

Christmas Lights Story

One of the first stories our museum visitors hear is a recounting of the miraculous start to opening Sun City as an active, retirement community, with 237 homes sold the first weekend of 1960. Sun City's first residents arrived in late spring/early summer. By New Year's Eve the population was 1,500 and grew to over 5,000 four years later. One of the forgotten stories involving those pioneer residents was their interest in outdoor Christmas decorations.

In those days, Christmas lights came in short strings with oversized bulbs by today's standards. Lights did not twinkle or change colors. Strobes, lasers, black lights, and miniature LED lights all came later. Any effort at Christmas lighting was noticeable and appreciated, as Sun City skies were consistently dark. There was no ambient light overflow from neighboring cities, as Youngtown residents numbered about 600 and Peoria was more of a village than a city.

Sun City was compact and squeezed between Grand Avenue on the north and Peoria Ave. on the south. Residents often just took a stroll to view community Christmas lights or used their three-wheeled golf car. Noting the community's interest in lighting, the Sun City Merchants Association saw an opportunity to promote "good will" and sponsored an annual lighting contest with prizes for winning entries.

In 1961 over 70 residents entered the contest, and a year later entries doubled. The first problem with contest rules was noted when secular display characters like "Frosty" and "Rudolph" became available and popular to compete against the traditional creche scenes with Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, shepherds, and animals.

In 1963 contest rules were changed to clearly state there would be no mixing and matching Christian and secular characters. There would be two distinct categories. Judging was completed the week before Christmas and prizes were awarded. Viewing winning entries was a popular activity for residents and guests alike.

For 1964 one more rule had to be added. After displays were judged, winners could not add to their displays. For instance, a winner in the Christian category could not add a blow-up "Rudolph" with a blinking red nose to solicit even more "oohs" and "ahs" from viewers. Violators would lose their prizes. That quelled complaints from entry losers in future years.

A historical oddity helps further explain the deep appreciation for Christmas decorations in Sun City during its first decade. Sun City from Grand Ave. to Peoria Ave. was built without street lights, so the lighted displays were highly visible and prominent. It was not until 1969 that the area from Grand to Peoria was lit at night when 735 street lights were added to fend off the darkness. Some pioneers did not describe that as progress.

If you enjoyed reading this short story from early Sun City history, know that it is but a tiny sample of delightful stories awaiting you. Please continue supporting your museum. Visit often! Bring guests! Spread the word. But most important of all, enjoy the holiday season. Merry Christmas!

Ben Roloff
Sun City Historian