

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 17, 2018

**Illuminations:** When Thomas A. Edison invented the successful incandescent lamp in 1879, it was not much good until electricity could be generated to light it. No one knew this better than Edison, so he set out to design and build a large steam generating plant hooked to an electric dynamo. Then he had to sell the idea. The powers-that-be in New York were very skeptical, but they finally allowed him to erect a lot of wooden poles around Pearl Street in Lower Manhattan and from them to string electric wires on something resembling knob-and-tube insulators to street lights and into the adjacent buildings. One night in 1882 with his reputation on the line, Edison closed a huge toggle switch in the power house, and the lights came on. No illuminations from that time on, and there were many spectacular ones, quite equaled that moment.

With most homes having electric lights by the 1920s, tiny colored electric lights began replacing wax candles in windows and on small Christmas trees, both inside the house and on outdoor displays. Strings of about 8 lights were hooked in series, with each colored bulb using about 15 volts. These were relatively safe, but if one bulb burned out on the string, all of them went out. I grew up with this type of Christmas tree lights. In affluent housing developments such as Westover Hills near Wilmington, owners competed for the best lawn displays, which practice soon developed in small towns like Middletown (DE), where my grandmother Shallcross, born in 1852, lived. When her family met at her home on Christmas Day, it was a special treat for her to be driven around Middletown just after dark, observing the colorful lights on the lawns of her neighbors. When she was at Auburn Heights for Christmas, we often took her to see the lights in Westover Hills.

England was “blacked out” from 1940 until 1945 because of the Nazi air raids over many English cities. There was a popular wartime song, “When the Lights Come on Again All over the World.” So when the war in Europe was finally over, it was a special treat for Britons to turn on the lights again. It was not until 1951, however, that the U.K. proclaimed a “Festival of Britain,” and encouraged all resort towns to vie for the best “Illuminations.” Places like Brighton, Torquay, Scarborough, and Blackpool had thousands (probably millions) of lights. Quantity rather than taste seemed to be the order of the day. I viewed the lights at Morecambe in North Lancashire, a small but popular seaside resort near the English Lake District. The centerpiece of the festival was a mini-World’s Fair on the south bank of the Thames in London.

In the 1950s, a new housing development called Drexel Brook, just west of Philadelphia, featured Christmas lights where all the new homes had spectacular lighting, and carloads of people were encouraged to come and look at these lights. I was there twice, and Drexel Brook became widely known. I’m sure it didn’t hurt new home sales in that development. A few miles away, an official of PECO (Philadelphia Electric Company) owned an old estate with a large Victorian home in Wallingford, and viewers came from a distance to view its illuminations, not only on the home’s exterior but also on most of the trees in the lawn and the outbuildings as well. It’s doubtful that the owner received an electric bill.

At the Old Fashioned Christmas events at the Magic Age of Steam (1971-77), our many illuminations around Auburn Heights were very crude by current standards. We advertised a steam-powered Christmas tree, which was in the museum and consisted of a large cut tree on a rotating platform powered by a model steam engine. The Lionel electric trains featured a different layout each year until 1976, when they were raised off the floor and made permanent on a large table. Outdoors, mostly for the benefit of those riding the Auburn Valley trains, displays included a rotating brightly lit tree on the island in the pond, Papier-mâché sheep grazing on the lower lawn, colored lights draping from the large holly in the circle of the driveway circle, Santa Claus with his sleigh and reindeer, bright colored lights around West Yorklyn Station, sundry trees and bushes lit around the property, and 72 electric candles in the windows of the big house. Nothing was well done, but it was impressive, and those events were highly successful.