The Young Newsboy

by William H. Meadowcroft

Edison's train left Port Huron at seven o'clock in the morning and arrived at Detroit in about three hours. It did not leave Detroit again until quite late in the afternoon, arriving at Port Huron about nine-thirty at night. This made a long day for the boy, but it gave him an opportunity to do just what he wanted, which was to read, to buy chemicals and apparatus, and to indulge in his favorite occupation—chemical experimentation.

The train was made up of three coaches—baggage, smoking, and ordinary passenger. The baggage-car was divided into three compartments—one for trunks and packages, one for the mail, and one for smoking.

As there was no ventilation in this smoking-compartment, no use was made of it. It was therefore turned over to young Edison, who not only kept his papers there and his stock of goods as a "candy butcher," but he also transferred to it the contents of the precious laboratory from his mother's cellar. He found plenty of leisure on the two daily runs of the train to follow up his study of chemistry.

His earnings on the train were excellent, for he often took in eight or ten dollars a day. One dollar a day always went to his mother, and, as he was thus supporting himself, he felt entitled to spend any other profit left over on chemicals and apparatus. Detroit being a large city, he could obtain a greater variety there than in his own small town. He spent a great deal of time in reading up on his favorite subject at the public library, where he could find plenty of technical books. Thus he gave up most of his time and all his money to chemistry.

He did not confine himself entirely to chemistry in his reading at the Detroit public library, but sought to gain knowledge on other subjects. It is a matter of record that in the beginning of his reading he started in with a certain section of the library and tried to read it through, shelf by shelf, regardless of subject.

Edison went along in this manner for quite a long time. When the Civil War broke out he noticed that there was a much greater demand for newspapers. He became ambitious to publish a local journal of his own. So his little laboratory in the smoking-compartment received some additions which made it also a newspaper office.

He picked up a second-hand printing-press in Detroit and bought some type. With his mechanical ability, it was not a difficult matter to learn the rudiments of the printing art, and as some of the type was kept on the train he could set it up in moments of leisure. Thus he became the compositor, pressman, editor, proprietor, publisher, and newsdealer of the *Weekly Herald*. The price was three cents a copy, or eight cents a month for regular subscribers and the circulation ran up to over four hundred copies an issue. Only one or two copies of this journal are now to be found.

It was the first newspaper in the world printed on a train in motion. It received the patronage of the famous English engineer, Stephenson, and was also noted by the *London Times*. As the production of a boy of fourteen it was certainly a clever sheet, and many people were willing subscribers, for, by the aid of the railway telegraph, Edison was often able to print late news of local importance which could not be found in regular papers, like those of Detroit.

Edison's business grew so large that he employed a boy friend to help him. There was often plenty of work for both in the early days of the war, when the news of battle caused great excitement.

In order to increase the sales of newspapers, Edison would telegraph the news ahead to the agents of stations where the train stopped and get them to put up bulletins, so that, when the stations were reached, there would usually be plenty of purchasers waiting.

He recalls in particular the sensation caused by the great battle of Shiloh, or Pittsburg Landing, in April, 1862, in which both Grant and Sherman were engaged, in which the Confederate General Johnston was killed, and in which there was a great number of men killed and wounded.

The bulletin-boards of the Detroit newspapers were surrounded by dense crowds, which read that there were about sixty thousand killed and wounded, and that the result was uncertain. Edison, in relating his experience of that day, says:

"I knew if the same excitement was shown at the various small towns along the road, and especially at Port Huron, the sale of papers would be great. I then conceived the idea of telegraphing the news ahead, went to the operator in the depot, and, on my giving him *Harper's Weekly* and some other papers for three months, he agreed to telegraph to all the stations the matter on the bulletin-board. I hurriedly copied it, and he sent it, requesting the agents to display it on the blackboards used for stating the arrival and departure of trains. I decided that, instead of the usual one hundred papers, I could sell one thousand; but not having sufficient money to purchase that number, I determined in my desperation to see the editor himself and get credit. The great paper at that time was the *Detroit Free Press*. I walked into the office marked 'Editorial' and told a young man that I wanted to see the editor on important business—important to me, anyway.

"I was taken into an office where there were two men, and I stated what I had done about telegraphing, and that I wanted a thousand papers, but only had money for three hundred, and I wanted credit. One of the men refused it, but the other told the first spokesman to let me have them. This man, I afterward learned, was Wilbur F. Storey, who subsequently founded the *Chicago Times* and became celebrated in the newspaper world. With the aid of another boy I lugged the papers to the train and started folding them. The first station, called Utica, was a small one, where I generally sold two papers. I saw a crowd ahead on the platform, and thought it was some excursion, but the moment I landed there was a rush for me; then I realized that the telegraph was a great invention. I sold thirty-five papers there. The next station was Mount Clemens, now a watering-place, but then a town of about one thousand population. I usually sold six to eight papers there. I decided that if I found a corresponding crowd there the only thing to do to correct my lack of judgment in not getting more papers was to raise the price from five cents to ten. The crowd was there, and I raised the price. At the various towns there were corresponding crowds. It had been my practice at Port Huron to jump from the train at a point about one-fourth of a mile from the station, where the train generally slackened speed. I had drawn several loads of sand to this point to jump on, and had become quite expert. The little Dutch boy with the horse met me at this point. When the wagon approached the outskirts of the town I was met by a large crowd. I then yelled: 'Twenty-five cents apiece, gentlemen! I haven't enough to go around!' I sold out, and made what to me then was an immense sum of money."

But this and similar gains of money did not increase Edison's savings, for all his spare cash was spent for new chemicals and apparatus. He had bought a copy of Fresenius's *Qualitative Analysis*, and, with his ceaseless testing and study of its advanced problems, his little laboratory on the train was now

becoming crowded with additional equipment, especially as he now added electricity to his studies.

"While a newsboy on the railroad," says Edison, "I got very much interested in electricity, probably from visiting telegraph offices with a chum who had tastes similar to mine."

We have already seen that he was shrewd enough to use the telegraph to get news items for his own little journal and also to bulletin his special news of the Civil War along the line. To such a ceaseless experimenter as he was, it was only natural that electricity should come in for a share of his attention. With his knowledge of chemistry, he had no trouble in "setting up" batteries, but his difficulty lay in obtaining instruments and material for circuits.

To-day any youth who desires to experiment with telegraphy or telephony can find plenty of stores where apparatus can be bought ready made, or he can make many things himself by following the instructions in *Harper's Electricity Book for Boys*. But in Edison's boyish days it was quite different. Telegraph supplies were hard to obtain, and amateurs were usually obliged to make their own apparatus.

However, he and his chum had a line between their homes, built of common stove-pipe wire. The insulators were bottles set on nails driven into trees and short poles. The magnet wire was wound with rags for insulation, and pieces of spring brass were used for telegraph keys.

With the idea of securing current cheaply, Edison applied the little he knew about static electricity, and actually experimented with cats. He treated them vigorously as frictional machines until the animals fled in dismay, leaving their marks to remind the young inventor of his first great lesson in the relative value of sources of electrical energy. Resorting to batteries, however, the line was made to work, and the two boys exchanged messages.

Edison wanted lots of practice, and secured it in an ingenious manner. If he could have had his way he would have sat up until the small hours of the morning, but his father insisted on eleven-thirty as the proper bed-time, which left but a short interval after a long day on the train.

Now, each evening, when the boy went home with newspapers that had not been sold, his father would sit up to read them. So Edison on some excuse had his friend take the papers, but suggested to his father that he could get the news from the chum by telegraph bit by bit. The scheme interested the father, and was put into effect, the messages over the wire being written down by Edison and handed to the old gentleman to read.

This gave good practice every night until twelve or one o'clock, and was kept up for some time, until the father became willing that his son should sit up for a reasonable time. The papers were then brought home again, and the boys practised to their hearts' content, until the line was pulled down by a stray cow wandering through the orchard.

Now we come to the incident which may be regarded as turning Edison's thoughts more definitely to electricity. One August morning, in 1862, the mixed train on which he worked as newsboy was doing some shunting at Mount Clemens station. A laden box-car had been pushed out of a siding, when Edison, who was loitering about the platform, saw the little son of the station agent, Mr. J. U. Mackenzie, playing with the gravel on the main track, along which the car, without a brakeman, was rapidly approaching.

Edison dropped his papers and his cap and made a dash for the child, whom he picked up and lifted to safety without a second to spare, as the wheel struck his heel. Both were cut about the face and hands by the gravel ballast on which they fell.

The two boys were picked up by the train-hands and carried to the platform, and the grateful father, who knew and liked the rescuer, offered to teach him the art of train telegraphy and to make an operator of him. It is needless to say that the proposal was most eagerly accepted.

Edison found time for his new studies by letting one of his friends look after the newsboy work on the train for part of the trip, keeping for himself the run between Port Huron and Mount Clemens. We have already seen that he was qualified as a beginner, and, besides, he was able to take to the station a neat little set of instruments he had just finished at a gun shop in Detroit.

What with his business as newsboy, his publication of the *Weekly Herald*, his reading and chemical and electrical experiments, Edison was leading a busy life and making rapid progress, but unexpectedly there came disaster, which brought about a sudden change. One day, as the train was running swiftly over a piece of poorly laid track, there was a sudden lurch, and a stick of phosphorus was jarred from its shelf, fell to the floor and burst into flame.

The car took fire, and Edison was trying in vain to put out the blaze when the conductor rushed in with water and saved the car. On arriving at the next station the enraged conductor put the boy off with his entire outfit, including his laboratory and printing-plant.

The origin of Edison's deafness may be told in his own words: "My train was standing by the platform at Smith's Creek station. I was trying to climb into the freight car with both arms full of papers when the conductor took me by the ears and lifted me. I felt something snap inside my head, and my deafness started from that time and has ever since progressed."

"This deafness has been a great advantage to me in various ways. When in a telegraph office I could hear only the instrument directly on the table at which I sat, and, unlike the other operators, I was not bothered by the other instruments. Again, in experimenting on the telephone, I had to improve the transmitter so that I could hear it. This made the telephone commercial, as the magneto telephone receiver of Bell was too weak to be used as a transmitter commercially. It was the same with the phonograph. The great defect of that instrument was the rendering of the overtones in music and the hissing consonants in speech. I worked over one year, twenty hours a day, Sundays and all, to get the word "specie" perfectly recorded and reproduced on the phonograph. When this was done I knew that everything else could be done—which was a fact. Again, my nerves have been preserved intact. Broadway is as quiet to me as a country village is to a person with normal hearing."

But we left young Edison on the station platform, sorrowful and indignant, as the train moved off, deserting him in the midst of his beloved possessions. He was saddened, but not altogether discouraged, and after some trouble succeeded in making his way home, where he again set up his laboratory and also his printing-office. There was some objection on the part of the family, as they feared that they might also suffer from fire, but he promised not to bring in anything of a dangerous nature.

He continued to publish the *Weekly Herald*, but after a while was persuaded by a chum to change its character and publish it under the name of *Paul Pry*, making it a journal of town gossip about local people and their affairs and peculiarities.

No copies of *Paul Pry* can now be found, but it is known that its style was distinctly personal, and the weaknesses of the townspeople were discussed in it very freely and frankly by the two boys. It caused no small offense, and in one instance Edison was pitched into the St. Clair River by one of the victims whose affairs had been given such unsought publicity.

Possibly this was one of the reasons that caused Edison to give up the paper not very long afterward. He had a great liking for newspaper work, and might have continued in that field had it not been for strong influences in other directions. There is no question, however, that he was the youngest publisher and editor of his time.

Source:

Meadowcroft, William. "The Young Newsboy." *The Boy's Life of Edison*. New York: Harper& Brothers Publishers. Electronic.