

Decatur man's Christmas show closing in on 30,000 lights

By Bayne Hughes Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, December 7, 2015 12:15 am

Southeast Decatur resident Thomas Terry has surpassed Clark Griswold with his annual Christmas light show.

This is the 10th year of Terry's growing display on Harrison Street Southeast. The lights are animated to Christmas music and include multi-colored bulbs arranged into two singing Christmas trees, 16 mini-trees, a singing Santa, a singing Mrs. Claus, candy canes and stars.

Terry's show is up to 28,550 lights. Clark Griswold, the character portrayed by Chevy Chase in National Lampoon's "Vacation" movies, had 25,000 lights in the 1989 movie "Christmas Vacation."

"I'm trying to get to 30,000 lights," Terry said.

Terry began lighting his home in 2005 and said he kept adding lights every year. The house lighting became serious in 2008, he said.

"At first, all he did was static lights," said Tonya West, Terry's wife. "But then he just went crazy with the decorating."

West said she enjoys the show her husband creates and doesn't mind he's taken up what can be an expensive hobby.

"We've all got our interests," West said. "I exercise and read. He is always building and trying to figure out how things work. He's very creative."

West said it's a tossup whether Terry enjoys Christmas more, or tinkering with the electronics and computer programming for the show.

"He loves to hear the kids laugh, and he feels like he is giving back to the community," West said.



Thomas Terry shows off a portion of his holiday light display at his home on Harrison Street in Southeast Decatur.

A computer technician at SAIC in Huntsville, Terry added computer animation in 2008. He later synchronized the lights to music so the characters appear to be singing. He created a music schedule that will run nightly through Dec. 31.

The music can be heard on 107.1 FM, so onlookers can listen to the show on their car radios. Terry recently added outside speakers for anyone who wants to stand on the street and listen. He keeps the volume low enough so it doesn't bother his neighbors.

"I haven't had any complaints yet from my neighbors," Terry said. "Some like to sit outside on their porch and just watch the show. I've had some ask me to turn the music up."

West said Terry gives her veto power on the music. "If I don't like a song, he'll take it off," she said.

Terry, 48, said he always loved riding through Decatur as a child with his parents and looking at the Christmas lights.

"A gentleman on State Avenue used to have a display that I thought was amazing," Terry said.

The display has become a year-round hobby for Terry, as it has for many enthusiasts throughout the country. Holiday lights date back to Thomas Edison and the Christmas of 1880, according to the website Gizmodo.

As a marketing trick, Edison strung up incandescent bulbs around this Menlo Park, New York, laboratory "so that passing commuters on the nearby railway could see the Christmas miracle," according to the site.

Two years later, Edison associate Edward Johnson displayed the first electrically illuminated Christmas tree at his Manhattan, New York, home.

West occasionally helps him, but he usually does the work on his own. He creates displays and makes repairs throughout the year. He begins setting up in October with the goal of completing his display by Thanksgiving night.

"I try to have it ready so people who have family and visitors from out of town can come see it," Terry said.

The display is a mixture of corrugated PVC pipe, conduit, and LED, Pixi and incandescent lights. He used tomato cages this year to create the 16 mini-Christmas trees.

Terry keeps up with the lights on a spreadsheet. He uses light sockets throughout his home and storage building to supply the power.

The increased affordability of LED lights, which require less power, allowed him to work toward his goal of 30,000 lights. “At between 23,000 and 25,000, I was probably getting close to my maximum number,” Terry said. “But LED lights allow me to put up three times as many lights.”

Terry said the light show typically increases his power bill about \$300 a month. The LED lights are helping reduce that bill.

However, he recently replaced about 2,400 LED lights with 384 old-fashioned C-9 ceramic bulbs for a brighter, more colorful display on his roof.

Terry’s home has a large ditch along Harrison Street. He keeps the display inside the ditch so it can serve as a buffer against the onlookers. He said he hasn’t yet had a major traffic jam on the street from the sightseers.

“It’s taken a while for word about my display to get around and for people to find my home, but we have been getting more people lately,” he said.

More information, including music schedules, photos and videos, about Terry and his Harrison Street show is available at lights.tbonerex.com and his Facebook page, Lights on Harrison Street.