What was life at night like before people had electric light? Read the article and answer the questions that follow.

Summer, Winter, Spring, Fall . . . and Night?

by Meg Moss

Once upon a time, people thought of nighttime as a different season.

1   What's the first thing you do in a dark room? Turn on the light, of course. Going outside after dinner? Grab a flashlight. You probably don't even think about the falling darkness as day slips quietly into night. Lights twinkle on and life continues.

2   Imagine what life was like before you could flip a switch. For most of history, with no electricity to light up cities, streets, or living rooms, the nighttime was truly dark. Until Thomas Edison invented the electric lightbulb—100 times brighter than a candle—people depended on fire. They burned wood, oil, or gas in torches, fireplaces, and primitive lamps. Stinky but cheap candles made of animal fat dimly lit many homes.

3   In Europe before electric lights, life in the day and night was so different that people considered the darkness a separate season. To overcome the difficulties of the unlit night and track and tame the darkness, they divided the hours between sunset and dawn into segments.

Sunset

4   Because the earth turns, the sun is forever setting somewhere in the world. In fact, half the globe is always in darkness. That means night is huge—it covers 98.5 million square miles of the earth's surface all the time. But who cares? Night only matters when it's falling on you. Long ago, sunset signaled the approaching end of the day's useful

Our word **curfew**—a time set to be home or off the street—comes from the French for "cover fire."

hours; people scurried home from the fields and the shops to prepare for the coming darkness.

Shutting-In

5 In 15th-century England, people began "shutting-in" as the night fell. In medieval villages and towns, bells, horns, and drums warned folks to hurry home. Walled cities closed their gates and pulled up their drawbridges. Some pulled big chains or logs across the streets to discourage residents from venturing out—and criminals from making fast getaways.

6 Of all night's dangers, townsfolk feared fire the most. Candles and fireplaces blazed everywhere and required constant tending. Wood and thatched houses could burn fast, and a shortage of water made firefighting difficult. The most important thing people had to do at shutting-in was to cover their hearth fires with ashes to make them burn slowly and safely.

Candlelighting

7 Once indoors, families carefully got ready for darkness. Folded clothes made it easier to dress in the dark if necessary. Some people pushed furniture against the walls so as not to trip in the pitch black. People believed the night air to be poisonous, or at least unhealthy, so they tightly closed and locked all windows and doors. In wealthy households, thick curtains around the bed helped to block out the bad air. And everyone wore a nightcap.

8 In winter, people warmed their beds by slipping hot rocks or a metal pan filled with hot coals beneath the covers. Whether bedding down on a straw mattress or an elegant four-post bed, sleepers checked for fleas and lice before turning in. In some homes, entire families slept in the same bed and even shared it with visitors and strangers. Just before bedtime, people prayed for safe delivery through the dark hours.

Bedtime

9 While some people tucked in, others ducked out. Without streetlights, however, travel at night could be dangerous. People memorized the local landscape, remembering the locations of ditches, ponds, trees, and other obstacles to avoid in the night's complete darkness. Many people believed that supernatural beings came out at night, so it was smart to know where the ghosts, elves, and fairies lurked.

10 To find their way, some travelers marked their route during the daytime with white, chalky soil. Those on foot wore light-colored clothing so that coach drivers could see them, and nighttime riders preferred white horses. A gentleman returning home after dark depended on a servant with a lantern. Less well-off or unprepared travelers took their chances, sometimes stumbling to their deaths in a deep ditch or remote lake.

Midnight

11 When you sleep, you probably dream your way right through the midnight hour. In fact, most of us in the modern world think that an uninterrupted night's sleep is ideal. But it wasn't always so. Before electric lights, people slept in two phases each night. In between, they awoke and spent an hour or two reading by candlelight, thinking about their dreams, or conversing with a bedfellow. Some folks even arose to tend to animals or chat with neighbors. People valued this dark and peaceful time as an escape from the hard lives they led.

12 Today, people who live in traditional farming societies without electric lights still sleep this way. Curious to find out more about these long, two-part nights, scientists experimented by confining a small group of volunteers every night for a month without electric lights. After a few days, the volunteers began to awaken each midnight for an hour or two and then return to sleep. The researchers identified chemicals in the volunteers' brains that kept them in a relaxed and peaceful state, even when awake. Darkness, it seems, triggers these chemicals to control and regulate our sleep. Today, instead of responding to natural changes in light and dark, these chemicals don't go to work until we turn out the lights. Does it matter? Is a longer night's sleep divided into two segments healthier than our short, modern nights? No one yet knows.

Dead of Night

13 Before streetlights, in the wee hours between midnight and 3 a.m., much mischief could be done. Burglars and other bad guys roamed the streets and country roads, holding up travelers and breaking into homes under cover of darkness. In the cities, noisy gangs might disturb the dark predawn hours. Many towns and cities employed night watchmen to patrol the darkened streets or keep watch from towers or city walls. They rang the fire alarm and enforced the curfew. On quiet nights, they strolled the streets, calling out the time and perhaps the weather or a reassuring "All's well." As years went by, police replaced the old-fashioned night watchmen.

Cockcrow

14 For merchants, fishers, and farmers, the working day was not far off by cockcrow at 3 a.m. But some folks were already hard at work by then. Bakers, shepherds, garbage collectors, and street cleaners worked in the darkness. The dark was perfect for digging graves and cleaning out sewers, jobs that were illegal to do by day.

Dawn

15 The "night season" drew to a close at sunrise. People could see again, dress, work, and move about easily without fear. The poisonous night air lifted, and the peril of ghosts, burglars, and large ditches faded away. Until sunset.
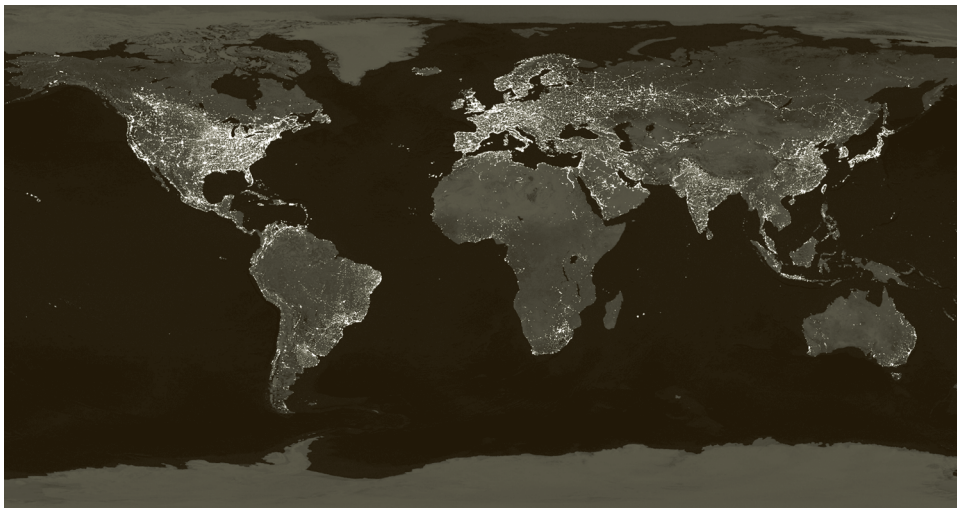
This satellite image (actually a combination of images) shows the earth at night in the 21st century. Even now, many places don't have electric lights. . . .

24/7

16 In the 1700s, people's attitudes toward the darkness in countries like England and France changed. They began to believe more in science and less in superstition, so the nighttime became less scary. They invented ways to light the streets, so the nighttime became less dark. Folks stayed up later and went outdoors for fun, shopping, and work. Authors, poets, and artists began to discover the beauty of the night. Sleeping in two phases began to fade. After Edison perfected the lightbulb in 1879, the custom disappeared.

17 Today, people live and work 24/7. Life in the darkness of night differs little from life in the lightness of day. We sleep, of course, but around us the world is alive with activity and bright with light. Have we gone too far? Some people think so. The International Dark-Sky Association believes that light pollution— too much artificial light at night—wastes energy, harms the health of humans and nighttime animals, and destroys the beauty of the night. Its mission is "to preserve and protect the nighttime environment and our heritage of dark skies." In response, cities, companies, and universities are installing dark-friendly lights to reduce the glare and glow that destroy our sense of the darkness and our view of the night.