

## The Iten Christmas Display

A multitude thronged the Rock Ledge estate of Frank J. Iten at Clinton. It was early evening of December 18, 1934, and automobiles were parked for blocks in every direction. Special police directed the steady stream of congested traffic on Bluff Boulevard in front of the Iten home. Old and young, rich and poor, followers of every faith, milled about restlessly, anxious to catch the first glimpse of Clinton's colorful Yuletide spectacle.

Suddenly a hush came over the vast assemblage as Christmas bells chimed joyously over a public address system. Then the warm friendly voice of Frank J. Iten announced that Station J-O-Y was broadcasting the opening program of his yearly Christmas display. A cordial invitation was extended to all to enjoy the display, to stay as long as they pleased, and to come back as often as they wished. The program opened with an invocation by the Reverend Harry E. Harned of the First Congregational Church. Local singers then rendered "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear", "The Holy Night", and "The Birth of Christ".

As the last note died on the crisp winter air a myriad of twinkling colored stars lighted the



heavens above the Iten home. High above sailed the moon. The scene shifted to the left as flood lights disclosed shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. Then a brilliant star in the heavens on the right sent a shaft of light downward upon an ancient village of walls, domes, and spires, representing Bethlehem in Judea on that first Christmas Eve nearly two thousand years ago. Exclamations of delight were heard on every hand. As the deep religious significance of the tableau was realized, some of the men removed their hats for the moment despite the chilly air. A flood of red, amber, and blue light slowly brought Bethlehem to life. Then the Three Wise Men of the East approached, dressed in oriental splendor and hastening to lay their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh before the new born king. This ended the religious pageant.

More lights flashed on and a cheer of delight broke from the lips of hundreds of youngsters as Santa Claus appeared on the roof with four prancing reindeer drawing a sleigh load of toys. Here, indeed, was good old Santa as young America knew and wanted him — prepared to spread good cheer among them. Suddenly the entire display became a scenic wonderland as all the lights flashed on at once. "Every stone, every bit of shrubbery, every tree glistened and sparkled



with light and color", an eye-witness declared. "Hundreds and thousands of electric lamps of different sizes and many colors had flashed on. Every snow flake, every bit of frost reflected and multiplied the points of color and light." Sparkling lights and streamers gleamed from a dozen living Christmas trees that flanked the four terraces of the spacious lawn. The Iten home was outlined by a string of green and red bulbs. Holly wreaths hung in the windows and the Cross of Christ formed a fitting center for the whole spectacle.

The Iten Christmas Display of 1934 did not spring into existence over night: it grew year by year as the idea developed in the imagination of its sponsor — Frank J. Iten. Born at Rock Island of Swiss-Bavarian ancestry in 1873, Iten came to Clinton with his parents in 1892. He was identified with the Iten Biscuit Company until 1928 when the business was sold to the National Biscuit Company. A modest, unassuming gentleman, he has always been actively engaged in community affairs, commanding the respect and admiration of all who know him.

Although the first real Christmas display was made in 1928, a Christmas tree had adorned the Iten lawn as early as 1925. The next year Santa Claus was added and in 1927 the diminutive



gnomes, who toil unceasingly in the Iten garden during the summer, were pressed into winter service. In 1928 a reindeer, hitched to a small sleigh filled with toys, reclined on the ground beside the Christmas tree where Santa and his elves were working diligently. The interest in this first simple display led Iten to plan a more extensive exhibit for the following Christmas.

Meanwhile the Clinton *Herald*, prompted by the Rock Ledge exhibit, determined to sponsor a Christmas display contest in 1929 designed to beautify the city. Every one was invited to participate. Judging was to be done with an eye for the artistic and not necessarily the elaborate. Valuable prizes were offered by local merchants. Mr. Iten supported the contest enthusiastically but wisely refrained from entering it.

The Iten Christmas display in 1929 was described as "startlingly beautiful" and Rock Ledge was hailed as the "show place" of eastern Iowa and western Illinois. The most conspicuous feature was Santa Claus with four reindeer and sleigh placed on the roof of the house. Bright wreaths hung in the windows and shrubs on the terraces were lighted with colored bulbs or flood lamps. Gnomes and fairies worked or played under the Christmas tree. The Santa Claus set became an instant favorite. Once, in 1932, when



Santa and his prancing steeds were placed on one of the terraces, disappointed Clintonians urged that they be returned to the roof. Since Iten believes in making others happy, Old Santa was returned to the roof and has remained there ever since.

The Iten Christmas Display made Clinton the Mecca for young and old from surrounding cities. Clinton itself perked up with electrical displays: some Chicagoans described it as the "most beautiful decorated city" they had ever seen. The new electrical feature in 1930 was the three shepherds with their herd of sheep. The open air service on the opening night was also inaugurated in 1930 when a tableau was presented on the front lawn of the Iten home. Carols were sung by a choral club of seventy voices.

Fully fifteen hundred people gathered at Rock Ledge to witness the opening of the 1931 Christmas Display. A live Santa Claus waved greetings from the roof. Two new sets — a gigantic Merry Christmas sign which could be changed to Happy New Year, and the motor-driven sleigh bells — added to the effectiveness of the display. It had taken four electricians five days to set up the 2100 electric lights and flood lamps and its beauty became the talk of the countryside. Many wondered how it could be improved.



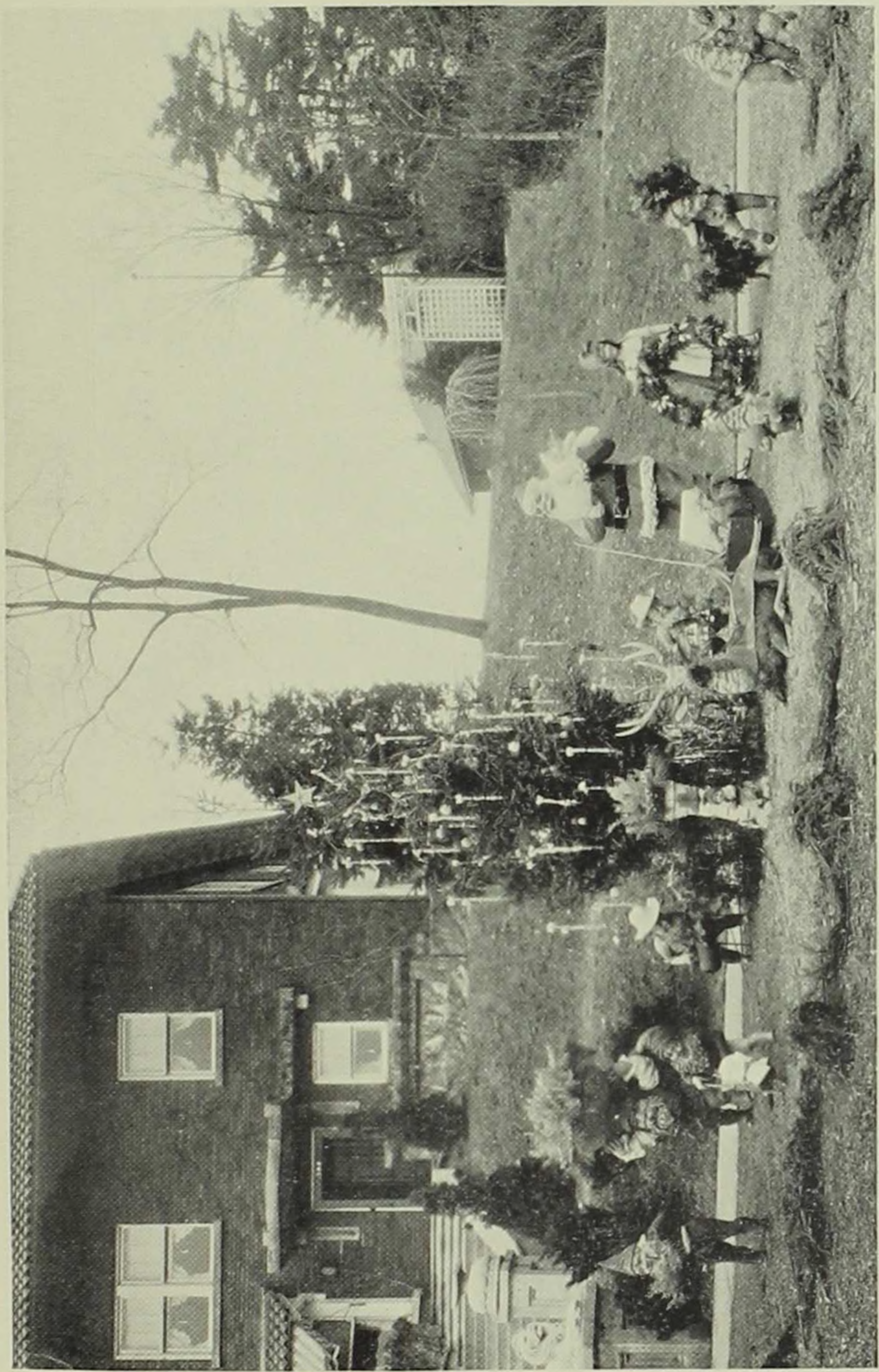
But the resourceful Clintonian had not exhausted his plans. In 1932 the Clinton *Herald* declared that Frank J. Iten's "idealized dream for a Christmas message" to the people of Clinton and the surrounding country had "produced something more beautiful and inspiring than ever before." It was the star of Bethlehem shining down upon the sleeping village where Christ was born. Thousands attended the opening performance on December 21st. The display was subsequently turned on each night at 5:30 o'clock until January 2nd. No definite time limit was set for turning off the display as Mr. Iten refused to extinguish the lights as long as visitors came to be cheered by his Christmas message. In 1933 a Milwaukee man arrived as the family was retiring. He had driven all day and had to continue on his journey that night. The entire display was turned on for ten minutes and the grateful man drove on rejoicing.

The Iten Christmas Display was attracting national attention: the Boston *Herald* printed a picture of the 1933 set in its rotogravure section. A passing Nebraskan asked a traffic officer how long the exhibit would be on.

"Until the day after New Year's", the officer replied.

"Fine, I'll be back with my kiddies", the Nebraskan assured him. A few days later the officer





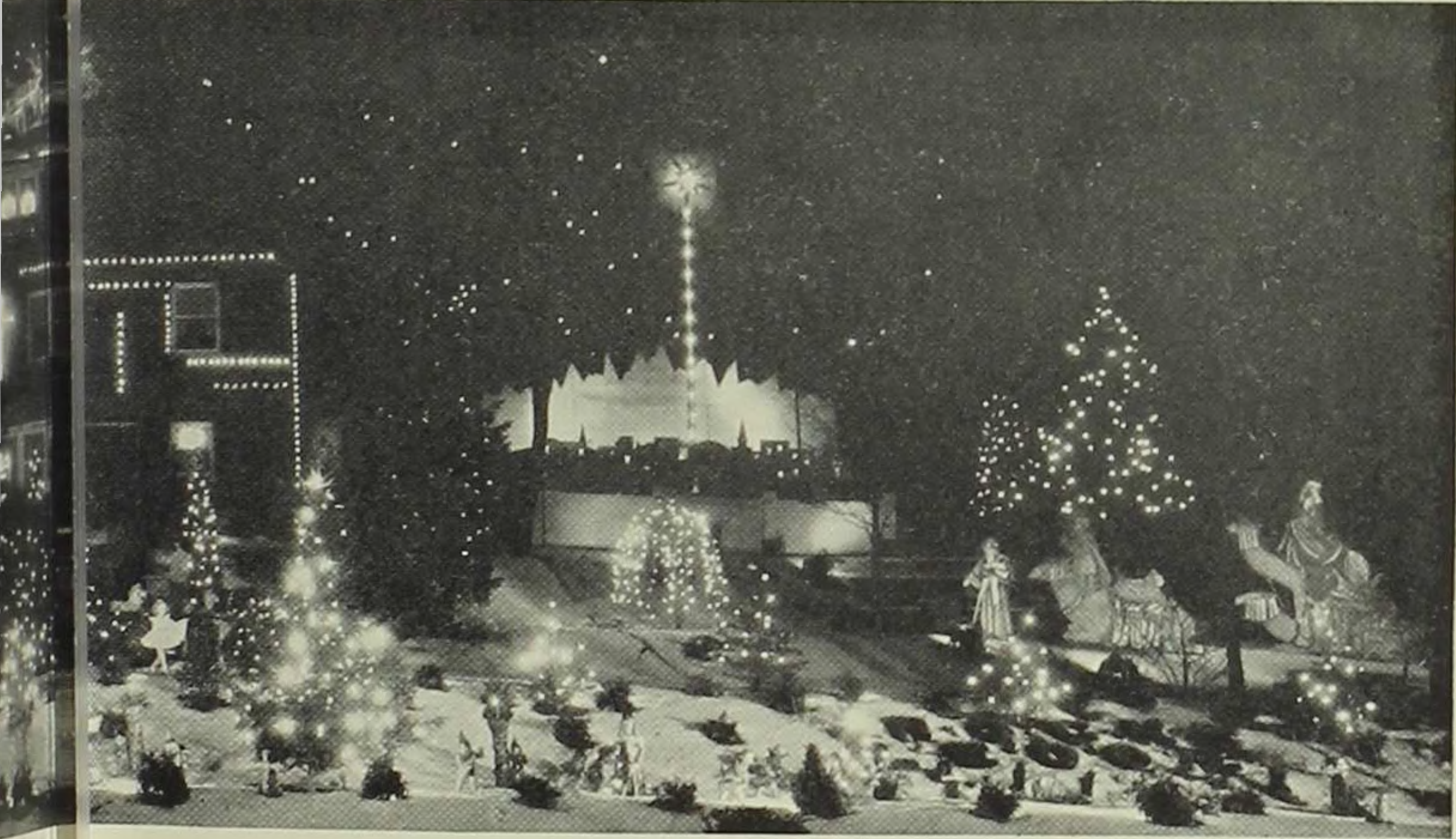
THE ITEN CHRISTMAS DISPLAY IN 1928





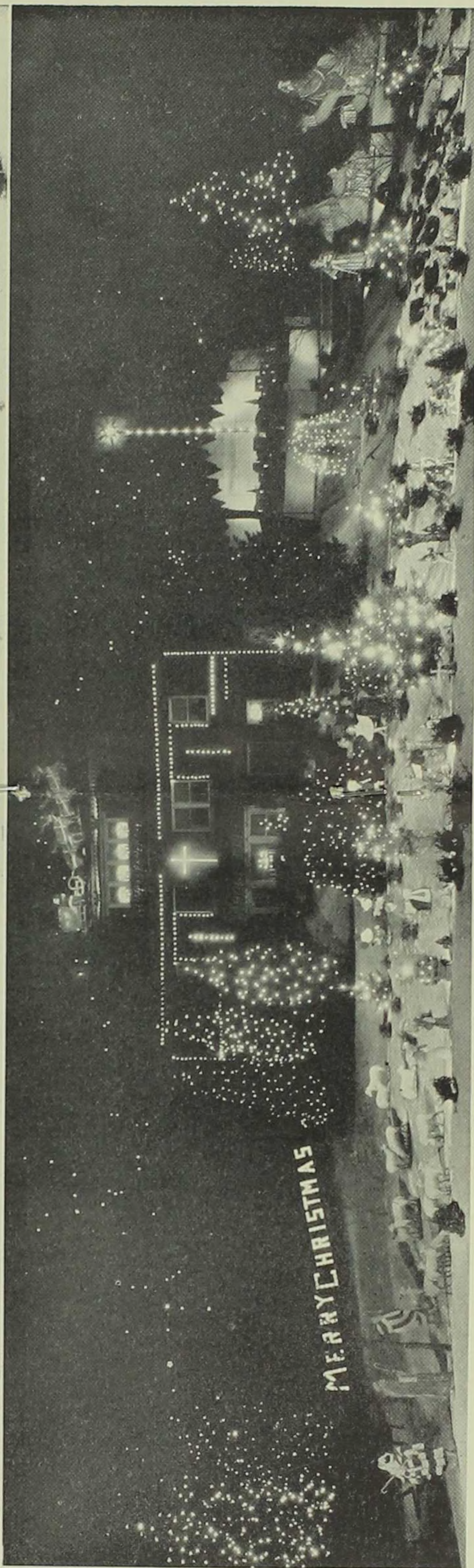
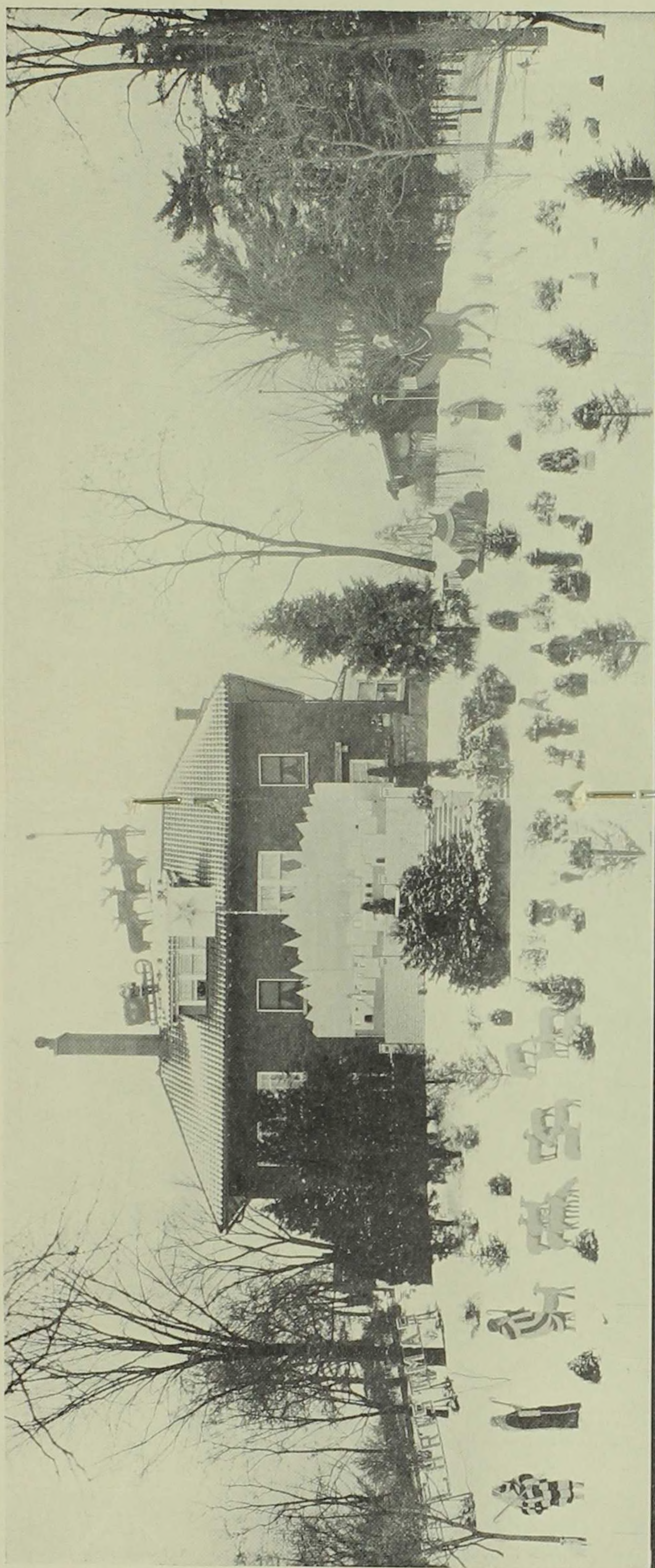
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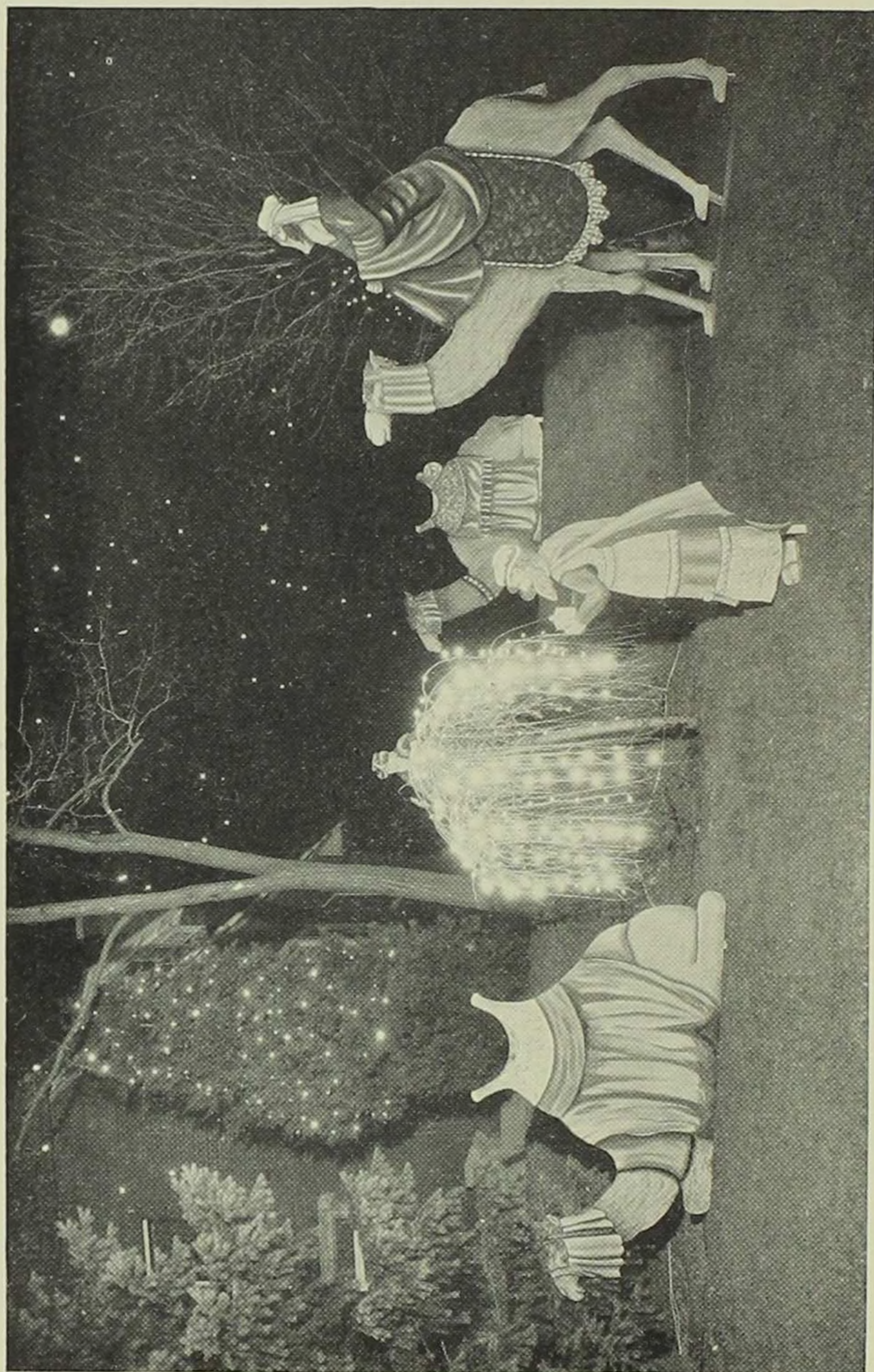
LAY: B DAY IN 1933, BY NIGHT IN 1934





THE ITEN CHRISTMAS DISPLAY: BY DAY IN 1933, BY NIGHT IN 1934





THE THREE WISE MEN



was greeted by the same Nebraskan and his family. They had driven hundreds of miles to see the exhibit.

The 1933 display was described as the "most outstanding of all". The three wise men and their camels had been added and a public address system installed. "There are many more stars in the sky", the Clinton *Herald* reported, "and when the storm clouds lift the Great Dipper will point to the North Star. Venus sheds her light in the west and a golden moon hangs in the celestial blue of the heavens."

Mr. Miles B. Rockwood, of the firm of Rockwood & Rohwer, electrical contractors, who has handled the lighting displays since their beginning, has written the following description of the 1933 display: "We used 2,129 lamps. These ranged in size from small lamps used in series up to the 400 watt lamps employed for floodlighting. The large central star was made of neon tubing. A  $\frac{1}{2}$  horsepower motor set the deer in motion, another  $\frac{1}{2}$  horsepower motor was used for control of the sign flasher. The installation also included a public address system, with speaker in the yard and microphone in the house, to play Christmas carols. The total load on the power company's lines was 22,585 watts, and the installation necessitated a separate 3 wire service and



meter connection. . . . The full lights were left on for a period of two minutes, then everything flashed off, except the small stars in the sky, and the story began all over again."

It took four electricians two weeks to place the 2800 colored bulbs that made up the 1934 display. When the position of a light in the sky was unsatisfactory they found it more convenient to shoot it out than change it.

All sorts of comments may be heard. "I wonder how much it costs?" some one once asked.

"I know it cost a lot", a companion rejoined.

Another declared that Mr. Iten had to import special electricians. Such comments bring a merry twinkle to the eyes of the master of Rock Ledge. His main concern is the joy the Christmas display brings to others, especially the youngsters who glory in the land-of-make-believe. Their joy could hardly be contained when they saw grouped before them in 1934 the familiar figures of Shirley Temple, Orphan Annie, Little Red Riding Hood, Popeye, Olive Oyl, Wimpy, Micky and Minnie Mouse, Betty Boop, and Skippy. But many an oldster in Clinton has pondered the question: Who gets the most fun out of the Christmas Display — Frank J. Iten, the children, or the older folks?

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN