As we prepare to celebrate the 75th Anniversary of the "Light of the World" pageant, let us go back to the beginning and see how it all started.

In the spring of 1946, Methodist Minister Rev. Arthur Johnson, approached Clayton Morey, the drama teacher, with an idea. Back in Bayard, NE where Rev. Johnson had come from, they had done a cantata of the Christmas Story. Rev. Johnson asked Clayton if he provided him with all of the biblical texts concerning the Christmas story if Clayton could write a script and create a play. Clayton got straight to work.

Later in the year Harold Pedley, President of the Chamber, was looking to add to the Christmas Celebrations of the lighting display and the church choirs. He contacted Clayton to see if he had any ideas. Clayton said, "Let me show you what I have been working on!" And from these humble beginnings a legacy was born. While working on the script, Arthur and Clayton asked Don Helzer, the music teacher to help find some songs to go with the narrative.

On the first rendition of the "Light of the World" pageant volunteers pantomimed each of six scenes.

Scene 1 – Prophet stating, A virgin will conceive and bear a son

Scene 2– Mary at the well, the Angel tells her she will be the mother of the Christ Child

Scene 3 –Joseph begging the innkeeper for a room for Mary

Scene 4 –Angel Choir, the Christ Child has been born

Scene 5 –The three Wise men bearing gifts to the New Born King

Scene 6 –Simeon being told he will not die until he sees the Christ Child

Prior to the first show, they put a tiny little ad in the Omaha World Herald advertising the event. From this small gesture, around 12,000 people came to see the first show, counters registered 1700 cars from other counties and 10 states other than Nebraska.

As an example of the cooperation which made the whole thing possible, we cite the case of the missing flares. Thursday night it was discovered that flares to be used in some of the scenes were not to be found. Friday, Paul Warp long distanced Delbert Christensen in Chicago. Delbert found them across the line in Indiana and in West Chicago but his messenger missed getting them aboard a plane heading this way. They then were placed in charge of the Pullman conductor on the Burlington from whom Paul received them (yawn, boy, I'm sleepy, yawn) about 3:30 Sunday morning. We had flares!!

On December 8th 1946, the first pageant was performed on the west side of the court house with volunteers John Bjorklund, Harold Pedley, Arthur Fellows, and Jack E. Etzelmiller reciting the lines from a microphone and using a record player for the songs.

Consequently, also in 1946, two native sons of the Minden area, Oscar Warp of Minden and his brother Harold Warp of Chicago donated and arranged for the installation in the courthouse of a set of Schulmerich Carillonic Tower Bells and a tower music system.

A bronze plaque inside the courthouse bears this inscription: Hallowed be these bells as a memorial to the men and women who have served and are serving our country in her armed forces so that we may have peace on earth and good will toward men.

> To signify peace . . . may these bells be blest
> Long ring their toll . . . from the Courthouse crest
> And stilled may they be . . . in time of unrest.

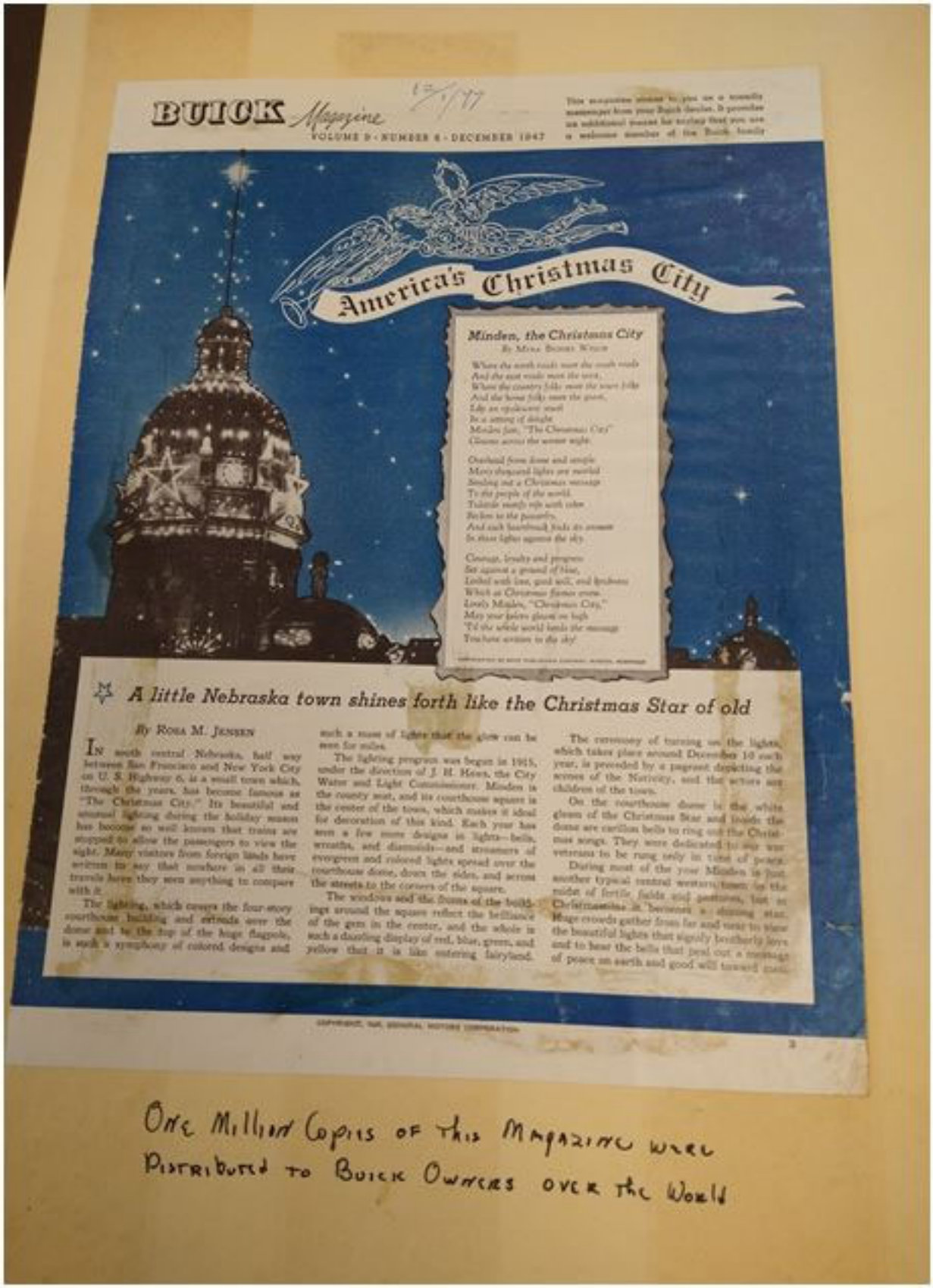
On the evening of the dedication, December 8th, 1946, it was decreed that: "These Carillonic bells will chime for the first time, and ever thereafter as the peace of eventide comes to the happy city."

In 1947, Don Helzer, Harold Pedley, Clayton Morey and Arthur Fellows, With Orval Emal and Floyd Morrow, a radio repairman, proceeded to record the script onto a reel to reel tape.

This recording was then broadcast over the new tower music system and because of the large number of people coming to the pageant it could then be simultaneously acted out on all four sides of the square. With the addition of the other sides, the cast now numbers 125, as well as all the volunteers who were helping with set, costumes, (under the direction of Mrs. W. R. Peck) lighting and everything else.

For the recognition given Minden, "The Christmas City" by publishers such as "Buick Magazine" (with a mailing list of a million names) who in 1947 printed a descriptive story of Minden and its colorful lights and pageant was submitted by Rosa McKay Jensen, a former resident of Minden. Rosa and

husband Carl "Shine" Jensen were residents of Palo Alto, California at the time.



BUICK Magazine

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America's Christmas City

Minden, the Christmas City

By Mrs. Bessie Wilson

Where the north roads meet the south roads
And the east roads meet the west,
Where the country folks meet the town folks
And the home folks meet the guest,
Life an opalescent jewel
In a setting of delight
Minden fair, "The Christmas City"
Gleams across the winter night.

Overhead from home and temple
Many-hued lights are twirled
Sending out a Christmas message
To the people of the world.
Twinkle merily rife with color
Perfect in the passerby,
And each heartbeat finds its answer
In those lights against the sky.

Courage, loyalty and progress
Set against a ground of blue,
Linked with love, good will, and kindness
Which as Christmas frames come,
Lovely Minden, "Christmas City,"
May your colors gleam on high
'Til the whole world lends the message
You have written in the sky!

A little Nebraska town shines forth like the Christmas Star of old

By Rosa M. Jensen

In south central Nebraska, half way between San Francisco and New York City on U. S. Highway 6, is a small town which, through the years, has become famous as "The Christmas City." Its beautiful and unusual lighting during the holiday season has become so well known that trains are stopped to allow the passengers to view the sight. Many visitors from foreign lands have written to say that nowhere in all their travels have they seen anything to compare with it.

The lighting, which covers the four-story courthouse building and extends over the dome and to the top of the huge flagpole, is such a symphony of colored designs and such a mass of lights that the glow can be seen for miles.

The lighting program was begun in 1915, under the direction of J. H. Haws, the City Water and Light Commissioner. Minden is the county seat, and its courthouse square is the center of the town, which makes it ideal for decoration of this kind. Each year has seen a few more designs in lights—bells, wreaths, and diamonds—and streamers of evergreen and colored lights spread over the courthouse dome, down the sides, and across the streets to the corners of the square.

The windows and the fronts of the buildings around the square reflect the brilliance of the gem in the center, and the whole is such a dazzling display of red, blue, green, and yellow that it is like entering fairyland.

The ceremony of turning on the lights, which takes place around December 10 each year, is preceded by a pageant depicting the scenes of the Nativity, and the actors are children of the town.

On the courthouse dome is the white gleam of the Christmas Star and inside the dome are carillon bells to ring out the Christmas songs. They were dedicated to our war veterans to be rung only in time of peace.

During most of the year Minden is just another typical central western town in the midst of fertile fields and pastures, but at Christmastime it becomes a shining star. Huge crowds gather from far and near to view the beautiful lights that signify brotherly love and to hear the bells that peal out a message of peace on earth and good will toward men.

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One Million Copies of this Magazine were Distributed to Buick Owners over the World

Those who were present, however, termed the 1948 performance the "Best Ever", but that year was not without repeated handicaps. Preparations and rehearsals were delayed considerably by the mid-November blizzard, but performers were determined to present the pageant on schedule. Working night and day, they had everything in readiness that Saturday evening, with sets in place on the courthouse square only to awaken Sunday morning to find the sets blown down, snow-soaked, and in some cases badly damaged by the wind. Snow was still coming down but director Morey and other officials, however, decided to make no changes in their performance plan. Carpenters and painters spent the day at the courthouse square, re-erecting and renovating the damaged scenery. When darkness fell, the Bethlehem scene again was ready for the pageantry.

On December 26, 1949, Clayton Morey was awarded the "Man of the Year" for his work on the Christmas pageant and his other community activities. Also a new addition to the play, was the use of live donkeys which came from Aurora, however they ended up not being very cooperative, so they were not used again.

Until 1950, the pageant was performed only once each year, after then, an additional week was added. Currently the pageant is performed on the Saturday evening after Thanksgiving and the first two Sundays in December.

In 1951, the first female voice was added to the recording, Sonja Grill, who later married Dr. Marvin Meyers. And, until

an infallible method of taking at least a fairly accurate count of the twice-yearly migration to our city is devised, casual estimates will have to be accepted by the curious. Observers set the crowd at 15,000. The following radio stations also helped to promote the Minden story, at least sixteen radio stations. Just to name a few, KFAB and WOW-Omaha; KMMJ-Grand Island; WJAG-Norfolk; WLS-Chicago, IL; WIBW-Topeka, KS; WWL-New Orleans, LA and WNAX-Yankton, SD.

Crowds continued to make the pilgrimage to Minden to see the pageant and the Christmas lights. Upwards of 20,000 were estimated, representing 17 states and even the island of Guam!

In 1953, they decided to add elevated platforms, provided by Al Johnson, who was the pageant construction chairman and spotlight them to help accentuate the cast and added straw bales with boards for people to sit on to help with the large number of visitors.

1954 was a year of many changes, and it brought forth a new scene! Roman soldiers were added with the presentation of Caesar's Tax Edict. Providing the voice for this new character was Perry Fitzsimmons. With the addition of 30 new volunteers, makes the cast nearly 200, as well as new costumes. The school kids really stepped up to help. At least 35 vocational agriculture students under the direction of Richard "Dick" Wilson assembled, painted and repaired the sets. The additional costumes were made by the homemaking

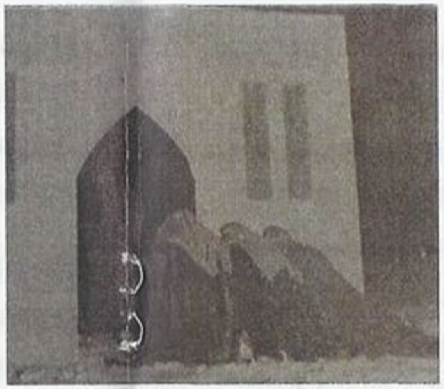
students under the supervision of Mrs. Earl Kahle. Soldiers' helmets were fashioned by a committee comprised of Alice Walberg, LaUna Hermansen, Patty Knudsen, RoseAnn Dorn and Dorothy Kuehn.

One more link in the chain of publicizing the Christmas pageant was a 30 minute presentation on sound film. The film, which will be distributed to television stations in Nebraska this year, was made possible by Harold and Paul Warp. It was filmed on one of the rehearsal evenings during the week. Assisting in producing the sound film were Director Morey, Assistant Director Harold Pedley, Floyd Morrow and Orval Emal, recording technicians, and Marshall Jensen, lighting technician. The film was distributed to television stations for use during the Christmas season.

Only two cast members from the original 1946 performance were still participating, Mrs. Betty Christiansen and Jack E. Etzelmiller.

Also a dramatic addition was a revision of the Lord's Prayer. Mrs. Delores Christensen, who played the Hammond organ at church, suggested that her son Marshall should sing while she played and it was recorded. Later on Marshall became an opera singer and his voice is very moving to say the least.

Very humorously, one day a story appeared in the newspaper. A tourist was cruising through the north outskirts of Minden, going to Hastings and stopped there at a drug store. At the drug store he related a weird story about a town "west of Hastings" claiming to be the **"Christian" City**.



Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

He said a sign on the edge of town broadcast the fact and he thought the claim to be hilariously farfetched. The druggist, by no means a stranger to Minden, promptly informed the tourist that the title was "**Christmas City**" and emphasized that the claim to that title was well founded. The tourist had no further reply. Just goes to show you that if this particular tourist hadn't been driving so fast he may not have misread the sign and might have saved him embarrassment when he jokingly expressed what he had seen. This story was related to the Courier by B H. Bracken.

Over the many years of traffic control, which was a considerable task, was handled by the town police with the help of many others including the effort of the Minden Post 94 Legionnaires helping to park cars under the direction of Harvey Spilker.

From time to time, new recordings were made of the narration, costumes were created and replaced by residents lending their talents to ensure the continuation of the production until 1966 when another scene was added with King Herod. Marshall Christensen, who sang the Lord's Prayer was the voice of Herod.

In 1967, a man by the name of Ted Griess came along and became an assistant to Mr. Morey and Mr. Pedley. Though truth be told, he called himself a 'gopher' as it became his job to do anything he was told to do. But he paid attention and learned and by 1970 he was handed the reins by Clayton,

and carried the torch until 1983. In 1970, Howard Andersen, owner of the jewelry store in town had commemorative watches made for Clayton, Harold and a third person (identity unknown) for their work on the pageant. The following picture is of Clayton's watch, which he passed on to his son, Ben, who has since passed it on to his son, Matt.

By 1969, technology had improved and the recording was then changed to cassette tape.

In 1973, in response to a request made by President Nixon during the energy crisis, the pageant was cancelled, but returned the following year.

In 1974, the pageant was presented on the Capital Mall in Washington, D. C., under the sponsorship of Senator and Mrs. Carl T. Curtis.

In early 1975, the Chamber of Commerce financed a three-year replacement of all the 150 odd costumes used in the performance. So under the new director Ted Griess, he contacted Grayson Tool and offered a sample breastplate and shin guards and asked if they could help and create enough for the cast. Ivan Lux took the task to heart and produced a finished product to fill the need. Winifred Felzein and her sewing group helped to sew new costumes from fabric Ted had purchased from a drapery shop in Hastings that was going out of business.

Harley Cole from Royal Plastics had made helmets for the soldiers, so now, two businesses in town had added their talents. When the new costume was ready, Ted said they placed it on display in Jack Etzelmiller's paint store window as a 'teaser' of "Look at the NEW costumes" and it really energized the community. They also thought to help make it more realistic, they add a drumming sequence to the sound track. The volunteer soldiers practiced at the school with the band director rehearsing to the sound tracks of Ben Hur and the Music Man.

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In 1976, there was yet another blizzard that damaged sets, but this time Swede Danielson came to the rescue to create new ones. In addition, the sound recording again went through a transformation to CD, and new voices were added. Those stepping up to help were Al Farm, Leroy Erpelding, Jerry Miller and probably others we may have forgotten.

Ben Morey moved back to Minden and in 1980 became an assistant to Ted Griess, by continuing a second generation of Morey's, Ben became the director in 1981.

In 1985, Clayton and Harold returned to the production, as Pedley performed the same part he took in the first pageant-Joseph-and Morey played an innkeeper. This is the first time Clayton was a part of the pageant as an actor. The wind chill during that performance registered at -40 degrees Fahrenheit. Brrrrrrr!

Jack Etzelmiller also performed for the last time in 1986 and then retired after 40 years of helping with the pageant.

On December 12, 1993, the pageant was again cancelled after an explosion at the Co-op Grain Elevator which shut down the highway entrances to town.

Thanks to Clayton J. Morey, Ted Griess, and Ben Morey, who have assumed the many responsibilities as directors of the pageant for over 60 years. In 1996, the 50th Anniversary of the "Light of the World" pageant, Clayton Morey was the Grand Marshall in the annual Christmas Parade. Director Ben Morey spoke thanking everyone for coming and dedicating

that nights' performance to Harold Pedley who had passed away just that spring.

Again in 2006, an ice storm came through and destroyed sets, strings of lights and caused havoc. But luckily another business in town, Minden Machine, came through and helped build new metal sets.

After many years of directing, Ben passed on the duties of director to his son Matt in 2010, providing us with the third generation of Morey's involved with the pageant. A true family legacy!

Over the years there have been other families that have participated as first, second and third generations of actors. They have worked tirelessly volunteering their time and talents. Some volunteering for 5 years, or 10 years, probably even some as many as 50 years. This has been a wonderful tradition we hope to continue for many more years to come.

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