AMERICA's Christmas Gift

Between 1947 and 1963, the SS AMERICA routinely arrived in Newport News for annual maintenance, usually between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Some years she spent part of this time in a dry dock, receiving any needed underwater repairs, plus bottom painting.

But every year, before she sailed away, she was tied up at one of Newport News Shipbuilding's outfitting piers to facilitate interior work. In this location, easily visible from a river front bluff just south of the yard, her colorful, floodlit red, white and blue funnels were an instant, welcome and appropriate addition to the shipbuilding town's holiday displays.

At such times, my parents would drive down Newport News' modest main drag - Washington Avenue – to view the Christmas lights, at least once each season. Thousands (well, maybe just hundreds) of those old-fashioned, huge red and green light bulbs once used for outdoor lighting were strung from light pole to light pole along both sides of the street. The strings of lights crossed at each intersection with a white-lighted star positioned in the center.

Newport News' Christmas Lights, were captured in the late 1940s for all time by Bea Kopp, diminutive and legendary Daily Press photographer in a b/w time-lapse photo of the kind popular in that simpler era.

The climax of that short, traditional journey came when my Pop drove us over one block and back north on West Avenue; turning onto 28th street to stop briefly where that street dead-ends at the river's edge.

It was there that we could best see the AMERICA in all of her floodlit glory. I know that we were not the only family to make that little pilgrimage, for that street was often filled with cars, and kids of all ages getting out to gather on the riverbank and to enjoy AMERICA's Christmas Gift.

In later years, the SS UNITED STATES would join her, or take her place. The Big U's larger funnels were even more imposing – albeit a far too temporary – addition to the skyline of the place where I was born, grew up and served an apprenticeship that lead to a satisfying career as a shipbuilder.

In the above image, taken during the holiday season of 1951, the AMERICA is in the foreground. Behind her is the UNITED STATES, nearing completion at that time. John Lochhead, head of the Mariners' Museum Research Library for many years, took this photo from that very same dead end street's vantage point.

Unfortunately, this vintage image is only available in b/w, but in my mind's eye, the vivid colors of her funnels are as bright, clear and sparkling as are the Christmas Lights of my youth in Newport News…long, long ago.

Bill Lee
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