

Giving credit to McCormick

As much as the news business is changing, at least one constant remains: Holiday-theme sites run on or before the holiday. This one is a double exception: It's running three or four months early — and also about a week late.

Last March, William W. "Bill" McCormick, former president of Joske's of Texas, called the San Antonio Express-News and reached Paul Cartwright, an online advertising specialist.

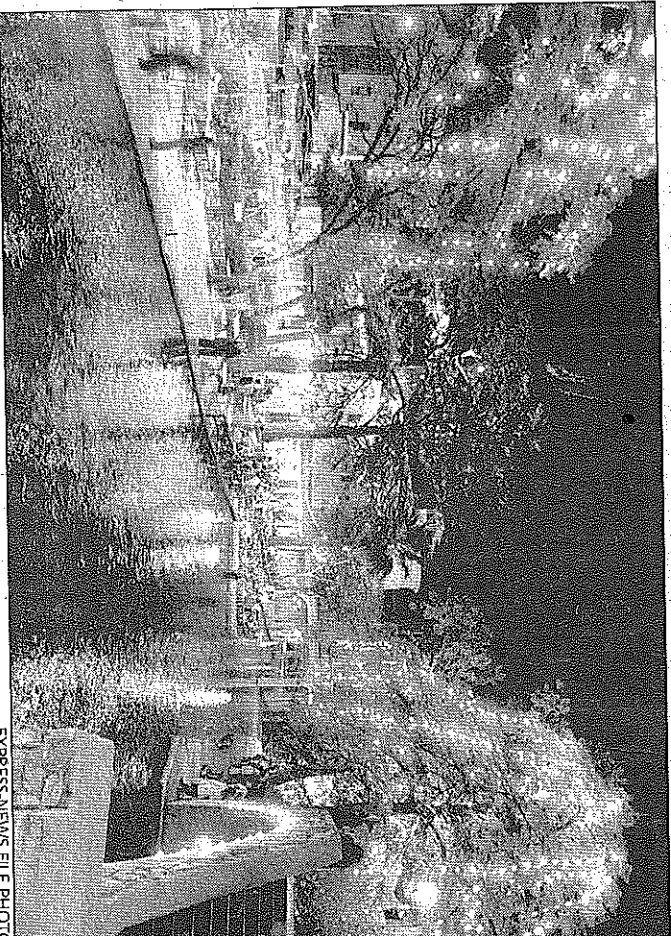
McCormick was calling to see if the newspaper might be able to find any documentation of the origin of the idea of lighting the River Walk for the holiday season.

If you're younger than age 40 or haven't lived in San Antonio that long, it would be easy to think that there have been lights in the trees along the downtown stretch of the river in the dark days of winter since man's discovery of fire, or least since the city has had a public utility for electricity.

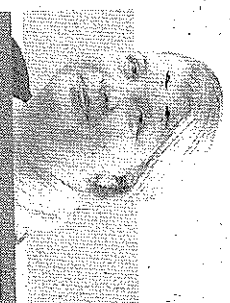
Not so: There was a flirtation with tree lighting during the early years of Fiesta San Antonio, but electric lights have brightened the nights from Thanksgiving through New Year's only since 1975. Unlike some other comparatively recent innovations, there was a single person identified with the idea, and that was Bill McCormick.

San Antonians of a certain age will remember Joske's, a full-service department store whose Alabama Plaza flagship had it all — the Magnolia Room tearoom, the fourth-floor Fantasyland animated Christmas display, a 40-foot Santa on the roof in season and a plethora of departments, from horse tack to rare stamps and coins. It was "the biggest store in the biggest state" until unwieldy Alaska joined the Union, after which Joske's became "the greatest store in the greatest state."

Founded in 1867, Joske's was a San Antonio institution, a major employer and big-time corporate player, whose advertisements fattened both of the city's daily newspapers. As trade moved out to the suburban malls — including a Joske's branch at North Star Mall — downtown wasn't the retail hub it had been through the



Photo, taken Dec. 10, 1975, was of the first year for the lights on the San Antonio River Walk.



PAULA ALLEN

1950s, McCormick thought of lighting the trees to attract customers back to the center city during the holiday shopping season. A member of the board of Downtown Inc., a merchants' association, he enlisted the support of fellow members Jerry Ehler, regional vice president of Sears, and Roane Harwood, president of First Federal Savings and Loan Association. Joske's and Sears helped to provide the lights, and city workers strung them in the trees along the River Walk.

Though neither local history nor news research is part of Cartwright's job, he listened to McCormick. "His call to my extension was such a random thing," said Cartwright, who took down the information and passed it to this columnist, who called McCormick for more background. Former Joske's associates had thrown a party for the former executive, he said, mentioning an unsuccessful effort to get the city to issue a proclamation crediting him with the inspiration behind the lighting tradition. They told the former boss about it, and he offered to call the paper to see if we could help. A search revealed that

the idea of replacing street-level with River Walk lighting first was publicized in the San Antonio Light, Oct. 8, 1975. In coverage of a meeting of the River Advisory Commission, the Light reported that a staff member of Downtown Inc. announced that the organization "had approved a \$25,000 project that would place about 35,000 lights in trees along the River Bend." The white decorative lights were to be placed before Thanksgiving, Nov. 27, 1975.

Dubbed "Tinkie, twinkie, little river" in a headline, the new decorations were a hit. In a post-holiday report on a river commission meeting, Downtown Inc. executive Ed Harlee told the commissioners that the lighting, which could be seen at street level, "helped to brighten the downtown area in general (and) brought people downtown (who) hadn't been along the river in years."

McCormick's name wasn't mentioned in the first-year coverage, but he recalled that it had been brought up in one of the papers, much later, by fellow business leader Roane Harwood, Express-News research director Mike Knoop found the reference in the Light, Nov. 26, 1989. Headed "They lit the way," it was an item about a Paseo del Rio Association celebration of that year's river lighting in Susan Yeakes' column. It was the seventh year of sponsorship for the as-

sociation, wrote Yeakes.

"However, some longtime San Antonians in the crowd remembered back to 15 years or so ago, when the river-lighting was dreamed up by a group of downtown civic leaders," Harwood remembered the participation of colleagues McCormick and Ehler, noting that the tradition had outlived the downtown stores they represented.

The relevant stories were e-mailed to McCormick late last March, and he returned gracious thanks. It seemed like a good subject for a Thanksgiving weekend column, or maybe one in December when there might just happen to be color on this page, thanks to holiday advertising.

That seemed like good timing, but it wasn't. "I thought you might like to know that Dad passed away last night (Aug. 8) after a yearlong battle with cancer," wrote his son Steve. The elder McCormick, at age 82, had sounded sharp and clear-headed when he recalled the first river-lighting. He didn't mention his illness.

The River Walk lighting ceremony is scheduled for Nov. 27, 34 years to the day since the original occasion. Maybe this year there could be some recognition of the man whose idea first flipped the switches.

E-mail questions to Paula Allen at historycolumnn@yahoo.com. Follow her on Twitter at twitter.com/sr-historycolumnn.

ART NOTES

Auditions

SYMPHONY MASTERSINGERS

The San Antonio Symphony Mastersingers are holding auditions for all voice parts for the 2009-2010 season, 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday at the UTSA choir rehearsal hall at the Loop 1604 Campus. (210) 244-1790 to schedule an appointment. www.usa-mastersingers.org

"CINDERELLA"

Children's roles as extras and eight ballroom couples are needed for the San Antonio Metropolitan Ballet's production. Auditions are Aug. 23 at Connally's Dance Workshop Inc., 2800 N.E. Loop 410. Ages 6-9 at 1:30 p.m.; ages 10-14 at 2:30 p.m.; and ages 15-adult at 3:30 p.m. Dancers must have two years of training. (210) 656-1334.

ROSE THEATRE CO.

Kid, teen and adult actors, musicians, dancers and writers are needed for the company's upcoming season. Auditions are noon-5 p.m. Aug. 23 at the theater, 11838 Wurzbach Road. (210) 360-0004.

"FASHIONABLY LATE"

The Spotlight Theatre & Arts Group is seeking six male and eight female performers for a comedy to open its 31st season. Auditions are at 4 p.m. Aug. 23 at Krause House Theater, 1300 Bulverde Road in Bulverde. (830) 438-2339.

CLASSIC THEATRE OF SAN ANTONIO

The company is auditioning for roles in two upcoming productions: "She Stoops to Conquer" and "All My Sons." Men and women ages 20-40 are needed. Auditions are at 7 p.m. Aug. 23-24 at Jump-Start Theatre, 1400 S. Alamo St. in the Blue Star Arts Complex. (210) 589-8450 for an appointment.

Notice

TEXAS MUSIC COALITION PANEL

This month's panel on "Getting Local Gigs" is 7 p.m. Tuesday at The Cove, 606 W. Cypress St. Panelists include Bill Angelini, Tina Sturchio and Dee Guillemette. Open mike to follow. (210) 522-1963.

Classes

THEATER USHERS

The Majestic and Empire theaters are recruiting

volunteers@majesticempire.com.
SWING LESSONS

San Antonio Swing

Dance Society hosts weekly lessons from 8 to 9 p.m. Wednesdays, followed by a dance social. Semeneya Ballroom, 2899 N.E. Loop 410. (210) 946-2899 or www.sasds.org. \$5 for lessons, \$3 for social.

BALLET INTENSIVE

The Ballet Conservatory of South Texas is holding workshops with artist and instructor Sara Knight, 10 a.m.-3:30 p.m. today through Thursday at the studio, 5200 Broadway. \$250. Register at www.balletsouthtexas.org or (210) 820-3400.

GRANT WRITING WORKSHOP

The San Antonio Theatre Coalition hosts a workshop for producers called "Grant Writing Done Right," 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday at Krause House Theater, 1300 Bulverde Road in Bulverde. \$15 for coalition members; \$25 for nonmembers. (210) 779-6782 or e-mail playbill@saththeatre.com.

STUDIO ART

Southwest School of Art & Craft is registering for 98 classes to be offered throughout the fall. A new class, Art Materials, is for beginners interested in drawing, painting and sculpture. (210) 224-1848 or www.swschool.org for a catalog.

CLOGGING

Texas Thunder Cloggers offer clogging for beginners at 6:30 p.m. Wednesdays at San Antonio Street Dance, 1026 Donaldson Ave. (210) 653-3492. \$20 per month. Visit www.texasthundercloggers.org.

BUTTON ACCORDION

The Conjuncto Heritage Taller offers classes for all ages Monday and Wednesday evenings at 725 S. Preisa St. (210) 212-8560 or e-mail h.taller@sbcglobal.net for prices.

BALLROOM DANCE

The Blue Bubble Ballroom, 9315 Broadway, has ongoing classes. Swing at 7 p.m. Sundays; ballroom basics at 6 p.m. and cha-cha and West Coast swing at 7 p.m. Mondays; salsa at 6 p.m. and tango at 7 p.m. Tuesdays; and ballroom basics for home-schooled students, 1-3 p.m. Wednesdays. (210) 829-5155. Free on Sundays; \$10-\$20 other days.

PURO TANGO

Lessons for dancers of all skill levels are offered at 6 p.m. Sundays and Wednesdays at Let's Dance Dance Studio. 5141