Thousands of people flock to the Cunninghams' Albany home before Christmas to see the lights. From left are Tonya, Pat, Dusty and Dustin Cunningham.

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‘They come from all over’ to see these lights

By CHRIS FRINK
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Albany family’s display for holiday grows and grows

Albany — Drivers on La. 43 north of Albany can see the glow to the east well before they see the sign: “Welcome to Our Christmas Wonderland.”

For five years, the Cunningham family’s huge holiday light display has drawn gawkers to their house in this semi-rural area of eastern Livingston Parish.

“We just started it for the kids,” Pat Cunningham said. “People got to hearing about it... and we started adding to it and it got bigger and bigger.”

From Thanksgiving to Christmas Eve, people come by the carload to see the Santas, alligators, reindeer and dolls that crowd the Cunninghams’ front yard. They watch the Ferris wheel rotate, the train chug around and Mr. and Mrs. Claus rock back and forth.

A compact disc player set on “repeat” pumps Christmas music from the Beach Boys to outdoor speakers.

The displays — most of which are homemade — are lit up by dozens of spotlights and strands and strands of lights.

From a distance, the place looks like a small airport lit up and ready for landing jets.

Pat Cunningham estimates more than a hundred cars a night turn off La. 43, trundle down a gravel lane and roll slowly around the circular drive. It’s not uncommon to see kids in pajamas hanging out car windows staring at the Cunninghams’ Wonderland.

“They come from all over,” she said. “Hammond, Baton Rouge, Alabama, New Orleans, Alexandria...”

There is a steady stream of cars from dark until they shut off the lights at 9 p.m. “We have to catch a break in traffic to close the gate,” she said.

Pat and her husband Dusty — with help from 10-year-old Dustin, 15-year-old Tonya and any neighborhood kids they can find — begin putting up the show in early November. First they have to take down their popular Halloween display.

Stringing the lights, laying the train tracks, erecting the Ferris wheel, untangling miles of extension cords and putting up everything else takes about four weeks, Pat said.

It’s a big chore for this dairy farming family — they spend a few hours a day on it.

“It’s fun putting it up,” she said. “But after Christmas, when we have to take it down, all the kids scatter.”

This year they toyed with the idea of not putting it up, Pat said. “Plenty of people called to say we had to.”

She is already working on additions to next year’s extravaganza. “Each year we naturally have to add a bit to it.”

She wouldn’t say what she’s working on for 1992. “Then it’s not a surprise,” she said. “Some people can always tell what’s

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A few displays — like the six moving dolls lining one side of the driveway — were ordered from a catalog, but Pat said they prefer making their own.

The two alligators pulling Santa and his gift-filled pirogue were adapted from a child’s costume pattern. Pat sewed the gators, stuffed them and coated the fabric with polyurethane for weatherproofing.

The nativity scene has people made of old, stuffed clothes with faces like Cabbage Patch Dolls. A plywood cutout camel is covered with brown carpeting to make it look more real.

In another scene — labeled “Dec. 26” — the Clauses rest in rocking chairs while Santa gets a soothing footbath. The chairs are rocked by windshield wiper motors; the steam from Santa’s feet comes from a hidden humidifier.

Dusty Cunningham built a small Ferris wheel out of PVC pipe, put dolls in the seats and strung the whole contraption with lights. It has an ingenious gizmo that supplies power to the lights without getting the cord tangled as the wheel rotates.

Dusty’s ingenuity also shows up in the “North Pole Express.” The train — an old lawn mower with a plywood body and a school bus headlight — rumbles around a 30-foot oval track made of metal pipe.

“The train’s an aggravation,” Pat said. “Not a night goes by that Dusty’s not out working on it . . . the belt will break or a sprocket needs fixing.”

The display may be plenty of work and aggravation, but Pat said the effort is worth the return. “They’ll call on the phone or stop when we’re outside and say ‘Thank you,’” she said.

They are kind of famous in town, too. “When we’re in a store and you say ‘Cunningham’ they pretty much know we’re they ones with the lights,” she said.

Because the display is never unattended at night, Pat said they have never had any problems with theft or vandalism.

“Every once in a while you have a carload of crazy people come by,” she said.

But it hasn’t scared them enough to end a growing tradition. Neither has a large December electric bill. “It jacks it up some,” she said. “But not really a whole lot.”