

The lights of Christmas



The Christmas Tree display in Cobourg's Victoria Hall;
taken by Stanley Isherwood

The tradition of decorated Christmas trees is a long one, and the ingenuity displayed by the designers is never-ending. From the simplicity of a few strands of tinsels and an Angel on top of a tree to the trees that appear to be one mass of ornaments concealing the green. But whatever the choice or quantity of hanging ornaments the final touch is the addition of lights.

How to light a tree is one of choice - do you make the lights the decoration or an accent touch? Some designers choose to cover the tree with so many lights that there is little room for other decorations and for some just a couple of strings is enough. But does anybody ever wonder about the history of this tradition?

Internet research into the topic reveals much of the same material, it appears that the writer of the *Wikipedia* page duplicated the effort on many other research pages, plagiarism is not a topic

covered in cyberspace, but further research uncovered a Christmas expert - Countess Maria Hubert Von Stauffer. This remarkable lady married into an aristocratic Polish family with a lineage traced to the Ninth Century. She was an academic researching Church and Reform History and when working as a Chef and food historian she was commissioned by the BBC to research material for a series about food history. Being an academic she worked at it interviewing people and documenting their responses and eight months later she had two things in her possession - twelve tea chests of notes and material and a realisation that very few people had researched and documented Christmas so the Countess dove in. Her website, <http://www.christmasarchives.org> is probably the most comprehensive documentation of the traditions, celebratory practices and anecdotes ever amassed. Much of the background material in this article is from that site. Documents in the public domain reveal that the Christmas Tree emerged in the Twelfth Century, it was hung upside down from ceilings as a symbol of Christianity, the triangular shape of the tree symbolised the Holy Trinity. The first documented decorated tree was in Riga, Latvia in 1510 and in the early Sixteenth Century Martin Luther is said to have put candles on his family's tree to demonstrate how the stars twinkled through the dark night. The practice of having candles on a tree continued until electrification happened.

Christmas lights as we know them are the result of two men - Thomas Edison and Albert Sadacca. Edison, having harnessed the power of electricity for mankind, converted his light bulb to become a decoration. In December 1880 he had strands of lights placed around his Laboratory. One thing led to another and in 1885 President Grover Cleveland requested that the White House Tree be illuminated by hundreds of coloured lightbulbs. In 1903 when the Edison Company offered light sets to the public the era of the household Christmas Tree tradition was started. Prior to this offering individual bulbs had to be strung together by electricians, an estimate to this, for an average tree, would have been



The lighting set offered to the public in 1903

two thousand dollars in today's dollars. However the Edison Company did not mass market light sets, but another American did. Albert Saddaca was manufacturing light sets and in 1925 he proposed to his industry members that they should consolidate into a trade organisation. This became NOMA industries, which continues to sell Christmas lights and novelties to this day.

Another account of the growing enthusiasm for decoration was taken from the website *Colorado Gambler* - <http://coloradogambler.com> - A Denver electrician named David Dwight Sturgeon produced the first outdoor lighting display in 1914 to cheer his young grandson, who was very ill and missing out on holiday festivities. Saddened and desperately wanted to help, Sturgeon took some ordinary light bulbs, dipped them in paint, connected them to electrical wire and strung the glowing baubles on the branches of a pine tree outside the boy's bedroom window. Both the child and the neighbors were delighted. A newspaper reporter named Frances Wayne picked up the story and soon the Sturgeon home was the center of attention all over the city. In 1918, Denver held its first outdoor lighting contest. The following year John Malpiede, at the time Denver's only electrician, decided to brighten the Christmas scene by replacing the white lights around Civic Center with colored red and green globes. The following year, he installed the first lighted Christmas tree. Over the years he added more lights, and in 1926 persuaded Mayor Ben Stapleton to let him decorate the exterior of City Hall. By the late 1920s, Denver was being called "the Christmas Capital of the World."



Memorial Park in Port Hope and the light display, pic courtesy Port Hope Tourism

So where does Cobourg and Port Hope fit into this story? Simple both communities offer extensive outdoor Christmas Light displays. Port Hope holds the “Port Hope Olde Tyme Christmas” this Annual event starts on November 25th and ends on January 2nd. This event is held in downtown Port Hope where all the windows in the shopping district are decorated in an old

fashioned theme for the holidays. Merchants will dress in Victorian garb, and visitors are invited to dress in costume to help us celebrate this magical time of year! As well the Capitol Theatre will stage the Capitol Christmas Festival of Trees - over 80 beautifully decorated trees and thousands of lights decorate trees and a Victorian Village, in Port Hope Memorial Park. This event kicked off, on November 25th with a Candlelight Walk and Carol Singing where Carolers met at the corner of Pine and Walton Street to receive their candles, and then paraded down main street to Memorial Park for refreshments and the lighting ceremony.



Cobourg's bandshell at Christmas Magic

In Cobourg the “Christmas Magic” display can be viewed nightly at Victoria Park from November 25, 2011- January 2, 2011. This award winning display of thousands of lights strung in the trees and static displays has been a must-see event for the past thirteen years. This year, as in others citizens assembled at Victoria Hall, exchanged a non-perishable food donation for a candle, lit their candles and paraded down King St to Victoria park for the lighting

ceremony and to meet Santa.

Not to be left out Brighton hosted the CP Holiday Train on Monday November 28th 3:45 p.m., East of the railway crossing at Prince Edward St. This train may not be a major presence in lights in Northumberland but at least it is a National exhibition and it did stop here - worthy mention.



The CP Holiday Train on tour



Garry Sheppard

If that is not enough a couple of private homes, in the area, go nuts with their displays. The winner for the most lights and static displays, in Cobourg and Port Hope, is the house at 6009 Choate Road in Port Hope. This house, which can be seen from the Hwy 401, and garden are festooned with strings of lights and over sixty "blowups"; Christmas characters of all sorts are here. The presenters - Garry Sheppard and his wife spent sixty-eight hours each last year and on the First of December this year spent more than that laying out the display that Garry planned all year and in 2010 cost \$480.00 in extra hydro. "People come up to me in the Summer and ask when I am going to start, I tell them all every year - December the First! We live this display twelve months a year" They have been displaying for a couple of decades and the display only gets bigger every year. "We have no set budget, we just buy 'em (the blowups) when we see 'em. We always buy on sale too, keeps the cost down." Asked why he does it Garry answers, "I'm just a big kid and we like to see people looking at the display. We have lineups on the road when we do it, plenty of people want to see this."

Over in Cobourg a house that has been getting a lot of attention in the past years is owned by Ian and Marnie Morton. 306 College always has a big display and this year branched out into an innovative way of fundraising - the Halloween display was dedicated to the "Childrens' Wish Foundation". The Christmas display, if anything like last year's will be a good one.

So we all go into the Christmas Holiday season we should be aware of the tradition, history and the way the future depends on both here in Northumberland and elsewhere. If we are a Global Village let's make it a lighted one.