

TEXAS HIGHWAYS--HOLIDAY LIGHTS--MALLORY

By Randy Mallory

TWINKLE! TWINKLE! **From Amarillo to Tyler, holiday lights parks bring out the child in everyone.**

For decades at Yuletide, Texas families have bundled up in their cars and driven through town, windows down, to “look at the lights.” Whole neighborhoods sparkled with multicolored bulbs and spotlighted displays of Santa and the Nativity. They still do.

In recent years, a new “look at the lights” tradition has switched on at holiday lights parks across the state. Each park offers a similar format: For a fee or donation you drive or take a hayride down a narrow lane through a wonderland of lights.

Elaborate displays depict secular and religious scenes--laid out in lights, painted plywood cut-outs, and even three-dimensional structures with costumed mannequins.

Some drive-throughs parks make their own displays. Others get them from a display manufacturer. Some are private enterprises. Others are fund-raisers for non-profits. Most play prerecorded carols throughout the park to keep visitors in the Christmas mood. A few even have a live Santa who ho-ho-ho's to passers-by.

Like good theater, such twinkling extravaganzas dramatize the excitement and joy of the holiday season. From light-laden forests in the eastern half of the state to electrified prairies and plains in the west, these shining spectacles entertain the child in everyone.

Enchanted Forests

At dusk, Mother Nature's stage lights dim in the forests of East Texas. Against a darkening backdrop of nightfall, the featured attraction (some two million lights) begins to glow across the 24 acres of Santa Land, near Tyler. Visitors enter beneath a 25-foot-

high arching wreath, then ease between two rows of 16-foot-high Christmas trees made lights.

Snug and warm in their cars, visions of sugar-plums dance in visitors' heads as they enter the tunnel of lights. Thousands of computer-controlled colored lights flash in synchronized waves flowing along the tunnel's 250-foot length.

Santa Land's one-mile lane meanders through hills of pines and hardwoods mantled in glittering lights. At "Santa's Village," one of the trees, a 50-foot juniper, serves as a resident Christmas tree, surrounded by cut-outs of giant packages and busy elves. Reindeer (outlined in white lights and mounted on curved metal rods over the lane) flash in sequence so they appear to leap over your head. Another automated display at "Elf Land, Texas" simulates a herd of cattle swirling around a tornado made of green tube lighting. The drive ends with a Nativity scene and camel-bound wise men in a starry night.

Santa Land remains the grandmother of Texas holiday lights parks. After visiting a similar park in St. Louis, Missouri, two couples (Dwight and Pat Palmer and Max and Sue Williams) opened Santa Land in 1995. Now owned by the Palmers, Santa Land attracted 75,000 visitors last year...and not just people.

"It's amazing how many bring their pets," Pat says. "We've had cats and dogs, a parrot, a pot-bellied pig, and even reindeer!" The Palmers are happy to please pets, but it's youngsters they have in mind.

Dwight occasionally dresses as Santa and hands out candy. Pat recalls one excited child who, at the sight of Santa, got tongue-tied and blurted out, "I'm so up-sided." Now as the Palmers make new scenes (assisted by Tyler artist Sue Ann Stagner), they find themselves proclaiming, "We're so up-sided!"

Folks are equally "up-sided" 15 miles west of Santa Land on Interstate 20 at Wonderland by Night, near Van.

One night a private pilot flew over the park enroute to Tyler. Impressed by the airborne view, he rented a car and came straight back to see it at ground level. Another fellow got so enthralled he placed a "Would You Marry Me" placard along the one-mile route as a novel proposal to his girlfriend.

Like other drive-throughs in wooded eastern Texas, this park creates displays primarily of wood. Many are plywood cut-outs painted like characters (such as elves, polar bears, and angels) or objects (such as wagons, igloos, and gingerbread houses). Some include three-dimensional structures, such as Wonderland by Night's "Little Town of Bethlehem. Spotlights illuminate displays amid tall trees strung with thousands of lights.

Wonderland by Night has plenty of fairies, sleighs, and Texas-sized toys-- including an animated 20-foot-diameter merry-go-round and a 40-foot-long steamboat. There's even a life-like Santa with a recorded voice which greets kids as they pass.

But religious scenes take the stage front and center here, comprising half of the displays. From Noah's Ark to Christ's resurrection, the park recounts the Bible. New this year, the "Last Supper" depicts Jesus and the disciples in life-sized mannequins with real hair and handmade robes.

Opened in 1996, Wonderland by Night is operated by partners Joyce and Bud Stanley, Linda and Burley Kinsel, Linda and James Henry, and Walter Moffeit. The seven design and make all the displays and string all the lights.

"It's a big job," says Joyce, "but visitors tell us they feel blessed here. That's what Christmas is all about."

Another timbered holiday lights park lies in the post-oak region of Central Texas near College Station.

Not a creature is stirring at night, but car-loads of excited visitors certainly are at Santa's Wonderland. "We've learned that for Christmas lights in Texas, bigger is better," says Scott Medlin, who designs and operates the one-mile drive-through with

Phil and Ann Medlin, his parents, and Rodney and Janie Craig. “When people come here, we want them to say ‘Wow!’ not just ‘pretty neat.’”

Since their 1988 opening, the couples have “wowed” visitors by covering their mile-long lane with a million-plus lights and cut-outs centered around several themes. “Dickensville” has an animated horse and buggy, Victorian homes, and characters from Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol.” The “Land of Sugar and Spice” serves up mammoth ice cream cones, cookies, and gingerbread men. Everywhere, tiny elves are busy--harvesting candy canes in “Candy Cane Forest,” feeding Dasher and company at the “North Pole,” and sorting wish lists at “Santa’s Post Office.” Georgia artist Linda Williford makes and paints many of the cut-outs.

Santa’s Wonderland visitors won’t forget they’re in College Station, home of Texas A&M University. What to their wondering eyes should appear this year but a maroon and white archway, measuring 44 feet wide and 25 feet high, spelling out “Aggie Country.”

Also new in 2000 is “Tombstone, Texas,” an Old West town at the entrance where visitors catch hayrides and warm up on hot chocolate and apple cider. (“Tombstone” and its open-air pavilion are available for rent other times of the year.)

Lighted Plains & Prairies

Scant of trees to decorate, most holiday lights parks on Texas’ plains and prairies turn to Midwest Display, Inc., of Marion, Indiana for razzle-dazzle. “We partner with non-profit groups to raise funds by creating unique and exciting displays,” says company president Mike Howard. “We add new displays each year, so the experience stays fresh.”

Midwest’s Texas partners include non-profits in Amarillo, Fort Hood (Belton), Grand Prairie, Allen, and El Paso. Mike was so impressed with these partners that he built a manufacturing plant in Alvarado, south of Fort Worth, to make displays for them.

Each free-standing display features large-bulb (C-7) lights hand-wired in the desired design to a grid made of 5/16-inch "pencil-rod" steel. Heavy square steel tubing braces the lighted grid, and guy-wires hold it erect. Computerized controls flash the lights in sequences that simulate movement across the grid. This kind of animation is vital on "customs." To raise extra funds, non-profits get local companies to sponsor custom-designed displays that reflect their business.

At Nites of Lites in Amarillo, one display shows a Rocky Mountain scene with a skiing Santa and a flowing waterfall, sponsored by Coors Light. Not to be outdone, Budweiser commissioned a display of Clydesdales pulling their famous beer wagon. Seventy-five of Nites of Lites' 100-plus displays are corporate sponsored, says Dusty McGuire, coordinator of Keep Amarillo Beautiful, the non-profit which established the drive-through in 1998 to beautify parks. Already, proceeds have added 100 trees and a 1,000-square-foot gazebo to the event site, John Stiff Park.

Forty-six non-profits and the chamber of commerce benefit from Grand Prairie's Prairie Lights, a three-mile trail at Joe Pool Lake. The suburban drive-through has 550 displays, including a 90-foot-long Victorian village and an animated "Frosty's Winter Olympics." Success during Prairie Lights' inaugural year (1999) spawned a sister drive-through at Allen to serve the northern part of the Metroplex. Northern Prairie Lights packs 250 displays along a one-mile drive in an undeveloped corporate park.

Drive-throughs have proved so popular that a Central Texas military post even got into the act. As a community project, Belton's Fort Hood sponsors Nature in Lights, a 5.5-mile drive past 120 lighted displays at Belton Lake Outdoor Recreation Area.

One western lights park--Celebration Park, near Abilene--makes its own displays...and has battled rough terrain to do it. In addition to installing 100 free-standing scenes, owners Royce and Rebecca Rampy removed thorns from 1,500 prickly mesquite trees in order to wrap them in lights. "We've battled mesquite thorns

and rattlesnakes to make Celebration Park a reality,” says Rebecca, “but when we see what a family tradition it has become, it’s all worthwhile.”

Across Texas at this time of year, families still hop in their cars to “look at the lights.” Increasingly, they’re headed for holiday lights parks where they wonder as they wander through displays glowing brighter than a Texas night. Here, as in every neighborhood, Santa remains a right jolly old elf. And the Nativity keeps the faith for a better tomorrow. And, as in decades past, kids of all ages find visions of sugar-plums dancing in their heads.

So, bring on the show!

Lights! Turn on those millions of twinkling bulbs!

Camera! Keep your point-and-shoot ready!

Action! Drive down the trail of a holiday lights park, and make this the brightest, most joyous Christmas ever!

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