



A Superb EXHIBITION

By Mary Evelyn McCurdy



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HISTORY

A History of Christmas Lights

Thomas Edison created more than the first successful practical light bulb. As railroad passengers rode by his Menlo Park Laboratory in New Jersey during the 1880 Christmas season, they enjoyed the world's first electric Christmas light display hanging outside. Edison created it himself. Two years later, Edison's friend and co-worker Edward H. Johnson hand-wired 80 red, white, and blue lights and used them to decorate the Christmas tree in his home. The Christmas tree stood on a rotating box. The following quote is from an article published that year in a Detroit newspaper:

Last evening I walked over beyond Fifth Avenue and called at the residence of Edward H. Johnson, vice-president of Edison's electric company. There, at the rear of the beautiful parlors, was a large Christmas tree, presenting a most picturesque and uncanny aspect. It was brilliantly lighted with many colored globes about as large as an English walnut and was turning some six times a minute on a little pine box. There were eighty lights in all encased in these dainty glass eggs, and about equally divided between white, red and blue. As the tree turned, the colors alternated, all the lamps going out and being relit at every revolution. The result was a continuous twinkling of dancing colors, red, white and blue, all evening. I need not tell you that the scintillating evergreen was a pretty sight—one can hardly imagine anything prettier. . . . It was a superb exhibition.

It was several years before electric Christmas lights became commonplace. First of all, many people weren't too sure about this whole electricity phenomenon. Besides that, electric Christmas lights were quite expensive. Around the turn of the century it would have cost the equivalent of \$2,000 in today's money to string electric lights on your Christmas tree. No wonder it took a while to catch on!

In 1895 President Grover Cleveland had the White House Christmas tree strung with colored electric lights. Over 20 years later, in 1917, a teenager named Albert Sadacca suggested that his family's novelty lighting company offer colored Christmas lights to the public. They did, and the idea took hold. Americans loved decorating their trees and houses with festive, brightly colored lights back then, and we still do today.



*National Christmas Tree, 1997,
Courtesy of the Library of Congress,*

Table Talk

Use these ideas to start some fun conversations around the dinner table.

1. Dad and Mom, what kinds of Christmas decorations did you have when you were kids?
2. If you could chose to decorate with only one type of lighted Christmas decoration, what would it be?
3. Why do you think Christmas lights have not gone out of style?



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