

Donation of the Month

Ritz Christmas Tree Lites Circa 1950

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Donor: Forrest Bland Estate



A Christmas tree with multicolored lights or the more traditional white lights are common place at the holiday season. This allows one to light up the tree without fear of fire. Prior to the advent of the light bulb trees were lit using candles wired or clipped to the trees branches.

Starting in the 1860s small candles were wired to the outside branches of the tree. A pail of water and a cloth covered stick or a sponge sat next to the table in case of fire. Due to the high risk of fire trees were only lit for a sort period on Christmas Eve. By the 1870s candles were clipped onto the branches using counterbalanced holders. In the 1880s the heavy counterbalanced holders were replaced with small light weight metal clips.

The first reported electrified Christmas tree was invented by Edward Johnson in 1882, when he strung several small light bulbs together. He invited several newspaper reporters to see his tree, but they were not interested. Only an out of town reporter for the Detroit Post took him up on the offer. In 1908, Ralph Morris another innovator created his own electrified Christmas tree by stringing telephone switch board lights together.

By 1900 the use of electrified Christmas trees became wide spread and a status symbol for the wealthy. It is estimated that an electrified Christmas tree could cost \$300 for all the bulbs, wires, generator and a wireman. By 1903 the cost came down considerably with pre-wired sockets called festoons produced by GE.

The earliest Christmas lights were miniature versions of Edison's light bulb with a carbon filament and a small pointed end. While stringing the lights the small pointed end often broke causing the vacuum to break and making the light inoperable. 1910 saw the advent of the first round light bulb. By 1920 the cone or flame shape bulb was introduced and remained the shape of choice until the 1970s.

This box of 7 multicolored Christmas tree lights was manufactured by the LECO Electric Co. Inc. of New York and Texas; and dates to the 1950s. The LECO Company started in 1946 in The Bronx, New York. Business was booming and they moved to the small town of Florida, New York. By 1951 the plant operated on a 24 hour schedule with 6 automatic Bakelite injection machines making sockets and plugs. In 1955, the company opened a second manufacturing facility in Dallas, Texas. The New York facility closed in 1966, but the Texas plant remains in business; however, they do not manufacture Christmas lights anymore.

“Antique Christmas Light Site: American Lights 1900-1950”, Old Christmas Lights, featured on:
www.oldchristmaslights.com

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