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Lutron Electronics Donates Company History to National Museum of American History

In a special donation ceremony today, Joel Spira, inventor and developer of the solid-state electronic “dimming device” and chairman and founder of Pennsylvania-based Lutron Electronics, will donate materials related to the company’s 50-year history to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History.

The donation includes an early version of the original solid-state (devices using transistors) Capri dimmer manufactured by Lutron in September 1964. Also part of the donation is a retail display featuring the fully functional dimmer and other Lutron dimmers and lighting-control systems that show lighting-control developments at the company over the past 50 years.

The museum requested objects and papers that would provide insight into Spira’s career as an inventor. The museum will receive his original inventor’s notebook with more than 100 pages of handwritten documentation and historic photographs, as well as product advertisements.

The Lutron materials will join other artifacts in the museum’s Electricity Collection, including experimental lightbulbs from Thomas Edison, dimming light sockets from the 1910s, theatrical lighting controls from the 1920s and many types of light switches.

“As the nation’s history museum we tell the story of this country in all its depth and breadth,” said Brent D. Glass, director of the museum. “Collections such as this one from Lutron help us to understand the continuation of the electrical evolution, the process of invention and the history of business and manufacture.”

Spira developed a way to reduce the light output of an incandescent bulb in his New York apartment in the late 1950s, which extended the life of the lightbulb and saved electrical energy. The commercialization of the solid-state dimmer has made such control of interior lights affordable for most homes.

”I am pleased to donate these artifacts to the museum,” said Spira. “For the past 50 years, the solid-state dimmer has made homes more beautiful and offices more efficient—all while saving energy and increasing lamp life. It is an honor for me to be in the company of Edison and others in this collection. I am truly humbled.”

“American homes changed significantly during the 20th century as people adopted electricity for any number of tasks, including illumination,” said Hal Wallace, associate curator of the museum’s Electricity Collection. “Objects such as those being donated by Lutron fit in nicely with the switches and control devices we preserve that date back to Edison’s day. Studying the tools of everyday life, such as light switches, helps us to understand our ever-changing technological society.”

The National Museum of American History collects, preserves and displays American heritage in the areas of social, political, cultural, scientific and military history. To mark the 50th anniversary of the Greensboro lunch counter sit-in, the museum explores stories of freedom and justice, both in Washington and online. To learn more about the museum, check <http://americanhistory.si.edu>. For Smithsonian information, the public may call (202) 633-1000, (202) 633-5285 (TTY).

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