Early Electrification of Lighting on Campus
The first stages of electrified lighting on campus began in 1884, four short years from when Thomas Edison invented the light bulb. Previously, the campus was lit by gas supplied by numerous generators. Old Main, the pre-cursor to Beardshear Hall, was the first building to receive electric lights under a contract with Western Edison Light Company. Two years later, the number of lights on campus had almost doubled. By 1898 the first exterior light on the campus grounds was installed.¹

In November 1902, the ISC Student newspaper reported. “Each night shows more lights distributed of the campus, their friendly rays lending light to the wandering pedestrian.”


Holiday Electrified Lights
In 1882, just two years after the invention of the light bulb, the first Christmas tree was lit by the use of electricity. Edward Johnson, an inventor and peer of Thomas Edison, lit a Christmas tree in New York City with eighty small electric light bulbs. The tree was in the parlor of Johnson’s New York City home, located in the first section of the city to be wired for electricity. The display created quite a stir, and was recorded by a visiting reporter named Croffut in the Detroit Post and Tribune:

“Last evening I walked over beyond Fifth Avenue and called at the residence of Edward H. Johnson, vice-president of Edison’s electric company. There, at the rear of the beautiful parlors, was a large Christmas tree presenting a most picturesque and uncanny aspect. It was brilliantly lighted with many colored globes about as large as an English walnut and was turning some six times a minute on a little pine box. There were eighty lights in all encased in these dainty glass eggs, and about equally divided between white, red and blue. As the tree turned, the colors alternated, all the lamps going out and being relit at every revolution. The result was a continuous twinkling of dancing colors, red, white, blue, white, red, blue—all evening.

I need not tell you that the scintillating evergreen was a pretty sight—one can hardly imagine anything prettier. The ceiling was crossed obliquely with two wires on which hung 28 more of the tiny lights; and all the lights and the fantastic tree itself with its starry fruit were kept going by the slight electric current brought from the main office on a filmy wire. The tree was kept revolving by a little hidden crank below the floor which was turned by electricity. It was a superb exhibition.”
Prior to this time, candles were used on trees and in candle sconces throughout the home. These open flames often sparked fires in the dried trees presenting opportunity for holiday hazards. A brightly painted bucket of sand (or water) was kept by the tree for the inevitable fire emergency, and many trees also had a "Christmas rug" under the tree, (the forerunner of today's tree skirt), to keep wax drippings off of the floor.

Johnson also created the first string of electric Christmas lights that were then mass produced around 1890. To quote Johnson from a letter sent to several New York newspapers, “Electric trees will prove to be far less dangerous than the wax candle parlor trees.” In reality, those first bulbs became very hot and were nearly as dangerous as the flaming candles they were replacing. By 1900, department stores started using the new Christmas lights for their Christmas displays and in holiday windows. In December 1923, President Calvin Coolidge started the National Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony on the White House lawn, firmly entrenching the tradition of a lighted tree for the holidays. The trend of electrically lit trees at home was reserved for the wealthy until more modest and cost effective strands from General Electric hit the market in the 1920s and 30s.

Source: http://www.oldchristmastreelights.com/history.htm

**Holiday Lights on Campus**

“The first holiday tree lightings were in 1914 and 1915. After a 30-year hiatus, the tree lighting became an annual tradition, starting in 1946. In the early 1950s, pranksters replaced several of the colored lights with flashbulbs to create a flash of light when the switch was thrown...” stated a December 15, 1995 article in The Iowa Stater providing background to tree lighting traditions on campus.

Today, the exterior trees on campus, including the one in front of the Farm House Museum, are lit with efficiency in mind using LED strands of multi-colored lights. Now a part of the Winterfest tradition, the annual tree lighting ceremony still signals the beginning of the holiday season on campus.