

EDISON'S PEDIGREE

by Frank Lewis Dyer and Thomas Commerford Martin

THOMAS ALVA EDISON was born at Milan Ohio, February 11, 1847. The State that rivals Virginia as a "Mother of Presidents" has evidently other titles to distinction of the same nature. For picturesque detail it would not be easy to find any story excelling that of the Edison family before it reached the Western Reserve. The story epitomizes American idealism, restlessness, freedom of individual opinion, and ready adjustment to the surrounding conditions of pioneer life. The ancestral Edisons who came over from Holland, as nearly as can be determined, in 1730, were descendants of extensive millers on the Zuyder Zee, and took up patents of land along the Passaic River, New Jersey, close to the home that Mr. Edison established in the Orange Mountains a hundred and sixty years later. They landed at Elizabethport, New Jersey, and first settled near Caldwell in that State, where some graves of the family may still be found. President Cleveland was born in that quiet hamlet. It is a curious fact that in the Edison family the pronunciation of the name has always been with the long "e" sound, as it would naturally be in the Dutch language. The family prospered and must have enjoyed public confidence, for we find the name of Thomas Edison, as a bank official on Manhattan Island, signed to Continental currency in 1778. According to the family records this Edison, great-grandfather of Thomas Alva, reached the extreme old age of 104 years. But all was not well, and, as has happened so often before, the politics of father and son were violently different. The Loyalist movement that took to Nova Scotia so many Americans after the War of Independence carried with it John, the son of this stalwart Continental. Thus it came about that Samuel Edison, son of John, was born at Digby, Nova Scotia, in 1804. Seven years later John Edison who, as a Loyalist or United Empire emigrant, had become entitled under the laws of Canada to a grant of six hundred acres of land, moved westward to take possession of this property. He made his way through the State of New York in wagons drawn by oxen to the remote and primitive township of Bayfield, in Upper Canada, on Lake Huron. Although the journey occurred in balmy June, it was necessarily attended with difficulty and privation; but the new home was situated in good farming country, and once again this interesting nomadic family settled down.

John Edison moved from Bayfield to Vienna, Ontario, on the northern bank of Lake Erie. Mr. Edison supplies an interesting reminiscence of the old man and his environment in those early Canadian days. "When I was five years old I was taken by my father and mother on a visit to Vienna. We were driven by carriage from Milan, Ohio, to a railroad, then to a port on Lake Erie, thence by a canal-boat in a tow of several to Port Burwell, in Canada, across the lake, and from there we drove to Vienna, a short distance away. I remember my grandfather perfectly as he appeared, at 102 years of age, when he died. In the middle of the day he sat under a large tree in front of the house facing a well-travelled road. His head was covered completely with a large quantity of very white hair, and he chewed tobacco incessantly, nodding to friends as they passed by. He used a very large cane, and walked from the chair to the house, resenting any assistance. I viewed him from a distance, and could never get very close to him. I remember some large pipes, and especially a molasses jug, a trunk, and several other things that came from Holland."

John Edison was long-lived, like his father, and reached the ripe old age of 102, leaving his son Samuel charged with the care of the family destinies, but with no great burden of wealth. Little is known of the early manhood of this father of T. A. Edison until we find him keeping a hotel at Vienna, marrying a

school-teacher there (Miss Nancy Elliott, in 1828), and taking a lively share in the troublous politics of the time. He was six feet in height, of great bodily vigor, and of such personal dominance of character that he became a captain of the insurgent forces rallying under the banners of Papineau and Mackenzie. The opening years of Queen Victoria's reign witnessed a belated effort in Canada to emphasize the principle that there should not be taxation without representation; and this descendant of those who had left the United States from disapproval of such a doctrine, flung himself headlong into its support.

It has been said of Earl Durham, who pacified Canada at this time and established the present system of government, that he made a country and marred a career. But the immediate measures of repression enforced before a liberal policy was adopted were sharp and severe, and Samuel Edison also found his own career marred on Canadian soil as one result of the Durham administration. Exile to Bermuda with other insurgents was not so attractive as the perils of a flight to the United States. A very hurried departure was effected in secret from the scene of trouble, and there are romantic traditions of his thrilling journey of one hundred and eighty-two miles toward safety, made almost entirely without food or sleep, through a wild country infested with Indians of unfriendly disposition. Thus was the Edison family repatriated by a picturesque political episode, and the great inventor given a birthplace on American soil, just as was Benjamin Franklin when his father came from England to Boston. Samuel Edison left behind him, however, in Canada, several brothers, all of whom lived to the age of ninety or more, and from whom there are descendants in the region.

After some desultory wanderings for a year or two along the shores of Lake Erie, among the prosperous towns then springing up, the family, with its Canadian home forfeited, and in quest of another resting-place, came to Milan, Ohio, in 1842. That pretty little village offered at the moment many attractions as a possible Chicago. The railroad system of Ohio was still in the future, but the Western Reserve had already become a vast wheat-field, and huge quantities of grain from the central and northern counties sought shipment to Eastern ports. The Huron River, emptying into Lake Erie, was navigable within a few miles of the village, and provided an admirable outlet. Large granaries were established, and proved so successful that local capital was tempted into the project of making a tow-path canal from Lockwood Landing all the way to Milan itself. The quaint old Moravian mission and quondam Indian settlement of one hundred inhabitants found itself of a sudden one of the great grain ports of the world, and bidding fair to rival Russian Odessa. A number of grain warehouses, or primitive elevators, were built along the bank of the canal, and the produce of the region poured in immediately, arriving in wagons drawn by four or six horses with loads of a hundred bushels. No fewer than six hundred wagons came clattering in, and as many as twenty sail vessels were loaded with thirty-five thousand bushels of grain, during a single day. The canal was capable of being navigated by craft of from two hundred to two hundred and fifty tons burden, and the demand for such vessels soon led to the development of a brisk ship-building industry, for which the abundant forests of the region supplied the necessary lumber. An evidence of the activity in this direction is furnished by the fact that six revenue cutters were launched at this port in these brisk days of its prime.

Samuel Edison, versatile, buoyant of temper, and ever optimistic, would thus appear to have pitched his tent with shrewd judgment. There was plenty of occupation ready to his hand, and more than one enterprise received his attention; but he devoted his energies chiefly to the making of shingles, for which there was a large demand locally and along the lake. Canadian lumber was used principally in this industry. The wood was imported in "bolts" or pieces three feet long. A bolt made two shingles; it was sawn asunder by hand, then split and shaved. None but first-class timber was used, and such

shingles outlasted far those made by machinery with their cross-grain cut. A house in Milan, on which some of those shingles were put in 1844, was still in excellent condition forty-two years later. Samuel Edison did well at this occupation, and employed several men, but there were other outlets from time to time for his business activity and speculative disposition.

Edison's mother was an attractive and highly educated woman, whose influence upon his disposition and intellect has been profound and lasting. She was born in Chenango County, New York, in 1810, and was the daughter of the Rev. John Elliott, a Baptist minister and descendant of an old Revolutionary soldier, Capt. Ebenezer Elliott, of Scotch descent. The old captain was a fine and picturesque type. He fought all through the long War of Independence—seven years—and then appears to have settled down at Stonington, Connecticut. There, at any rate, he found his wife, "grandmother Elliott," who was Mercy Peckham, daughter of a Scotch Quaker. Then came the residence in New York State, with final removal to Vienna, for the old soldier, while drawing his pension at Buffalo, lived in the little Canadian town, and there died, over 100 years old. The family was evidently one of considerable culture and deep religious feeling, for two of Mrs. Edison's uncles and two brothers were also in the same Baptist ministry. As a young woman she became a teacher in the public high school at Vienna, and thus met her husband, who was residing there. The family never consisted of more than three children, two boys and a girl. A trace of the Canadian environment is seen in the fact that Edison's elder brother was named William Pitt, after the great English statesman. Both his brother and the sister exhibited considerable ability. William Pitt Edison as a youth was so clever with his pencil that it was proposed to send him to Paris as an art student. In later life he was manager of the local street railway lines at Port Huron, Michigan, in which he was heavily interested. He also owned a good farm near that town, and during the ill-health at the close of his life, when compelled to spend much of the time indoors, he devoted himself almost entirely to sketching. It has been noted by intimate observers of Thomas A. Edison that in discussing any project or new idea his first impulse is to take up any piece of paper available and make drawings of it. His voluminous note-books are a mass of sketches. Mrs-Tannie Edison Bailey, the sister, had, on the other hand, a great deal of literary ability, and spent much of her time in writing.

The great inventor, whose iron endurance and stern will have enabled him to wear down all his associates by work sustained through arduous days and sleepless nights, was not at all strong as a child, and was of fragile appearance. He had an abnormally large but well-shaped head, and it is said that the local doctors feared he might have brain trouble. In fact, on account of his assumed delicacy, he was not allowed to go to school for some years, and even when he did attend for a short time the results were not encouraging—his mother being hotly indignant upon hearing that the teacher had spoken of him to an inspector as "addled." The youth was, indeed, fortunate far beyond the ordinary in having a mother at once loving, well-informed, and ambitious, capable herself, from her experience as a teacher, of undertaking and giving him an education better than could be secured in the local schools of the day. Certain it is that under this simple regime studious habits were formed and a taste for literature developed that have lasted to this day. If ever there was a man who tore the heart out of books it is Edison, and what has once been read by him is never forgotten if useful or worthy of submission to the test of experiment.

But even thus early the stronger love of mechanical processes and of probing natural forces manifested itself. Edison has said that he never saw a statement in any book as to such things that he did not involuntarily challenge, and wish to demonstrate as either right or wrong. As a mere child the busy scenes of the canal and the grain warehouses were of consuming interest, but the work in the ship-

building yards had an irresistible fascination. His questions were so ceaseless and innumerable that the penetrating curiosity of an unusually strong mind was regarded as deficiency in powers of comprehension, and the father himself, a man of no mean ingenuity and ability, reports that the child, although capable of reducing him to exhaustion by endless inquiries, was often spoken of as rather wanting in ordinary acumen. This apparent dulness is, however, a quite common incident to youthful genius.

The constructive tendencies of this child of whom his father said once that he had never had any boyhood days in the ordinary sense, were early noted in his fondness for building little plank roads out of the debris of the yards and mills. His extraordinarily retentive memory was shown in his easy acquisition of all the songs of the lumber gangs and canal men before he was five years old. One incident tells how he was found one day in the village square copying laboriously the signs of the stores. A highly characteristic event at the age of six is described by his sister. He had noted a goose sitting on her eggs and the result. One day soon after, he was missing. By-and-by, after an anxious search, his father found him sitting in a nest he had made in the barn, filled with goose-eggs and hens' eggs he had collected, trying to hatch them out.

One of Mr. Edison's most vivid recollections goes back to 1850, when as a child three or four years old he saw camped in front of his home six covered wagons, "prairie schooners," and witnessed their departure for California. The great excitement over the gold discoveries was thus felt in Milan, and these wagons, laden with all the worldly possessions of their owners, were watched out of sight on their long journey by this fascinated urchin, whose own discoveries in later years were to tempt many other argonauts into the auriferous realms of electricity.

Another vivid memory of this period concerns his first realization of the grim mystery of death. He went off one day with the son of the wealthiest man in the town to bathe in the creek. Soon after they entered the water the other boy disappeared. Young Edison waited around the spot for half an hour or more, and then, as it was growing dark, went home puzzled and lonely, but silent as to the occurrence. About two hours afterward, when the missing boy was being searched for, a man came to the Edison home to make anxious inquiry of the companion with whom he had last been seen. Edison told all the circumstances with a painful sense of being in some way implicated. The creek was at once dragged, and then the body was recovered.

Edison had himself more than one narrow escape. Of course he fell in the canal and was nearly drowned; few boys in Milan worth their salt omitted that performance. On another occasion he encountered a more novel peril by falling into the pile of wheat in a grain elevator and being almost smothered. Holding the end of a skate-strap for another lad to shorten with an axe, he lost the top of a finger. Fire also had its perils. He built a fire in a barn, but the flames spread so rapidly that, although he escaped himself, the barn was wholly destroyed, and he was publicly whipped in the village square as a warning to other youths. Equally well remembered is a dangerous encounter with a ram that attacked him while he was busily engaged digging out a bumblebee's nest near an orchard fence. The animal knocked him against the fence, and was about to butt him again when he managed to drop over on the safe side and escape. He was badly hurt and bruised, and no small quantity of arnica was needed for his wounds.

Meantime little Milan had reached the zenith of its prosperity, and all of a sudden had been deprived of its flourishing grain trade by the new Columbus, Sandusky & Hocking Railroad; in fact, the short canal was one of the last efforts of its kind in this country to compete with the new means of transportation. The bell of the locomotive was everywhere ringing the death-knell of effective water haulage, with such dire results that, in 1880, of the 4468 miles of American freight canal, that had cost \$214,000,000, no fewer than 1893 miles had been abandoned, and of the remaining 2575 miles quite a large proportion was not paying expenses. The short Milan canal suffered with the rest, and to-day lies well-nigh obliterated, hidden in part by vegetable gardens, a mere grass-grown depression at the foot of the winding, shallow valley. Other railroads also prevented any further competition by the canal, for a branch of the Wheeling & Lake Erie now passes through the village, while the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern runs a few miles to the south.

The owners of the canal soon had occasion to regret that they had disdained the overtures of enterprising railroad promoters desirous of reaching the village, and the consequences of commercial isolation rapidly made themselves felt. It soon became evident to Samuel Edison and his wife that the cozy brick home on the bluff must be given up and the struggle with fortune resumed elsewhere. They were well-to-do, however, and removing, in 1854, to Port Huron, Michigan, occupied a large colonial house standing in the middle of an old Government fort reservation of ten acres overlooking the wide expanse of the St. Clair River just after it leaves Lake Huron. It was in many ways an ideal homestead, toward which the family has always felt the strongest attachment, but the association with Milan has never wholly ceased. The old house in which Edison was born is still occupied (in 1910) by Mr. S. O. Edison, a half-brother of Edison's father, and a man of marked inventive ability. He was once prominent in the iron-furnace industry of Ohio, and was for a time associated in the iron trade with the father of the late President McKinley. Among his inventions may be mentioned a machine for making fuel from wheat straw, and a smoke-consuming device.

This birthplace of Edison remains the plain, substantial little brick house it was originally: one-storied, with rooms finished on the attic floor. Being built on the hillside, its basement opens into the rear yard. It was at first heated by means of open coal grates, which may not have been altogether adequate in severe winters, owing to the altitude and the north-eastern exposure, but a large furnace is one of the more modern changes. Milan itself is not materially unlike the smaller Ohio towns of its own time or those of later creation, but the venerable appearance of the big elm-trees that fringe the trim lawns tells of its age. It is, indeed, an extremely neat, snug little place, with well-kept homes, mostly of frame construction, and flagged streets crossing each other at right angles. There are no poor—at least, everybody is apparently well-to-do. While a leisurely atmosphere pervades the town, few idlers are seen. Some of the residents are engaged in local business; some are occupied in farming and grape culture; others are employed in the iron-works near-by, at Norwalk. The stores and places of public resort are gathered about the square, where there is plenty of room for hitching when the Saturday trading is done at that point, at which periods the fitful bustle recalls the old wheat days when young Edison ran with curiosity among the six and eight horse teams that had brought in grain. This square is still covered with fine primeval forest trees, and has at its centre a handsome soldiers' monument of the Civil War, to which four paved walks converge. It is an altogether pleasant and unpretentious town, which cherishes with no small amount of pride its association with the name of Thomas Alva Edison.

In view of Edison's Dutch descent, it is rather singular to find him with the name of Alva, for the Spanish Duke of Alva was notoriously the worst tyrant ever known to the Low Countries, and his evil

deeds occupy many stirring pages in Motley's famous history. As a matter of fact, Edison was named after Capt. Alva Bradley, an old friend of his father, and a celebrated ship-owner on the Lakes. Captain Bradley died a few years ago in wealth, while his old associate, with equal ability for making money, was never able long to keep it (differing again from the Revolutionary New York banker from whom his son's other name, "Thomas," was taken).

Source:

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