

BOYHOOD AT PORT HURON, MICHIGAN

THE new home found by the Edison family at Port Huron, where Alva spent his brief boyhood before he became a telegraph operator and roamed the whole middle West of that period, was unfortunately destroyed by fire just after the close of the Civil War. A smaller but perhaps more comfortable home was then built by Edison's father on some property he had bought at the near-by village of Gratiot, and there his mother spent the remainder of her life in confirmed invalidism, dying in 1871. Hence the pictures and postal cards sold largely to souvenir-hunters as the Port Huron home do not actually show that in or around which the events now referred to took place.

It has been a romance of popular biographers, based upon the fact that Edison began his career as a newsboy, to assume that these earlier years were spent in poverty and privation, as indeed they usually are by the "newsies" who swarm and shout their papers in our large cities. While it seems a pity to destroy this erroneous idea, suggestive of a heroic climb from the depths to the heights, nothing could be further from the truth. Socially the Edison family stood high in Port Huron at a time when there was relatively more wealth and general activity than to-day. The town in its pristine prime was a great lumber centre, and hummed with the industry of numerous sawmills. An incredible quantity of lumber was made there yearly until the forests near-by vanished and the industry with them. The wealth of the community, invested largely in this business and in allied transportation companies, was accumulated rapidly and as freely spent during those days of prosperity in St. Clair County, bringing with it a high standard of domestic comfort. In all this the Edisons shared on equal terms.

Thus, contrary to the stories that have been so widely published, the Edisons, while not rich by any means, were in comfortable circumstances, with a well-stocked farm and large orchard to draw upon also for sustenance. Samuel Edison, on moving to Port Huron, became a dealer in grain and feed, and gave attention to that business for many years. But he was also active in the lumber industry in the Saginaw district and several other things. It was difficult for a man of such mercurial, restless temperament to stay constant to any one occupation; in fact, had he been less visionary he would have been more prosperous, but might not have had a son so gifted with insight and imagination. One instance of the optimistic vagaries which led him incessantly to spend time and money on projects that would not have appealed to a man less sanguine was the construction on his property of a wooden observation tower over a hundred feet high, the top of which was reached toilsomely by winding stairs, after the payment of twenty-five cents. It is true that the tower commanded a pretty view by land and water, but Colonel Sellers himself might have projected this enterprise as a possible source of steady income. At first few visitors panted up the long flights of steps to the breezy platform. During the first two months Edison's father took in three dollars, and felt extremely blue over the prospect, and to young Edison and his relatives were left the lonely pleasures of the lookout and the enjoyment of the telescope with which it was equipped. But one fine day there came an excursion from an inland town to see the lake. They picnicked in the grove, and six hundred of them went up the tower. After that the railroad company began to advertise these excursions, and the receipts each year paid for the observatory.

It might be thought that, immersed in business and preoccupied with schemes of this character, Mr. Edison was to blame for the neglect of his son's education. But that was not the case. The conditions were peculiar. It was at the Port Huron public school that Edison received all the regular scholastic instruction he ever enjoyed—just three months. He might have spent the full term there, but, as already noted, his teacher had found him "addled." He was always, according to his own recollection, at the foot of the class, and had come almost to regard himself as a dunce, while his father entertained vague

anxieties as to his stupidity. The truth of the matter seems to be that Mrs. Edison, a teacher of uncommon ability and force, held no very high opinion of the average public-school methods and results, and was both eager to undertake the instruction of her son and ambitious for the future of a boy whom she knew from pedagogic experience to be receptive and thoughtful to a very unusual degree. With her he found study easy and pleasant. The quality of culture in that simple but refined home, as well as the intellectual character of this youth without schooling, may be inferred from the fact that before he had reached the age of twelve he had read, with his mother's help, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Hume's *History of England*, Sears' *History of the World*, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and the *Dictionary of Sciences*; and had even attempted to struggle through Newton's *Principia*, whose mathematics were decidedly beyond both teacher and student. Besides, Edison, like Faraday, was never a mathematician, and has had little personal use for arithmetic beyond that which is called "mental." He said once to a friend: "I can always hire some mathematicians, but they can't hire me." His father, by-the-way, always encouraged these literary tastes, and paid him a small sum for each new book mastered. It will be noted that fiction makes no showing in the list; but it was not altogether excluded from the home library, and Edison has all his life enjoyed it, particularly the works of such writers as Victor Hugo, after whom, because of his enthusiastic admiration—possibly also because of his imagination—he was nicknamed by his fellow-operators, "Victor Hugo Edison."

Electricity at that moment could have no allure for a youthful mind. Crude telegraphy represented what was known of it practically, and about that the books read by young Edison were not redundantly informational. Even had that not been so, the inclinations of the boy barely ten years old were toward chemistry, and fifty years later there is seen no change of predilection. It sounds like heresy to say that Edison became an electrician by chance, but it is the sober fact that to this pre-eminent and brilliant leader in electrical achievement escape into the chemical domain still has the aspect of a delightful truant holiday. One of the earliest stories about his boyhood relates to the incident when he induced a lad employed in the family to swallow a large quantity of Seidlitz powders in the belief that the gases generated would enable him to fly. The 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 clock." The disastrous result of this experiment did not discourage Edison at all, as he attributed failure to the lad rather than to the motive power. In the cellar of the Edison homestead young Alva soon accumulated a chemical outfit, constituting the first in a long series of laboratories. The word "laboratory" had always been associated with alchemists in the past, but as with "filament" this untutored stripling applied an iconoclastic practicability to it long before he realized the significance of the new departure. Goethe, in his legend of Faust, shows the traditional or conventional philosopher in his laboratory, an aged, tottering, gray-bearded investigator, who only becomes youthful upon diabolical intervention, and would stay senile without it. In the Edison laboratory no such weird transformation has been necessary, for the philosopher had youth, fiery energy, and a grimly practical determination that would submit to no denial of the goal of something of real benefit to mankind. Edison and Faust are indeed the extremes of philosophic thought and accomplishment.

The home at Port Huron thus saw the first Edison laboratory. The boy began experimenting when he was about ten or eleven years of age. He got a copy of Parker's *School Philosophy*, an elementary book on physics, and about every experiment in it he tried. Young Alva, or "Al," as he was called, thus early displayed his great passion for chemistry, and in the cellar of the house he collected no fewer than two hundred bottles, gleaned in baskets from all parts of the town. These were arranged carefully on shelves and all labelled "Poison," so that no one else would handle or disturb them. They contained the chemicals with which he was constantly experimenting. To others this diversion was both mysterious and meaningless, but he had soon become familiar with all the chemicals obtainable at the local drug stores, and had tested to his satisfaction many of the statements encountered in his scientific reading.

Edison has said that sometimes he has wondered how it was he did not become an analytical chemist instead of concentrating on electricity, for which he had at first no great inclination.

Deprived of the use of a large part of her cellar, tiring of the "mess" always to be found there, and somewhat fearful of results, his mother once told the boy to clear everything out and restore order. The thought of losing all his possessions was the cause of so much ardent distress that his mother relented, but insisted that he must get a lock and key, and keep the embryonic laboratory closed up all the time except when he was there. This was done. From such work came an early familiarity with the nature of electrical batteries and the production of current from them. Apparently the greater part 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, Michael Oates, being a lad of Dutch origin, many years older, who did chores around the house, and who could be recruited as a general utility Friday for the experiments of this young explorer—such as that with the Seidlitz powders.

Such pursuits as these consumed the scant pocket-money of the boy very rapidly. He was not in regular attendance at school, and had read all the books within reach. It was thus he turned newsboy, overcoming the reluctance of his parents, particularly that of his mother, by pointing out that he could by this means earn all he wanted for his experiments and get fresh reading in the shape of papers and magazines free of charge. Besides, his leisure hours in Detroit he would be able to spend at the public library. He applied (in 1859) for the privilege of selling newspapers on the trains of the Grand Trunk Railroad, between Port Huron and Detroit, and obtained the concession after a short delay, during which he made an essay in his task of selling newspapers.

Edison had, as a fact, already had some commercial experience from the age of eleven. The ten acres of the reservation offered an excellent opportunity for truck-farming, and the versatile head of the family could not avoid trying his luck in this branch of work. A large "market garden" was laid out, in which Edison worked pretty steadily with the help of the Dutch boy, Michael Oates—he of the flying experiment. These boys had a horse and small wagon intrusted to them, and every morning in the season they would load up with onions, lettuce, peas, etc., and go through the town.

As much as \$600 was turned over to Mrs. Edison in one year from this source. The boy was indefatigable but not altogether charmed with agriculture. "After a while I tired of this work, as hoeing corn in a hot sun is unattractive, and I did not wonder that it had built up cities. 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 a 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 in 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 U. S. 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, where the boy would take them to the store. They were much better than those grown locally, and sold readily. I never was asked to pay freight, and to this day cannot explain why, except that I was so small and industrious, and the nerve to appropriate a U. S. 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."

The hours of this occupation were long, but the work was not particularly heavy, and Edison soon found opportunity for his favorite avocation—chemical experimentation. His train left Port Huron at 7 A.M., and made its southward trip to Detroit in about three hours. This gave a stay in that city from 10 A.M. until the late afternoon, when the train left, arriving at Port Huron about 9.30 P.M. The train was made up of three coaches—baggage, smoking, and ordinary passenger or "ladies." The baggage-car was divided into three compartments—one for trunks and packages, one for the mail, and one for smoking. In those days no use was made of the smoking-compartment, as there was no ventilation, and it was turned over to young Edison, who not only kept papers there and his stock of goods as a "candy butcher," but soon had it equipped with an extraordinary variety of apparatus. There was plenty of leisure on the two daily runs, even for an industrious boy, and thus he found time to transfer his laboratory from the cellar and re-establish it on the train.

His earnings were also excellent—so good, in fact, that eight or ten dollars a day were often taken in, and one dollar went every day to his mother. Thus supporting himself, he felt entitled to spend any other profit left over on chemicals and apparatus. And spent it was, for with access to Detroit and its large stores, where he bought his supplies, and to the public library, where he could quench his thirst for technical information, Edison gave up all his spare time and money to chemistry. Surely the country could have presented at that moment no more striking example of the passionate pursuit of knowledge under difficulties than this newsboy, barely fourteen years of age, with his jars and test-tubes installed on a railway baggage-car.

Nor did this amazing equipment stop at batteries and bottles. The same little space a few feet square was soon converted by this precocious youth into a newspaper office. The outbreak of the Civil War gave a great stimulus to the demand for all newspapers, noticing which he became ambitious to publish a local journal of his own, devoted to the news of that section of the Grand Trunk road. A small printing-press that had been used for hotel bills of fare was picked up in Detroit, and type was also bought, some of it being placed on the train so that composition could go on in spells of leisure. To one so mechanical in his tastes as Edison, it was quite easy to learn the rudiments of the printing art, and thus the Weekly Herald came into existence, of which he was compositor, pressman, editor, publisher, and newsdealer. Only one or two copies of this journal are now discoverable, but its appearance can be judged from the reduced facsimile here shown. The thing was indeed well done as the work of a youth shown by the date to be less than fifteen years old. The literary style is good, there are only a few trivial slips in spelling, and the appreciation is keen of what would be interesting news and gossip. 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. This was by no means the result of mere public curiosity, but attested the value of the sheet as a genuine newspaper, to which many persons in the railroad service along the line were willing contributors. Indeed, with the aid of the railway telegraph, Edison was often able to print late news of importance, of local origin, that the distant regular papers like those of Detroit, which he handled as a newsboy, could not get. It is no wonder that this clever little sheet received the approval and patronage of the English engineer Stephenson when inspecting the Grand Trunk system, and was noted by no less distinguished a contemporary than the London Times as the first newspaper in the world to be printed on a train in motion. The youthful proprietor sometimes cleared as much as twenty to thirty dollars a month from this unique journalistic enterprise.

But all this extra work required attention, and Edison solved the difficulty of attending also to the newsboy business by the employment of a young friend, whom he trained and treated liberally as an

understudy. There was often plenty of work for both in the early days of the war, when the news of battle caused intense excitement and large sales of papers. Edison, with native shrewdness already so strikingly displayed, would telegraph the station agents and get them to bulletin the event of the day at the front, so that when each station was reached there were eager 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 Johnston died, and in which there was a ghastly total of 25,000 killed and wounded.

In describing his enterprising action that day, Edison says that when he reached Detroit the bulletin-boards of the newspaper offices were surrounded with dense crowds, which read awestricken the news that there were 60,000 killed and wounded, and that the result was uncertain. "I knew that if the same excitement was attained 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 by 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. By 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 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. 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 all out, and made what to me then was an immense sum of money."

Such episodes as this added materially to his income, but did not necessarily increase his savings, for he was then, as now, an utter spendthrift so long as some new apparatus or supplies for experiment could be had. In fact, the laboratory on wheels soon became crowded with such equipment, most costly chemicals were bought on the instalment plan, and Fresenius' Qualitative Analysis served as a basis for ceaseless testing and study. George Pullman, who then had a small shop at Detroit and was working on his sleeping-car, made Edison a lot of wooden apparatus for his chemicals, to the boy's delight. Unfortunately a sudden change came, fraught with disaster. The train, running one day at thirty miles an hour over a piece of poorly laid track, was thrown suddenly out of the perpendicular with a violent lurch, and, before Edison could catch it, a stick of phosphorus was jarred from its shelf, fell to the floor, and burst into flame. The car took fire, and the boy, in dismay, was still trying to quench the blaze when the conductor, a quick-tempered Scotchman, who acted also as baggage-master, hastened to the scene

with water and saved his car. On the arrival at Mount Clemens station, its next stop, Edison and his entire outfit, laboratory, printing-plant, and all, were promptly ejected by the enraged conductor, and the train then moved off, leaving him on the platform, tearful and indignant in the midst of his beloved but ruined possessions. It was lynch law of a kind; but in view of the responsibility, this action of the conductor lay well within his rights and duties.

It was through this incident that Edison acquired the deafness that has persisted all through his life, a severe box on the ears from the scorched and angry conductor being the direct cause of the infirmity. Although this deafness would be regarded as a great affliction by most people, and has brought in its train other serious baubles, Mr. Edison has always regarded it philosophically, and said about it recently: "This deafness has been of great advantage to me in various ways. When in a telegraph office, I could only hear 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 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."

Saddened but not wholly discouraged, Edison soon reconstituted his laboratory and printing-office at home, although on the part of the family there was some fear and objection after this episode, on the score of fire. But Edison promised not to bring in anything of a dangerous nature. He did not cease the publication of the Weekly Herald. On the contrary, he prospered in both his enterprises until persuaded by the "printer's devil" in the office of the Port Huron Commercial to change the character of his journal, enlarge it, and issue it under the name of Paul Pry, a happy designation for this or kindred ventures in the domain of society journalism. No copies of Paul Pry can now be found, but it is known that its style was distinctly personal, that gossip was its specialty, and that no small offence was given to the people whose peculiarities or peccadilloes were discussed in a frank and breezy style by the two boys. In one instance the resentment of the victim of such unsought publicity was so intense he laid hands on Edison and pitched the startled young editor into the St. Clair River. The name of this violator of the freedom of the press was thereafter excluded studiously from the columns of Paul Pry, and the incident may have been one of those which soon caused the abandonment of the paper. Edison had great zest in this work, and but for the strong influences in other directions would probably have continued in the newspaper field, in which he was, beyond question, the youngest publisher and editor of the day.

Before leaving this period of his career, it is to be noted that it gave Edison many favorable opportunities. In Detroit he could spend frequent hours in the public library, and it is matter of record that he began his liberal acquaintance with its contents by grappling bravely with a certain section and trying to read it through consecutively, shelf by shelf, regardless of subject. In a way this is curiously suggestive of the earnest, energetic method of "frontal attack" with which the inventor has since addressed himself to so many problems in the arts and sciences.

The Grand Trunk Railroad machine-shops at Port Huron were a great attraction to the boy, who appears to have spent a good deal of his time there. He who was to have much to do with the evolution of the modern electric locomotive was fascinated by the mechanism of the steam locomotive; and whenever he could get the chance Edison rode in the cab with the engineer of his train. He became thoroughly familiar with the intricacies of fire-box, boiler, valves, levers, and gears, and liked nothing better than to handle the locomotive himself during the run. On one trip, when the engineer lay asleep while his

eager substitute piloted the train, the boiler "primed," and a deluge overwhelmed the young driver, who stuck to his post till the run and the ordeal were ended. Possibly this helped to spoil a locomotive engineer, but went to make a great master of the new motive power. "Steam is half an Englishman," said Emerson. The temptation is strong to say that workaday electricity is half an American. Edison's own account of the incident is very laughable: "The engine was one of a number leased to the Grand Trunk by the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy. It had bright brass bands all over, the woodwork beautifully painted, and everything highly polished, which was the custom up to the time old Commodore Vanderbilt stopped it on his roads. After running about fifteen miles the fireman couldn't keep his eyes open (this event followed an all-night dance of the trainmen's fraternal organization), and he agreed to permit me to run the engine. I took charge, reducing the speed to about twelve miles an hour, and brought the train of seven cars to her destination at the Grand Trunk junction safely. But something occurred which was very much out of the ordinary. I was very much worried about the water, and I knew that if it got low the boiler was likely to explode. I hadn't gone twenty miles before black damp mud blew out of the stack and covered every part of the engine, including myself. I was about to awaken the fireman to find out the cause of this when it stopped. Then I approached a station where the fireman always went out to the cowcatcher, opened the oil-cup on the steam-chest, and poured oil in. I started to carry out the procedure when, upon opening the oil-cup, the steam rushed out with a tremendous noise, nearly knocking me off the engine. I succeeded in closing the oil-cup and got back in the cab, and made up my mind that she would pull through without oil. I learned afterward that the engineer always shut off steam when the fireman went out to oil. This point I failed to notice. My powers of observation were very much improved after this occurrence. Just before I reached the junction another outpour of black mud occurred, and the whole engine was a sight—so much so that when I pulled into the yard everybody turned to see it, laughing immoderately. I found the reason of the mud was that I carried so much water it passed over into the stack, and this washed out all the accumulated soot."

One afternoon about a week before Christmas Edison's train jumped the track near Utica, a station on the line. Four old Michigan Central cars with rotten sills collapsed in the ditch and went all to pieces, distributing figs, raisins, dates, and candies all over the track and the vicinity. Hating to see so much waste, Edison tried to save all he could by eating it on the spot, but as a result "our family doctor had the time of his life with me in this connection."

An absurd incident described by Edison throws a vivid light on the free-and-easy condition of early railroad travel and on the Southern extravagance of the time. "In 1860, just before the war broke out there came to the train one afternoon, in Detroit, two fine-looking young men accompanied by a colored servant. They bought tickets for Port Huron, the terminal point for the train. After leaving the junction just outside of Detroit, I brought in the evening papers. When I came opposite the two young men, one of them said: 'Boy, what have you got?' I said: 'Papers.' 'All right.' He took them and threw them out of the window, and, turning to the colored man, said: 'Nicodemus, pay this boy.' I told Nicodemus the amount, and he opened a satchel and paid me. The passengers didn't know what to make of the transaction. I returned with the illustrated papers and magazines. These were seized and thrown out of the window, and I was told to get my money of Nicodemus. I then returned with all the old magazines and novels I had not been able to sell, thinking perhaps this would be too much for them. I was small and thin, and the layer reached above my head, and was all I could possibly carry. I had prepared a list, and knew the amount in case they bit again. When I opened the door, all the passengers roared with laughter. I walked right up to the young men. One asked me what I had. I said 'Magazines and novels.' He promptly threw them out of the window, and Nicodemus settled. Then I came in with cracked hickory nuts, then pop-corn balls, and, finally, molasses candy. All went out of the window. I felt like Alexander the Great!—I had no more chance! I had sold all I had. Finally I put a rope to my trunk, which was about the size of a carpenter's chest, and started to pull this from the

baggage-car to the passenger-car. It was almost too much for my strength, but at last I got it in front of those men. I pulled off my coat, shoes, and hat, and laid them on the chest. Then he asked: 'What have you got, boy?' I said: 'Everything, sir, that I can spare that is for sale.' The passengers fairly jumped with laughter. Nicodemus paid me \$27 for this last sale, and threw the whole out of the door in the rear of the car. These men were from the South, and I have always retained a soft spot in my heart for a Southern gentleman."

While Edison was a newsboy on the train a request came to him one day to go to the office of E. B. Ward & Company, at that time the largest owners of steamboats on the Great Lakes. The captain of their largest boat had died suddenly, and they wanted a message taken to another captain who lived about fourteen miles from Ridgeway station on the railroad. This captain had retired, taken up some lumber land, and had cleared part of it. Edison was offered \$15 by Mr. Ward to go and fetch him, but as it was a wild country and would be dark, Edison stood out for \$25, so that he could get the companionship of another lad. The terms were agreed to. Edison arrived at Ridgeway at 8.30 P.M., when it was raining and as dark as ink. Getting another boy with difficulty to volunteer, he launched out on his errand in the pitch-black night. The two boys carried lanterns, but the road was a rough path through dense forest. The country was wild, and it was a usual occurrence to see deer, bear, and coon skins nailed up on the sides of houses to dry. Edison had read about bears, but couldn't remember whether they were day or night prowlers. The farther they went the more apprehensive they became, and every stump in the ravished forest looked like a bear. The other lad proposed seeking safety up a tree, but Edison demurred on the plea that bears could climb, and that the message must be delivered that night to enable the captain to catch the morning train. First one lantern went out, then the other. "We leaned up against a tree and cried. I thought if I ever got out of that scrape alive I would know more about the habits of animals and everything else, and be prepared for all kinds of mischance when I undertook an enterprise. However, the intense darkness dilated the pupils of our eyes so as to make them very sensitive, and we could just see at times the outlines of the road. Finally, just as a faint gleam of daylight arrived, we entered the captain's yard and delivered the message. In my whole life I never spent such a night of horror as this, but I got a good lesson."

An amusing incident of this period is told by Edison. "When I was a boy," he says, "the Prince of Wales, the late King Edward, came to Canada (1860). Great preparations were made at Sarnia, the Canadian town opposite Port Huron. About every boy, including myself, went over to see the affair. The town was draped in flags most profusely, and carpets were laid on the cross-walks for the prince to walk on. There were arches, etc. A stand was built raised above the general level, where the prince was to be received by the mayor. Seeing all these preparations, my idea of a prince was very high; but when he did arrive I mistook the Duke of Newcastle for him, the duke being a fine-looking man. I soon saw that I was mistaken: that the prince was a young stripling, and did not meet expectations. Several of us expressed our belief that a prince wasn't much, after all, and said that we were thoroughly disappointed. For this one boy was whipped. Soon the Canuck boys attacked the Yankee boys, and we were all badly licked. I, myself, got a black eye. That has always prejudiced me against that kind of ceremonial and folly." It is certainly interesting to note that in later years the prince for whom Edison endured the ignominy of a black eye made generous compensation in a graceful letter accompanying the gold Albert Medal awarded by the Royal Society of Arts.

Another incident of the period is as follows: "After selling papers in Port Huron, which was often not reached until about 9.30 at night, I seldom got home before 11.00 or 11.30. About half-way home from the station and the town, and within twenty-five feet of the road in a dense wood, was a soldiers' graveyard where three hundred soldiers were buried, due to a cholera epidemic which took place at Fort Gratiot, near by, many years previously. At first we used to shut our eyes and run the horse past this graveyard, and if the horse stepped on a twig my heart would give a violent movement, and it is a

wonder that I haven't some valvular disease of that organ. But soon this running of the horse became monotonous, and after a while all fears of graveyards absolutely disappeared from my system. I was in the condition of Sam Houston, the pioneer and founder of Texas, who, it was said, knew no fear. Houston lived some distance from the town and generally went home late at night, having to pass through a dark cypress swamp over a corduroy road. One night, to test his alleged fearlessness, a man stationed himself behind a tree and enveloped himself in a sheet. He confronted Houston suddenly, and Sam stopped and said: 'If you are a man, you can't hurt me. If you are a ghost, you don't want to hurt me. And if you are the devil, come home with me; I married your sister!'"

It is not to be inferred, however, from some of the preceding statements that the boy was of an exclusively studious bent of mind. He had then, as now, the keen enjoyment of a joke, and no particular aversion to the practical form. An incident of the time is in point. "After the breaking out of the war there was a regiment of volunteer soldiers quartered at Fort Gratiot, the reservation extending to the boundary line of our house. Nearly every night we would hear a call, such as 'Corporal of the Guard, No. 1.' This would be repeated from sentry to sentry until it reached the barracks, when Corporal of the Guard, No. 1, would come and see what was wanted. I and the little Dutch boy, after returning from the town after selling our papers, thought we would take a hand at military affairs. So one night, when it was very dark, I shouted for Corporal of the Guard, No. 1. The second sentry, thinking it was the terminal sentry who shouted, repeated it to the third, and so on. This brought the corporal along the half mile, only to find that he was fooled. We tried him three nights; but the third night they were watching, and caught the little Dutch boy, took him to the lock-up at the fort, and shut him up. They chased me to the house. I rushed for the cellar. In one small apartment there were two barrels of potatoes and a third one nearly empty. I poured these remnants into the other barrels, sat down, and pulled the barrel over my head, bottom up. The soldiers had awakened my father, and they were searching for me with candles and lanterns. The corporal was absolutely certain I came into the cellar, and couldn't see how I could have gotten out, and wanted to know from my father if there was no secret hiding-place. On assurance of my father, who said that there was not, he said it was most extraordinary. I was glad when they left, as I was cramped, and the potatoes were rotten that had been in the barrel and violently offensive. The next morning I was found in bed, and received a good switching on the legs from my father, the first and only one I ever received from him, although my mother kept a switch behind the old Seth Thomas clock that had the bark worn off. My mother's ideas and mine differed at times, especially when I got experimenting and mused up things. The Dutch boy was released next morning."

Source:

Dyer, Frank Thomas, Thomas Martin. "Boyhood at Port Huron, MI." *Edison His Life and Inventions.* Electronic.