

Christmas Lights and Community Building in America

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Christmas is Bill Clot's favorite time of the year. Every year during the holiday season, the Pinecrest, Florida native literally lights up with excitement as he begins to erect his world-famous holiday lights display, consisting of over 600,000 light bulbs wired to about 500 extension cords. According to Clot's son, his father's 50,000 square-foot property "looks like daylight" as he adorns trees, Santa Claus and his entourage, and even a group of ice skating penguins with brilliant lights. In 2002, NBC's *Today* labeled the display the nation's best.¹

While Christmas lights displays may seem commonplace to us today, they were not always so. In fact, the modern ritual of hanging string after string of colored lights right after Thanksgiving (and often not taking them down until well after Christmas) only began in its current form after World War II. Our veritable front yard amusement parks of light are uniquely American in character. Drawing on ancient Pagan and Christian traditions far removed from our extravagance and coupled with an increasingly urbanized population, American Christmas lights displays represent a contrast between modernity and antiquity.

It is impossible to study the emergence of American winter light rituals without also tracing the history of the Christmas tree, which helped bring Christmas lights to the forefront of American national consciousness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For it was, in part, on the Christmas tree that Edison advertised his new incandescent light bulb, forever tying it to the evergreen branches of Christmas tradition.² With the popularization of the electrically lighted Christmas tree first as a local, then national symbol in the period between 1882 and 1940, the seeds of the modern American Christmas tradition were planted. Competition between Christmas light manufacturers brought new technologies to light design, making such lights more accessible to everyday people. Although World War II diverted attention from the home front to overseas

¹ David Seidman. *Holiday Lights!* (North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing, 2003), 34.

² Warren Sloat. "The Wizard of your Christmas Tree," *American Heritage*, December 2003, 36.

conflicts, returning GIs were eager to embrace a booming economy and rejoice in their hard-fought victory. Post-war economic growth, along with an American desire for pure fantasy, led to the emergence of the modern light tradition.

Christmastime ritual largely rooted in “Yule” (meaning “wheel”)—the medieval pagan celebration of the winter solstice. Although there were many variations of the holiday among different cultures, Yule was generally celebrated from mid-November to the end of January and centered on the ceremonial burning of the “Yule Log” during the short, dark days of winter. The first documentary evidence of the Yule Log dates back to 1184 in Germany. Because northern Europeans could expect about six hours of daylight on the shortest days of winter, they saw the Yule log as a light in the darkness promising the sun’s return. It was also thought to ward off evil spirits associated with the darkness.³ Many churches incorporated yuletide traditions into Christmas festivals and Yule logs lit up homes on Christmas Eve until the late nineteenth century, when cast iron stoves replaced open hearths.⁴ The adoption of the Yule log as a Christian tradition was representative of the central role light played in the celebration of the Christ, as Jesus himself was seen as the light of the world. The light of the Yule log thus came to represent Jesus rather than the mystical pagan spirits.⁵

In addition to burning the Yule log, Christians all over the world practiced several other light-based traditions at Christmas time. One such tradition was Candlemas, the Feast of the Presentation celebrated on the second of February. According to Jewish law, every male must be brought to the temple to be blessed forty days after his birth. In Luke 2:32, when Jesus arrives at the temple to be blessed, Simeon sees him as “a light to lighten the Gentiles.” In many cultures Candlemas represents the last day of the Christmas season and the time when ornaments are taken down and greenery burnt.⁶ A German variation of this ritual was to determine on February 2 whether or not the dark winter would continue for another six weeks by waiting for the emergence of a hedgehog from its den. When German settlers arrived in North America, they found the groundhog to be a suitable substitute, and the tradition of Groundhog Day began.⁷ Another light ritual was Christingle, or “Christ-light,” service. This tradition originated in the Moravian church in the eighteenth century and gained popularity in English Protestant churches. During the service money is collected for charity with the Christingle candle representing the light of Jesus.⁸ Mexicans and many Southwestern Americans light small bonfires at Christmas in the celebration of Luminaria, another celebration of the light of Jesus.⁹ Light has clearly played a prominent role in different Christmastime traditions all over the world.

In the United States, the evergreen tree became the locus of Christmas ritual. The origins of ritual evergreen use can be traced to the Druids, who used holly and mistletoe as symbols of eternal life possessing of magical powers able to keep evil spirits away. In the late middle ages, Germans and Scandinavians brought evergreen trees into their

³ Gerry Bowler. *The World Encyclopedia of Christmas*. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, Ltd., 2000), 254-255.

⁴ “The Yule Log.” <<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/noel/angl/buche.htm>> (5 December 2004)

⁵ Bowler, 133.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷ “European Roots.” <http://www.groundhog.org/history/tradition.shtml> (9 December 2004).

⁸ Bowler, 119.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

homes as symbols of the life of the forthcoming spring.¹⁰ German-speaking Moravians in Pennsylvania and North Carolina transplanted this tradition to America in the early nineteenth century. According to historian Alfred L. Shoemaker, the earliest documented reference to a Christmas tree in America is located in an 1821 journal entry of Lancaster, Pennsylvania resident Matthew Zahn: “Sally & our Thos. & Wm. Hensel was out for Christmas trees, on the hill at Kendrick’s saw mill.”¹¹ The Moravians practiced the “putzing” (“dressing up”) of these trees, initiating a decorative tradition that soon came to include lights in addition to fruit, sweets and ornaments.¹² According to Charles Dickens, the Christmas tree was a “new German toy.”¹³

The close correlation of meaning between evergreens and lights—symbols of life and hope in the dead of winter—was not lost upon many people. Although legend has it that Martin Luther first placed candles upon a tree in the sixteenth century after being inspired by a starry Christmas Eve sky, the first documented references to this practice came more than a century later, in 1660 in Germany.¹⁴ In 1747 the Pennsylvania Dutch introduced the “lichstock” (“light stick”), a candle-lit advent pyramid constructed of wood that is believed to be the predecessor to the modern Christmas tree. Drawing upon the German traditions of nearby Pennsylvania, in 1832 Harvard Professor Charles Follen decorated an evergreen with candles in what is believed to be the first tree decorated in such a fashion in the United States.¹⁵

Because Christmas trees like Professor Follen’s were initially very expensive to display, many public and private exhibitions were established, often either for charity or personal profit. As the craze for Christmas trees began to catch on, entrepreneurs seized the opportunity to turn a profit and began to open tree lots. In 1851, woodsman Mark Carr opened the first of these retail outfits in New York City’s Washington Market. He cut the trees himself in the nearby Catskill Mountains and soon established a steady business.¹⁶ By 1856 the candle-adorned Christmas tree had become so popular that President Franklin Pierce decided to erect one in the White House.¹⁷ What began as a German custom in rural Pennsylvania had become a nationally recognized symbol of the American Christmas.

As the candle-lit Christmas tree became more commonplace, many people attempted to devise solutions to deal with the variety of problems posed by candles. One of the primary issues with candles was simply keeping them attached to the tree branches as they melted down. People employed various methods of attaching them to trees, including piercing the candle and branch with a long needle, wiring the candle to the tree, using flexible candles to wrap around branches, and using melted wax to serve as an

¹⁰ “Traditions – Trees and Ornaments.” <http://www.christmas-tree.com/where.html> (5 December 2004)

¹¹ Alfred L. Shoemaker. *Christmas in Pennsylvania: A Folk-Cultural Study*. (Lancaster, PA: Intelligencer Printing Company, 1959), 52.

¹² Pat Browne and Ray B. Browne, eds., *The Guide to United States Popular Culture*. (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2001), 170.

¹³ Richard P. Bucher. “The Origin and Meaning of the Christmas Tree.” November 2000, <<http://users.rcn.com/tlclcms/chrtree.htm>>, (8 December 2004).

¹⁴ Bowler, 132.

¹⁵ William D. Crump. *The Christmas Encyclopedia*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 88-90.

¹⁶ “The Christmas Tree in England and America.”

<<http://www.oldandsold.com/articles03/santaclaus10.shtml>> (5 December 2004).

¹⁷ Browne, 170.

adhesive between the candle and the branch. A breakthrough came in 1878 when Frederick Artz invented the clip-on candleholder, a device that securely fastened the candle to the branch.¹⁸ Still, people lit candles for no more than half an hour at a time and vigilantly monitored the tree, a bucket of sand or water always at hand in case of fire.¹⁹ Some people seeking an alternative to open-flame candles attached oil lamps and lanterns to branches. However, these devices were very hot and heavy and so did little to improve tree safety. One English inventor even manufactured a metal Christmas tree with gas jets, but this idea failed to achieve widespread popularity.²⁰

Not surprisingly, candle-lit trees brought grief to insurance companies who increasingly had to deal with claims related to Christmas tree fires. In 1908, a group of insurance companies collectively refused to pay for fires started by Christmas trees with candles, adopting a clause of “knowing risks” in their policies. This clause was inserted partly because of the advent of the safer electric Christmas light, but also because of the fact that fire was practically inevitable when candles were placed on trees.²¹ According to Margaret Bulgin, a child of the Great Depression who grew up without electricity in poverty-stricken Appalachia, “we were never allowed to use candles. They’re just so tricky. And father, being in the fire-fighting business, wasn’t about to let us do that anyway.”²²

Although the electric Christmas light would not become commonplace until years after Thomas Edison first created the incandescent light bulb, his invention spelled doom to the candle-lit tree. In 1879, watching the world’s first truly functional light bulb give off 40 hours of continuous light, Edison knew he would be a rich man. While Edison is mostly remembered for his scientific genius, he also had a knack for making a buck. During the 1880 Christmas season, he constructed an eight-mile underground wiring system in order to power a grand light display on the grounds of his Menlo Park factory. Situated along the railroad that passed between Manhattan and Philadelphia, Edison’s light display so enraptured passers-by that one reporter labeled him “the enchanter.” The light show was a sensationalist bit of self-promotion and part of a bid to gain a contract to power Manhattan with electricity.²³ It was the first time (but hardly the last) that Christmas sentiment was used as a shrewd marketing tool. In 1900 retail stores began stringing lights in their windows, taking advantage of Edison’s tactics and starting a trend that has lasted until the present day.²⁴

In 1882, Edison displayed the first electrically-lit Christmas tree in the New York City home of his friend and the Vice President of the Edison Electric Company, Edward Johnson. The tree sat atop a motorized box that spun it around as eighty red, white and blue lights blinked on and off to the delight of Johnson’s guests.²⁵ Powered by an Edison generator in the city, Johnson’s tree soon garnered media attention. An 1884 *New York Times* article expressed the excitement many people felt for the new invention:

¹⁸ Bowler, 132.

¹⁹ Karal Ann Marling. *Merry Christmas! Celebrating America’s Greatest Holiday*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 56.

²⁰ Bowler, 132.

²¹ Penne L. Restad. *Christmas in America: A History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 114.

²² Eliot Wigginton and His Students, eds. *A Foxfire Christmas*. (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 13.

²³ Warren Sloat. “The Wizard of your Christmas Tree,” *American Heritage*, December 2003, 36.

²⁴ Seidman, 26.

²⁵ Marling, 56.

A pretty as well as novel Christmas tree was shown to a few friends by Mr. E.H. Johnson, President of the Edison Company for Electric Lighting . . . the tree was lighted by electricity, and the children never beheld a brighter tree or one more highly colored than the children of Mr. Johnson when the current was turned and the tree began to revolve.²⁶

Despite popular fascination with Johnson's Christmas tree, electric Christmas lights remained available only to the very rich until the early twentieth century. Because lights had to be wired individually and needed a power source—either in the form of an expensive generator or battery—they were not practical for the average American.²⁷ One 1884 *New York Times* editorial noted the exclusivity of electric Christmas lights and dubbed them “extravagant.”²⁸ By 1900 prices had gone down a bit, but not much. A sixteen-foot strand of lights cost around \$12, an exorbitant sum in those days. In fact, between the lights, the generator and wireman services, a Christmas tree could cost up to \$300.²⁹ As a result, many people instead chose to rent lights.³⁰ However, by 1914, the cost of a sixteen-foot light string had gone down to \$1.75.³¹ By the 1920s, lights were within the reach of many Americans—the result of technological improvements spurred by business competition.

The main goals of Christmas light manufacturers were to make the lights easier to use, safer, and more economical. Although the first Christmas tree was adorned with electric lights in 1882, it was not until 1890, when General Electric bought Edison's light bulb factory, that lights were commercially distributed for the first time.³² As mentioned before, these lights were cumbersome because they needed to be individually wired, usually by a professional. They were also very hot and, though safer than candles, could still cause tree fires. A breakthrough in lighting technology came in 1903 when GE offered the first pre-wired eight-socket light strings, also known as “festoons.” These light strings were safer and easier to use than earlier lights. When GE's application for a patent on the technology was rejected, other companies quickly jumped at the chance to produce the first viably marketable light sets.³³ In 1907, the Excelsior Supply Company advertised the new technology in *Hardware Dealer's Magazine* as possessing “[n]o smoke, no dirt, no grease, no danger from fire. Candles are dangerous. Electric lights are safe.” Included with each light set were “eight miniature electric lamps with assorted red, green and white bulbs and enough flexible cord to decorate any table, chandelier, or Christmas tree. Four dry cell batteries furnish the current.”³⁴ The ad focused on the distinctions between candles and electric lights and emphasized the benefits of the new technology. No further technological breakthroughs were reached until 1927, when GE

²⁶ “In and About the City.” *New York Times*, 27 December 1884, p. 5.

²⁷ Bowler, 132.

²⁸ Judy Stark. “Starry Nights.” *St. Petersburg Times*, 9 December 2000.

²⁹ Stark, 1.

³⁰ Seidman, 26.

³¹ Marling, 56.

³² Marling, 56.

³³ “Interesting Facts.” *The Antique Christmas Lights Site*, <http://www.oldchristmaslights.com/interesting_facts.htm> (9 December 2004).

³⁴ “Winking Fairy Lights for Christmas Trees.” Advertisement, Excelsior Supply Company. *Hardware Dealer's Magazine*, December 1907.

introduced parallel wiring to light strings. This innovation allowed strings to stay lit even if one bulb went out—a feature that the earlier series-wired strings lacked. This technology did not become widespread until after WWII, when larger light displays called for the reliability of parallel light strings.³⁵

The market for lights was also completely restructured in 1925, when fifteen manufacturers joined together to form a trade union, the National Outfit Manufacturer's Association (NOMA). These manufacturers quickly dominated the market, establishing a virtual monopoly on the Christmas lights business that would last until the 1960s, when foreign imports, particularly from China, would offer stiff competition.³⁶

The early twentieth century saw the Christmas tree become the household item that it is today. In 1900 one in five American families decorated Christmas trees in their homes, mostly without electric lights; by 1930, dressing up the tree was a universal custom, and the majority of Americans used electric lighting.³⁷ This popularization of the electrically-lit Christmas tree was due in large part to efforts by public officials and philanthropists to bring it into the public consciousness. What began in 1895 with President Cleveland's order to decorate the White House Christmas tree with electric lights soon became a national phenomenon of publicly displayed trees.³⁸ Electrically-lit community trees emerged as early as 1904 in San Diego and 1909 in Pasadena, but these displays failed to garner nationally significant attention.³⁹ The New York City Christmas celebration, begun in 1912 as the brainchild of a group of philanthropists, served to solidify the grasp of the electrically-lit Christmas tree on the public imagination and gave new meaning to its image.

The group of people who sponsored the celebration was composed of wealthy citizens with fat pocketbooks and a penchant for reform. Calling their group the "Tree of Light," these reformers mourned the loss of community that had accompanied the rapid industrialization and urbanization at the turn of the century. They thought that city dwellers lacked a sense of common identity, a characteristic feature of so many small towns.⁴⁰ According to William B. Waits, author of *The Modern Christmas in America*, the Tree of Light group wanted the Christmas celebration to inject a sense of small-town camaraderie into the impersonal New York metropolis. The reformers felt that the Christmas celebration, with the outdoor electrically-lit tree as its centerpiece (courtesy of the Edison Electric Company), would achieve three major objectives in their quest to re-instill a small-town feeling into New York. First, the celebration, which was open to all social classes, would encourage greater friendship ties between strangers from all different backgrounds and encourage social interaction between people who otherwise would not have spoken to one another. In this vein, the reformers also wanted to promote religious unity and racial mixing. The Christmas celebration was a Christian one, and by bringing it into the purview of the public the reformers hoped to promote a religious homogeneity reminiscent of a small town. However, the festival ended up promoting a secularized interaction of people of different religious backgrounds, who gathered at the

³⁵ Crump, 92.

³⁶ Sloat, 36.

³⁷ Crump, 91.

³⁸ Browne, 170.

³⁹ Browne, 170.

⁴⁰ William B. Waits. *The Modern Christmas in America*. (New York: NYU Press, 1993), 152.

Christmas tree to revel in the magnificent lights and the newfound sense of community rather than to worship Jesus. By bringing people of different nationalities and ethnicities together they sought to promote tolerance between people who felt distinctly different from one another.⁴¹ As the *New York Times* reported days before the celebration, “New York’s great foreign population will hear the music of their own lands in their own tongues—German, Scandinavian, Italian, French, perhaps.”⁴²

By promoting inter-class, inter-religious and inter-racial social interaction, the Tree of Light group ultimately wanted to strengthen the city’s identity and create a popular consciousness of belonging. Although their goals may have been too ambitious to be fully achieved—few people actually socialized with strangers at the celebration and the city remained an impersonal place to live—the reformers succeeded in establishing the community Christmas tree as what the *New York Times* dubbed “a place where all may gather, rich or poor, on Christmas Eve . . . and feel that it is their tree, their Christmas, and that the spirit of peace and good-will encircles them, no matter how friendless they may be.”⁴³

The Christmas celebration held in New York City turned out to be a huge success and the tradition soon spread rapidly across the nation. Ten thousand people attended each night of New York City’s weeklong celebration, with an astounding 80,000 people coming to see the tree on Christmas Eve. Smaller celebrations were held that same year in Boston and Hartford, and hundreds more cropped up in cities throughout the country during the next few years.⁴⁴ In 1913, President Wilson instituted the first national Christmas tree lighting ceremony and thereby increased demand for community tree lighting celebrations.⁴⁵ In 1914, there were more than 300 Christmas festivals in the United States, each with an electrically-lit tree as its centerpiece; by 1920 these celebrations were commonplace in most American cities.⁴⁶ The huge success of Christmas festivals surely came as a delight to the Tree of Light group, who in 1912 had “hope[d] that the public Christmas tree may become a national feature, to be found in every town and village.”⁴⁷

An unintended factor in popularizing the Christmas tree may have been the First World War. As New Yorkers had looked to the Christmas tree in the Tree of Light group’s celebration as a symbol of community and identity, so too did Americans as a whole look to the tree as a means of forging a national identity. Much like the Yuletide traditions of centuries past, lights at Christmas time may have given people hope for an end to the fighting in Europe and passage through dark times.

While indoor Christmas tree lights were gaining in popularity throughout the first three decades of the 1900s, outdoor lights like those used in community celebrations had yet to be introduced to the public. The Society for Electrical Development, an electric power trade organization, recognized the potential market for outdoor lights. In 1923, the organization financed and publicized the first outdoor national Christmas tree. President Coolidge, in a concession to the power industry, agreed to move the lighting ceremonies

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 154-155.

⁴² “Public’s Xmas Tree to Stand for a Week.” *New York Times*, 19 December 1912, p. 11.

⁴³ “Public’s Xmas Tree to Stand for a Week.” *New York Times*, 19 December 1912, p. 11.

⁴⁴ Waits, 153.

⁴⁵ Crump, 93.

⁴⁶ Waits, 152.

⁴⁷ “Public’s Xmas Tree to Stand for a Week.” *New York Times*, 19 December 1912, p. 11.

outside the White House to the Ellipse. Although many city Christmas celebrations had already featured outdoor trees, the fact that this tree was a national symbol meant the move carried special significance.⁴⁸ Only two years later, in 1925, outdoor lights were offered commercially for the first time.⁴⁹ Sales of outdoor lights picked up when GE and Edison Electric distribution companies began to sponsor neighborhood “decorating with color-light” competitions.⁵⁰ Granted, outdoor lights were hot, impractical and expensive, but the seeds were being planted for a revolution in outdoor lighting that would commence with the close of the Second World War.

The ability of Christmas lights to comfort people in desperate conditions continued to manifest itself through the 1930s, as the Great Depression cast a shadow over the nation’s morale. All-blue light displays, popular during this period, reflected the somber mood of a nation in trouble.⁵¹ However, because in 1930 only 10 percent of rural Americans had electricity in their homes, any such light displays were few and far between. As Depression-era Appalachian resident Leona Carver said, “Back then, people didn’t have no electricity. There were just lamps and candles.”⁵² A positive development for Christmas lights to come out of the Great Depression was the 1935 New Deal-sponsored Rural Electrification Administration. The REA worked with initiatives such as the Tennessee Valley Authority to electrify rural homes. By 1939, 25 percent of rural Americans were receiving electricity, demonstrating a trend that increasingly allowed isolated Americans to enjoy the comfort of Christmas lights.⁵³ In an expanding global community beset by urbanization, war, depression and increasingly impersonal technology, the sight of a lighted Christmas tree continued to offer solace to millions of Americans.

During the darkest depths of World War II, millions of people still viewed the lighted Christmas tree as a symbol of hope for a peaceful future. In *Christmas Under Fire*, a British film shot during the Blitz at the end of 1940, a Christmas tree brightens a crowded tube station where a group of Britons stands huddled together “unbeaten, unconquered and unafraid.” The film was made as an appeal to the United States for assistance against the relentless bombing of Hitler’s Luftwaffe, its imagery selected to strike a chord in the hearts of Americans.⁵⁴ In spite of a home front desire for the comfort of electric Christmas lights, the war and its immediate aftermath put a damper on their availability. During the war, GE turned a light shortage into a war slogan by imploring people to celebrate a “Victory Christmas” by using fewer lights. By 1947, GE was still unable to meet the demand for Christmas lights, which had increased significantly since the end of the war.⁵⁵

The economic shortages of the post-war years soon gave way to the “superabundance” of the 1950s. After years of war, returning GIs and their families were

⁴⁸ Waits, 160.

⁴⁹ Sloat, 36.

⁵⁰ “Interesting Facts.” *The Antique Christmas Lights Site*.
<http://www.oldchristmaslights.com/interesting_facts.htm> (9 December 2004).

⁵¹ Sloat, 36.

⁵² Wigginton, 17.

⁵³ “TVA: Electricity for all.” <<http://newdeal.feri.org/tva/tva10.htm>> (9 December 2004).

⁵⁴ A.W. Purdue and J.M. Golby. *The Making of the Modern Christmas*. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 131.

⁵⁵ Marling, 58.

quick to embrace a booming peacetime economy marked by high consumption. As the baby boom led to a sharp population increase, the demand for housing quickly shot up as well. Homebuyers were aided by the availability of long-term mortgage loans via the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the GI Bill, which created a Veteran's Administration to help the sixteen million returning soldiers and sailors purchase homes. The VA worked so closely with the Federal Housing Administration to provide these loans that the two were often considered to be a single effort. As millions of families moved into their new homes, they felt a sense of hope for a better future.⁵⁶ At the national community Christmas tree lighting ceremony in 1957, President Eisenhower remarked on the power of the ceremony to bring these oft dispersed families together: "The custom we now observe brings us together for a few minutes this one night...you and I, here, are not alone in a world indifferent and cold. We are part of a numerous company—united in the brotherhood of Christmas."⁵⁷ Many Americans manifested this sentiment by stringing lights over their roofs and walls during Christmas time.⁵⁸ Armed with more disposable income than at any prior time in their lives, Americans met the post-war economic boom with a newfound sense of freedom in their purchases. The sheer availability of so many different products, coupled with a desire for a sense of community, allowed Christmas lights to become commonplace in the average American home.

One of the major consequences of the new economic order and technological progress was the rise of fads in Christmas light design. While there had always been trends in light design—from pear shaped bulbs to Viennese-produced figural lights in the shapes of Santa Claus, clowns, animals, and cartoon figures—lighting after WWII was susceptible to the fickle tastes of a culture of abundance. The first great post-war Christmas light fad was the Bubble Light, patented in 1944 by Carl Otis, a Montgomery Ward accountant. When Otis's bosses at Montgomery Ward rejected the design, which consisted of a large base with a long candle-shaped bulb filled with methylene chloride, a chemical that boiled and bubbled at low temperatures, Otis took it to NOMA, which quickly purchased the design. Bubble Lights soon became the most popular Christmas lights in history as millions of Americans rushed to purchase them. However, as happens with all fads, interest in bubble lights soon declined and within a few years they were relegated to the bargain bin.⁵⁹ Another late 1940s fad was the aluminum Christmas tree, which featured "color wheels" lighted by a floodlight. One 1954 Lord & Taylor advertisement flaunted their line of Christmas lights, which included sparkle lights, twinkle lights, Swedish luma candles, star lights and elfin lights. The ad also emphasized the fact that "Christmas lights can do so many things—they twinkle, they flicker, they blink."⁶⁰ Miniature lights became popular in the 1950s and remained so until the late 1980s, when traditional cone-shaped lights made a comeback.⁶¹ In the 1990s, electricity-

⁵⁶ Kenneth T. Jackson. *Crabgrass Frontier*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 204.

⁵⁷ "Message at Tree Lighting." *New York Times*, 24 December 1957, p. 8.

⁵⁸ Seidman, 26.

⁵⁹ Browne, 170.

⁶⁰ "Christmas Lights Can Do So Many Things." Advertisement, Lord & Taylor. *New York Times*, 12 December 1954.

⁶¹ Sloat, 36.

hogging icicle lights became popular, typifying the non-functional excess of post-war light design.⁶²

Outdoor lighting became a popular phenomenon during the 1950s. In December of 1950, Joseph H. Ward, executive vice-president of the Noma Electric Company, predicted that the booming economy would lead to an increase in Christmas lighting: “This is the first year since the war that there is enough electrical power and merchandise to really go all out . . . I think we’ll have brilliantly decorated towns for at least several Christmases to come in contrast to the blackout of Christmas lights during World War II.”⁶³ While many community Christmas celebrations still embraced the electrically-lit tree as their focal point, Christmas lights were increasingly strung elsewhere in the city as part of the celebration. In 1957 the sixty-five-foot tree in Rockefeller Center was “lined with tributary trees . . . that bloomed in pale green with inner lighting.”⁶⁴ In contrast to the centrality of the New York City Christmas celebration, festivals in Southern California reflected the suburban sprawl of the Los Angeles area. That same year the Miracle Mile was illuminated by “27 giant snowmen along Wilshire Blvd., from Sycamore to Fairfax Aves.”⁶⁵ Although the display lacked a focal point like the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center, it appealed to motorists who could look out of their windows as they drove down Wilshire Boulevard and observe the lights. This automobile-centered approach to community light designs called for bigger and better light displays capable of catching passengers’ attention as they drove by. In Altadena’s “world famed” display, “mile-long rows” of giant Himalayan deodar trees “were strung with thousands of colored electric lights.” The display was so bright that “cars driving through Christmas Tree Lane [did] not turn on lights but [instead used] the colored lights of the trees for guidance.”⁶⁶ Although someone viewing Christmas lights from the windows of their car may not have felt the same personal connection to his neighbors as would have someone gathering at a community tree on foot, the immense scale of the lighting displays still provided a shared spectacle in the midst of a sprawling city.

Another factor in the popularization of Christmas lights during the 1950s was the advent of community-sponsored Christmas decoration competitions. GE had sponsored such competitions in the late 1920s, but they were not comparable in size and popularity to those of the post war years. Competitions were often sponsored by a city’s chamber of commerce and judged by city dignitaries. They encouraged citywide participation, not only by homeowners but by “churches, shops and factory plants” as well.⁶⁷ As a result, Christmas lights illuminated residential, commercial and industrial landscapes. Competitions were also held between cities, further encouraging widespread light decorating. In 1956, Orange County, California, held a “40 Miles of Christmas Smiles” competition to encourage a county-wide lighting boom.⁶⁸ Christmas light competitions provided people with a unique opportunity to gain a sense of participation within their large, impersonal communities.

⁶² Seidman, 140.

⁶³ “Cities Go All Out for Brightest of Christmases.” *New York Times*, December 11 1950, p. 20.

⁶⁴ “About New York.” *New York Times*, December 25, 1957, p.34.

⁶⁵ “Santa Pulls Switch and Lights Up Miracle Mile.” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 November 1956, p.3.

⁶⁶ “Christmas Lights Gleam on Tall Altadena Deodars.” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 December 1950, p.10.

⁶⁷ “Valley Cities to Pick Best Yule Decorations.” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 December 1953, p. G14.

⁶⁸ “Christmas Lights Turned On at Laguna.” *Los Angeles Times*, 9 December 1956, p. 11.

Today it is hard to imagine an American neighborhood without Christmas lights. According to Minami International Corporation, a leading supplier of Christmas lights, eighty million homes are decorated each year, with more than 150 million light sets sold annually.⁶⁹ The Christmas lights business has changed significantly since its early days; today most lights are manufactured in China, with the United States providing by far the largest market.⁷⁰ In fact, electric Christmas lights have remained a largely American custom; many Europeans still prefer to use candles to celebrate Christmas.⁷¹ The question then remains: what is the greater significance of Christmas lights, and what do they say about the American character?

One of the key aspects of the American Christmas light display is its secular nature. Although some people do utilize lighting for religious exaltation—for example with illuminated outdoor nativity scenes—the vast majority do not directly associate light displays with religion. Christmas lights have maintained many of their original non-religious meanings. In rural America, Christmas lights hark back to yuletide tradition, conveying a sense of hope in a vast darkness. City dwellers continue to flock to community Christmas celebrations every year in order to gain a sense of common identity. Suburbanites place lights on their houses, participating in a shared ritual from which they too gain a sense of common identity.⁷² Communities continue to sponsor competitions, sometimes inspiring residential light displays so bright that they have become “public nuisances” to neighbors unable to sleep at night.⁷³ The patriotic post-9/11 light displays of Christmas 2001 also conjure memories of similar patriotic displays on the home front during WWII, representing the will of the average American to maintain an “American way of life” during troubled times.⁷⁴ Perhaps the most uniquely American aspect of Christmas lights, though, is that they represent a desire to blur the line between fantasy and reality.

The modern American Christmas light tradition is perhaps the most visible way our culture has dealt with an increasingly technological and impersonal world. Drawing on traditions first brought to the United States by German immigrants in the nineteenth century as well as a host of scientific advancements that began with Edison’s electric light, Christmas lights represent a juxtaposition of ancient ritual and modern technology. In the twentieth century, Christmas light displays became popular in large part because of their ability to convey a small-town feel among strangers in an unfriendly metropolis. After World War II, the average American acquired the monetary and technological means to construct his or her ideal Christmas light show. Reeling from the trauma wrought by the war, people took advantage of these new resources to create increasingly fantastical light designs. As people flocked in droves to Disneyland to escape into a magical retreat that evoked friendly, small-town feelings, so too did they erect gleaming, secularized shrines at Christmas time as a testament to the legacy of a simpler time.

⁶⁹ Seidman, 27.

⁷⁰ Chris York. Employee of christmaslightsetc.com, email to author, 18 November 2004.

⁷¹ Sloat, 36.

⁷² Sloat, 36.

⁷³ “Holiday Lights Go Pro.” [CNN.COM](http://www.cnn.com/2004/US/12/06/bright.christmas.ap/index.html), 6 December 2004.

<<http://www.cnn.com/2004/US/12/06/bright.christmas.ap/index.html>> (6 December 2004).

⁷⁴ Seidman, 48-49.

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