

Glen Cove's "Tree of Light"

In 1915, the first outdoor community Christmas Tree was erected in Glen Cove, at the corner of School Street and Highland Road.

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Each year at Christmas time, a holiday tree strung with electric lights graces downtown Glen Cove. The tradition dates back to 1915 when the first such tree was erected and strung with electric lights by residents of the community spurred to act by a movement to erect a public, outdoor "Tree of Light" in towns and cities across the nation.

The very first "Tree of Light" has been erected in New York City in 1912. It was the brainchild of Emelie D Lee Herreshoff, wife of a wealthy New York chemist and industrialist. It was her desire to erect a Christmas Tree in the heart of Manhattan, outdoors in a public place where anyone and everyone could enjoy it

... a place where all may gather, rich or poor, on Christmas Eve, listen to the Christmas music, and feel that it is their tree, their Christmas, and that the spirit of peace and good-will encircles them, no matter how friendless they may be. The tree will not be for children more than for grown people, for the poor more than the rich. There will be no gifts on it, and only the gift of the Christmas spirit to emanate from it. (Ames, 1916)

Although New York City's park authorities seemed deeply confused as to why anyone would wish to interject non-commercial activities into something as commercially profitable as Christmas, they finally consented to allow the "Tree of Light" to be placed in Madison Square Park. More than one thousand small electric bulbs which adorned the tree were turned on at dusk on Christmas Eve as Christmas Carols and patriotic songs were sung. The festivities continued for a week, until the New Year was rung in. Mrs Herreshoff quietly noted a few years later "I am happy that the idea was accepted... I deeply wish this Tree would always be called the Tree of Light, as it was first called."

The concept rapidly spread across the country. By the next year, there were "Trees of Light" placed in public spots in Chi-

cago, Philadelphia, Pittsburg, San Francisco, and Baltimore.

In 1915, just three years later, it was decided that Glen Cove would have its own Tree of Light. The decision appears to have been made on short notice. The editor of the Glen Cove Echo, John C F Davis (better known locally as "Echo John") observed that the community had only 15 days from the decision until Christmas Eve. However, many segments of the community quickly pitched in – quietly, anonymously – to help make the tree a reality.

We are to have one – a Community Christmas Tree, a tree under the open sky, belonging to the whole village, free to all to enjoy, be we rich or poor, young or old, native or foreign born, whatever our color or station! (GC Echo, 1915a)

A suitable evergreen tree was found in a woods about 10 miles from Glen Cove; the cost of cutting the tree and hauling it to Glen Cove was donated by an anonymous resident.

The site selected for the tree was "Neighborhood Corner" at the intersection of Highland Road and School Street. This was the home of the Glen Cove Neighborhood Association, the community's leading civic organization. The Association had taken over the 1860's era public schoolhouse, located on the corner opposite the Methodist Church. [A few years later the building would be destroyed by fire; the Neighborhood Association would then take over the former R M Bowne house, which they relocated from School Street to 3 Highland Road where it still stands today.]

There were a few thin spots among the branches of the Christmas tree, a common flaw in most big evergreens. An anonymous resident devoted an entire day to filling in the bare spots with branches.

The Glen Cove Light and Power Company offered to wire the tree with lights and to provide electricity for the tree for Christmas week. The Glen Cove Light and Power Company was owned by the same people who controlled the Ladew Leather Belting Company in Glen Cove. The electrical utility

was created in 1903, soon after Edward R Ladew completed the enormous leather belting plant (which covered a large tract of land that stretched from Glen Cove Creek to north of The Place) and discovered that the factory's massive electrical generator was producing considerably more power than the factory could consume. The GCL&PC was formed to make the excess electricity available to residents of Glen Cove – at almost half the price that residents of neighboring communities were paying for electricity.

It took a crew from the GCL&PC three days to fully wire the tree. Staff members of the company even constructed an electrically-illuminated star to crown the tree. (GC Echo 1916)

Unlike modern practice, where the lighting of our community's holiday tree is scheduled weeks before Christmas, the first Glen Cove community Christmas Tree was not lit until Christmas Eve, and remained lit until New Year's Eve... exactly as the first Tree of Light in New York City.

Since much of the entertainment planned for the week between Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve were musical in nature, a resident who lived near the downtown area loaned the community a piano.

"Echo John" asked the residents of Glen Cove:

Look for [the Tree of Light] as you hurry home to your supper each night of Christmas Week, with its shining up-ward pointed star, and think as you go, of what Christmas really means. Then come back to it with all the family at eight o'clock to join in singing Christmas Carols around the tree with the children and your neighbors!

At 6 pm on Christmas Eve members of the community gathered on School Street to watch the lighting. The Presbyterian Church's Sunday School children sang Christmas Carols at the tree. At 8 pm, townspeople gathered again to listen to the chorus from the Carpenter Memorial Methodist Church.

On Christmas Day, at 6:30 in the evening, the students of the Carpenter Memorial Church's Sunday School assembled on the steps near the tree to lead the community in an hour of Christmas carols.

The event held on the evening of the 26th was "a very general and joyful musical festival" in which all of the children of Glen Cove, including the public school children and all of the community's Sunday School children, gathered together at 5 pm to sing carols around the tree. The rest of the community was "invited to go and join them."

Starting on Monday, December 27th, all of the musical events at the tree shifted to 8 pm. That evening started with a performance by the Choir Boys of St Paul's Episcopal Church at 8 pm, followed at 8:30 by members of the Scandinavian Baptist Church performing Christmas Carols and folk songs in both English and Swedish. Because the church had a small congregation, members of a sister church in Brooklyn trekked out to Glen Cove to add their voices. The performance was "very much enjoyed and appreciated by all who heard it... their clear voices and excellent singing gave great pleasure." One of the

Swedish folksongs, entitled "Du Gama Du Fria" ("To The Swedish Homeland") was so striking that the Glen Cove Echo printed the lyrics in both Swedish and English in their next issue.

On the evening of the 28th, the Presbyterian Quartet "with chorus and Soprano Soloist" performed a selection of Christmas songs. The next night the Neighborhood Association's Chorale Society, with a Contralto Soloist, entertained the community.

The evening of Thursday, December 30th was given over to the Boy Scouts of Troop 4, accompanied by their Fife and Drum Corps. Affiliated with St Patrick's Church, their Scoutmaster was F. Darius Benham, a young man who wanted desperately to become a newspaper reporter, writer and publicist (and eventually did, with success).

The celebrations at the Tree of Light culminated on New Year's Eve. At 8 pm, the Glen Cove Camp Fire Girls and both Troops 1 and 2 of the local Boy Scouts gathered around the tree. The Camp Fire Girls were dressed in Native American garb. Together the girls and boys offered a half hour long program of "calls, songs and Scout work." This was followed at 8:30 by the chorus of the Calvary African Methodist Episcopal Church performing Christmas carols and other songs. Those who remained downtown until midnight were treated to a performance of the Boys' Band from the Carpenter Memorial Methodist Church. (GC Echo, 1915b)

The week is over. Our Festival of Light and Song closes tonight. What has it meant to us? What have we gained? Some of us have gained in our appreciation of our fellowmen – the whole town has certainly gained in its feeling of Fellowship and Brotherhood. It has been proved to one mind at least, that Glen Cove is a wonderful village, composed of wonderful people! (GC Echo, 1916)

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