Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 23, 2013

Christmas Lights of Years Ago: Real candles first adorned trees and other objects, indoors and out, before electricity was readily available. As homes and yards gained access to electric power (usually 110 volts, DC) in the early years of the 20th century, their owners began using strings of colored lights on small trees in the front yard and on a cut tree of a convenient size somewhere in the house, often installed by Santa Claus on Christmas Eve. The lights on indoor trees were supplemented by shiny balls of many shapes and colors and also by strands of tinsel hanging from the branches. In the 1930s, the outdoor lights and their connecting wires, called "strings," were often homemade; indoor lights were small bulbs of many colors with a string of about eight sockets wired in series, so that when one bulb came loose or burned out, the whole string went out. Although the lights may not show in the well-used 1927 photo of the north bedroom at Auburn Heights, they were probably there and of the type just mentioned.

When I was growing up, Christmas day was always spent with my mother's family, either with the Fergusons at Ridley Park (Mary Ferguson was my mother's sister), with my grandmother Shallcross in Middletown, or at Auburn Heights. There would usually be between 15 and 20 who sat down to Christmas dinner about 1:00 P.M. In early evening, before we ate leftovers, we would often pile into the big Packards of Uncle Bassett Ferguson and my father and drive around town to see the few front yards and porches that might be lit for the holidays. "Town" from Yorklyn may have been Westover Hills or Kennett Square; there was not a lot to see closer than that. The lights were colorful but by today's standards were very sparse and crude in their design.

The lighting on the big fir tree to the left of the driveway as you approach Auburn Heights was amateurish but colorful and could be seen well from the house as well as from Route 82. After World War II, this tree had grown to a size where we could no longer light it. Other small bushes and trees in the yard took its place, and there was always a freshly cut Douglas fir or Colorado blue spruce in the "mansion," with lights and decorations improving with each season. Greens and a string of lights often spread across one or more of the mantels. When the head of a buck deer that hung for many years above the fireplace in the living room (parlor) accidently lost its nose, a red light took its place to replicate Rudolph (at the request of my mother, this was repeated for several years, but it was really a corny exhibit).

In the 1950s and '60s, when suburban sprawl was in full swing, new housing developments and large private homes would try to outdo one another with their Christmas lights. In the Philadelphia suburbs, one such place I visited several times was Drexel Brook near Drexel Hill, and another was a Wallingford estate owned by an official of PECO, where something like 20,000 lights were all over the big house, outbuildings, trees, and shrubbery. A few years later, there was also such a place near Red Lion, Delaware. Now, decorations like these are everywhere.

During the "Old-Fashioned Christmas" years at the Magic Age of Steam in the 1970s, holiday decorations at Auburn Heights, inside and out, were all over the place but lacked much sophistication. Outside, sheep grazing near a manger, Santa Claus with his reindeer and sleigh, electric candles in each of 72 windows in the big house, and holiday lights on bushes and trees, including the big holly in the "circle" next to the mansion, all were illuminated for the visitors who came to ride the steam trains, visit the museum with its electric trains, and enjoy steam-made popcorn and hot chocolate. Christmas light strings hung at the railroad station and in the tunnel. For five or six nights each year from 1971 through 1977, usually between December 26 and January 4, Auburn Heights was lavishly illuminated.

Happy Christmas to all, and to all a Good Night!