denholms during the holidays in their youth,” Sawyer said. “It was a simpler time when people enjoyed going to the store to look at decorations.”

Sawyer’s collection celebrates that era and he’s keenly aware of its importance to the history of the city. “When I pass away, my collection will go to the Worcester Historical Museum,” he said. “But I’m not ready to give it up yet.”

The collection includes a Denholms mink stole and a 1960s display hand with jewelry pieces from the Josephine Carbone Collection that were worn in a fashion show.