

Famous Floridians: Thomas Alva Edison

One of the outstanding geniuses in the history of technology, Thomas Edison earned patents for more than a thousand inventions, including the electric light, the phonograph, and the motion-picture camera. These three inventions gave rise to giant industries—electric utilities, phonograph and record companies, and the film industry—thus changing the work and leisure habits of people throughout the world. The period from 1879 to 1900, when Edison produced and perfected most of his devices, has been called the Age of Edison.

Edison was the youngest of seven children. He began to lose his hearing after having scarlet fever as a young child. As he grew older, his deafness increased until finally he was totally deaf in his left ear and had only 10% hearing in his right ear. Edison did not consider this a “handicap” and said that it was rather an advantage as it gave him more time to think because he did not have to listen to foolish “small talk.”



Edison patented more than 1,000 inventions.

Although Edison was an inquisitive child, his teachers considered him to be a dull student. Because of his hearing problems, he had difficulty following the lessons and his school attendance became sporadic. Nevertheless, Edison became a voracious reader and at age 10, he set up a laboratory in his basement.

When his mother could no longer stand the smell of his chemistry lab, Edison took a job as a trainboy on the railway and established a new lab in an empty freight car. He was 12 at the time. He also began printing a weekly newspaper.

While Edison was working for the railroad, something happened that changed the course of his career. Edison saved the life of a station official’s child, who had fallen onto the tracks of an oncoming train. For his bravery, the boy’s father taught Edison how to use the telegraph. In 1868, at age 21, he developed a telegraphic vote-recording machine, the first of his inventions to be patented.

Edison slept little for he was gripped by a passion for manipulating electrical currents in new ways. In 1876, he set up a laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey where he could devote his full attention to invention. He promised that he would turn out a minor invention every ten days and a big invention every six months.

In 1878, the Edison Electric Light Company, the predecessor of today's General Electric Company, was formed. Also that year, his most original invention, the phonograph, was patented. Edison took tin foil, wrapped it around a cylinder and casually said, "This machine is going to talk." He recited "Mary had a little lamb" into the strange device and to everyone's amazement (even Edison's) the machine repeated the words exactly.

In his middle years, Edison began to dislike winter weather in the north. He decided to try spending winters in Florida. He could afford it by then. He discovered Fort Myers and bought land in the small Gulf Coast community. In 1901, he began spending every winter there. The comings and goings of the famous man were the talk of what was then little more than a coastal village. Edison returned the community's affection by bringing 2,000 royal palms from Cuba to plant along main thoroughfares in the city.

Edison traveled around the world collecting many kinds of plants and trees for his experiments. In the small laboratory in his Fort Myers home, Edison experimented with using plant and tree fibers as a filament for his electric lights. He also directed a search for a domestic plant that would produce rubber as insurance against the day when supplies of the natural product from abroad might be disrupted by war.

Today, visitors to Thomas Edison's laboratory can see where he conducted experiments. Many of his inventions, including his famous filament light bulbs, are located in the museum. There is also a tour of Edison's home. The home was shipped to Fort Myers from New England and contains the original interior.

Visitors can also see Edison's concrete swimming pool, which was one of the first to be built in Florida. Edison and his guests would enjoy this pool and the surrounding grounds, which included



A view inside Edison's laboratory.

many of the plants and trees used in his experiments. Each February, Fort Myers celebrates Edison's legacy with the Pageant of Light.

Throughout his career, Edison directed his studies to devices that could satisfy real needs and come into popular use. Indeed, it may be said that in applying himself to technology, he was fulfilling the ideals of democracy, for he centered his attention upon projects that would increase the convenience and pleasure of mankind.