

Edison's Early Boyhood

by William H. Meadowcroft

It was when he was about seven years old that Edison's parents moved to Port Huron, Michigan, and it was there, a few years later, that he began his active life by becoming a newsboy.

With his mother he found study easy and pleasant. The quality of the education she gave him may be judged from the fact that before he was twelve years old he had studied the usual rudiments and had read, with his mother's help, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Hume's *History of England*, Sear's *History of the World*, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and the *Dictionary of Sciences*.

They even tried to struggle through Newton's *Principia*, but the mathematics were too much for both teacher and student. To this day Edison has little personal use for arithmetic beyond that which is called "mental." He said to a friend, "I can always hire some mathematicians, but they can't hire me."

His father always encouraged his literary tastes, and paid him a small sum for each book which he mastered. Although there is no fiction in the list, Edison has all his life enjoyed it, particularly the works of such writers as Victor Hugo. Indeed, later on, when he became a telegraph operator, he was nicknamed by his associates "Victor Hugo Edison"—possibly because of his great admiration for that writer.

When he was about eleven years old he became greatly interested in chemistry. He got a copy of Parker's *School Philosophy*, an elementary book on physics, and tried almost every experiment in it. He also experimented on his own account. It is said that he once persuaded a boy employed by the family to swallow a large quantity of Seidlitz powders in the belief that the gases penetrated would enable him to fly. The awful agonies of the victim attracted attention, and Edison's mother marked her displeasure by an application of the switch kept behind the old Seth Thomas "grandfather's clock."

It was as early as this that young Alva, or "Al," as he was called, displayed a passion for chemistry, which has never left him. He used the cellar of the house for his experiments and collected there no fewer than two hundred bottles from various places. They contained the chemicals with which he was constant experimenting, and were all marked "Poison," so that no one else would disturb them.

He soon became familiar with all the chemicals to be had at the local drug stores, for he did not believe the statements made in his books until he had tested them for himself.

Edison used such a large part of his mother's cellar for this, his first laboratory, that, becoming tired of the "mess," she once ordered him to clear out everything. The boy was so much distressed at this that she relented, but insisted that he must keep things under lock and key when he was not there.

Most of his spare time was spent in the cellar, for he did not share to any extent in the sports of the boys of the neighborhood. His chum and chief companion at this time was a Dutch boy, much older than himself, named Michael Oates, who did chores around the house. It was Michael upon whom the Seidlitz powder experiment was tried.

As Edison got deeper into his chemical studies his limited pocket-money disappeared rapidly. He was being educated by his mother, and, therefore, not attending a regular school, and he had read all

the books within reach. So he thought the matter out and decided that if he became a train newsboy he could earn all the money he wanted for his experiments and also get fresh reading from papers and magazines. Besides, if he could get permission to go on the train he had in mind, he would have some leisure hours in Detroit and would be able to spend them at the public library free of charge. His parents objected, particularly his mother, but finally he obtained their consent.

It has been thought by many people that his family was poor, and that it was on account of their poverty that young Edison came to sell newspapers on the train. This is not true, for his father was a prosperous dealer in grain and feed, and was also actively interested in the lumber industry and other things. While he was not rich, he made money in his business, and, having a well-stocked farm and a large orchard besides, was in comfortable circumstances. Socially the family stood high in the town, where at the time many well-to-do people resided.

It was of his own choice and because of his never-satisfied desire for experiment and knowledge that Edison became a newsboy.

In 1859, when he was twelve years old, he applied for the privilege of selling newspapers on the trains of the Grand Trunk Railroad between Port Huron and Detroit. After a short delay the necessary permission was obtained.

Even before this he had had some business experience. His father had laid out a "market-garden" on the farm, and young Edison, at eleven years of age, and Michael Oates had worked in it pretty steadily. In the season the two boys would load up a wagon with onions, lettuce, peas, etc., and drive through the town to sell their produce. As much as \$600 was turned over to Mrs. Edison in one year from this source.

Edison was industrious, but he did not take kindly to farming. He tells us about this himself:

"After a while I tired of this work. Hoeing corn in a hot sun is unattractive, and I did not wonder that boys had left the farm for the city. Soon the Grand Trunk Railroad was extended from Toronto to Port Huron, at the foot of Lake Huron, and thence to Detroit, at about the same time the War of the Rebellion broke out. By a great amount of persistence I got permission from my mother to go on the local train as newsboy. The local train from Port Huron to Detroit, a distance of sixty-three miles, left at 7 A.M. and arrived again at 9.30 P.M. After being on the train for several months, I started two stores at Port Huron—one for periodicals and the other for vegetables, butter, and berries in the season. These were attended by two boys, who shared in the profits. The periodical store I soon closed, as the boy in charge could not be trusted. The vegetable store I kept up for nearly a year. After the railroad had been opened a short time they put on an express, which left Detroit in the morning and returned in the evening. I received permission to put a newsboy on this train. Connected with this train was a car, one part for baggage and the other part for United States mail, but for a long time it was not used. Every morning I had two large baskets of vegetables from the Detroit market loaded in the mail car and sent to Port Huron, when the boy would take them to the store. They were much better than those grown locally, and sold readily. I never was asked for freight, and to this day cannot explain why, except that I was so small and industrious and the nerve to appropriate a United States mail car to do a free freight business was so monumental. However, I kept this up for a long time, and in addition bought butter from the farmers along the line and an immense amount of blackberries in the season. I bought wholesale and at a low price, and permitted the wives of the engineers and trainmen to have the benefit of the discount. After a while there was a daily immigrant train put on. This train generally had from seven to ten coaches, filled always with Norwegians, all bound for Iowa and Minnesota. On these trains

I employed a boy who sold bread, tobacco, and stick candy. As the war progressed the daily newspaper sales became very profitable, and I gave up the vegetable store."

This shrewd commercial instinct, and the capacity for carrying on successfully several business undertakings at the same time, were certainly remarkable in a boy only thirteen years old. And now, having had a glimpse of Edison's very early youth, let us begin a new chapter and follow his further adventures as a newsboy on a railway train.

Source:

Meadowcroft, William. "Edison's Early Boyhood." *The Boys' Life of Edison*. New York: Harper & Brother Publishers. Electronic.