

**ONCE UPON A TIME IN NORTH PARK  
EVERYONE KNEW (OF) WILLIAM G. GEROW  
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When William Gordon Gerow spoke, people listened. William Gordon Gerow was one of the shining lights of the North Park community. Why then is there no monument to him at the former site of his business at 2328 El Cajon Boulevard or a school named after him? Although he spoke to thousands who listened intently on a regular basis and although he illuminated the lives of many, he always just seemed to be the older man in the background.

By 1950, the Wm. G. Gerow Sound Equipment Company was a fixture at 2328 El Cajon Boulevard. It would undergo a name change to Gerow Searchlight and Sound and would also become associated with A-1 Searchlight and would continue to be a name of recognition until the late 1980s.

Gerow Sound had a sound-car. It was an old "Bonnie and Clyde" style car with speakers on each corner of the roof that could be heard for blocks. On a Saturday afternoon it was common to hear "Gerow" driving down El Cajon Boulevard or University Avenue announcing the opening of a new business or a spectacular sale that was about to take place. If you lived on Orange or Polk or Lincoln you could still hear him coming and couldn't help but pause to listen to the message. He was often followed by an entourage of kids on bikes that enjoyed the opportunity to ride behind the man behind the voice.

If Gerow's sound-car attracted attention, his searchlights did even better. As dusk fell and the columns of light appeared on the horizon, it was time for kids to beg to go see the searchlights and parents to pile the family into the car to go seek out possible bargains or even free samples at an opening. People flocked to Gerow's searchlights like moths to a light bulb. Whether it was a sale at Gustafson's Furniture or Harrington's Appliance or the unveiling of the new model year at Guarantee Chevrolet's Magic Corner on El Cajon Boulevard, people came. The adults came looking for something of value and the kids came to look at the searchlights. Gerow and his helpers always provided the center of attention for the younger set.

Gerow's searchlights were not wimpy little lights that shined up into the sky. They were 60-inch diameter carbon arc lamps that could seemingly shine a concise beam of light as far as the eye could see. Actually, the beam length was approximately 5.6 miles with beam recognition up to 28 miles. He had units mounted on trucks with a generator. Other units were on four-wheel trailers that were towed to the exciting event and then connected to generators. The units rotated around in circles and could be maneuvered up and down. The operators would even play tag in the sky if enough kids begged. There was something about the smell of ozone from the lamps, the smoke from the burning electrodes, the noise of the generators, and those incredible beams of light that captivated the younger audiences.

The large searchlights had been used extensively in World War II to spot enemy planes over England, illuminate tanks in North Africa, reveal enemy placements throughout Europe, and stand at the ready along the coasts of the United States should the enemy attack. (In San Diego, 60-inch lights had been placed in several locations including

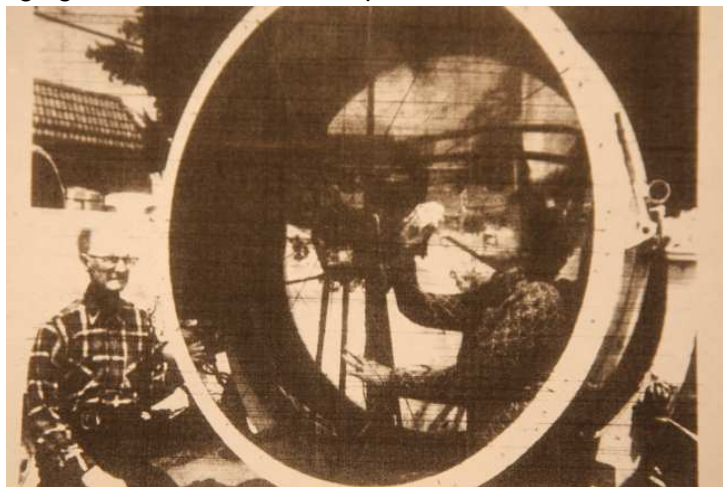
Kettner Boulevard above the Consolidated Aircraft Plant on Pacific Highway.) Gerow's lights and trucks and sound-car were all painted white with his name on them. With their military backgrounds obliterated, they became another marvel for the younger members of the crowds.

Carbon arc lamps were not new during the war. In fact, San Diego's first street lights in the downtown area were carbon arc lamps that required much attention to keep them functioning. The carbon arc searchlights employed carbon electrodes. The electrodes were moved close enough together to initiate an electrical arc and then moved one inch apart as the ionized air between them became conductive, thereby sustaining the arc. The resulting electrical arc looked like a giant arc welder. Since the constant arc eroded the electrodes, several means were employed to continually move the electrodes towards the arc so that the ends remained the same distance apart. The arc produced in a 60-inch searchlight was approximately equivalent to a 15,000-watt light bulb. Some of the energy was dissipated in the form of heat with a little smoke that could be seen rising from the light, but the majority of the energy was released in the form of light that was concentrated into a concise five-foot diameter beam by mirrors inside of the light body. Gerow and his crew had to constantly monitor the position of the electrodes and adjust them as necessary. Every two hours, the electrodes eroded to the point where they had to be replaced and a gloved hand reached in to insert the new carbon rod. A treasure of the event was the end of an old electrode that was given to a lucky kid after it cooled. (I wonder if Gerow was just being smart and getting rid of his trash.) The lights were usually shut down before 10:00 PM because that is when the curfew whistle blew at SDG&E's power plant downtown and it was time to go home.

In a September 24, 1980, story in the *San Diego Union*, the 89-year-old Gerow stated that he had 22 of the 60-inch searchlights on his lot. He kept seven or eight ready at all times and always had another three or four in reserve. The rest were held for parts and to prevent competitors from getting their hands on the fast disappearing lights.

Could Gerow operate in San Diego today? Probably not. By 1980, the cost of carbon rods had risen from \$22.50 to \$185.00 per set. Also by 1980, the city of El Cajon had an ordinance forbidding the use of the big lights. He would need a permit for his sound-car and it would be too loud. He would need a permit for the emissions from his generators and they wouldn't meet the requirements. He would need permits for the emissions from his lights and there is no way that those could be used. He would need a permit because of light pollution and would have to make sure that he did not interfere with aircraft. So we would not have his business today. Could the merchants of North Park and all of San Diego have lived without him?

Probably not.



W. Gordon Gerow and his wife, Lucille, service a 60-inch searchlight on his 86<sup>th</sup> birthday (*San Diego Union*, May 14, 1977)