Brief History of the Life of Thomas A. Edison

Samuel Ogden Edison Jr. (1804-1896), Thomas Edison's father, was born in Marshalltown, Nova Scotia. The Edison family migrated to Vienna, Ontario, Canada in the spring of 1811. On September 12, 1828, Samuel Jr. married the local school teacher, Nancy Mathews Elliott (1810-1871). Samuel and Nancy had four children when they lived in Canada: Marion Wallace (1829-1900). Samuel joined the rebels and fought against the Canadian government in the Papineau Mackenzie Rebellion in December, 1837. Samuel Edison fled through the woods and traveled over 75 miles through Canada until he safely reached the United States at Port Huron, Michigan. He became friends with Capt. Alva Bradley of Vermilion, Ohio. Captain Bradley brought Samuel to Milan, Ohio about 1838 and Samuel set up a shingle mill near the Milan Canal, a very busy grain port on the Huron River. By 1839, he was able to bring his wife and four children to the bustling canal town. Samuel built a three-story brick home in 1841. Three more children were born in Milan, including Thomas Alva in 1847.

When "little Al", as he was called, was about five, he roamed around the town of Milan; there were so many interesting things he was so curious about, but sometimes he got into trouble. He would go down the hill behind his house to the shipyards by the Canal Basin and watch the men building boats for Great Lakes shipping. He asked the shipbuilders hundreds of questions; some they could answer and some they couldn't. If his father couldn't answer his questions any better, he would turn to him and say, "Well, why DON'T you know?" He memorized all the rowdy songs that the
lumber gangs sang and built little roads with wooden planks, just like the big ones that came through town. He was a pest at the local telegraph office, always asking questions about how the instruments worked. Deciding that birds could fly because they ate worms, he mixed mashed worms with water and convinced a neighbor girl to drink the concoction. She got sick and he got a sound spanking. When he and a friend decided to start a bonfire in a barn, it burned down. His father finally took him to the Public Square for a spanking to try to calm down a little of the "curiosity".

Sometimes his curiosity led to some hilarious acts. One day he watched a chicken sitting on her eggs in the barn of his older sister’s farm just outside of town. Young Al decided to try to hatch goose eggs in the same way; only by sitting on them himself. His sister’s husband Homer observed him in the act and laughed uproariously at the sight. His sister Marion was very kind, though and encouraged him to continue to try to figure out how things worked.

Although the town of Milan and the Milan Canal were very prosperous for about 10 years, there were railroads being built all around in the area that were taking away the trade that the Canal could have, because they could transport the grain and other goods faster and cheaper. Sadly, they brought about the end of the Canal’s prosperity.

The Edisons decided to move to Port Huron, Michigan in the spring of 1854. Tom was enrolled in the Family School for Boys and Girls, but he was not a well child. He had suffered through a bout of scarlet fever, and constantly had colds and other respiratory afflictions. He started to have a slight hearing loss as a result of his illnesses and he began to experience a kind of "attention deficit disorder" that led to his very strict teacher, the Rev. G.B. Englelabeling him as "addled". Young Tom was so upset that he went home and told his mother, who decided to keep him at home and teach him herself until he was twelve years old and, among other things, she introduced him to
reading, which he took to like a duck to water. He was such an avid reader, that he devoured every book in sight on all topics: history, literature, science, mathematics, and language. He worked on experiments in the basement of his home and again, his enthusiasm and unbridled curiosity got him into trouble many times.

When he was twelve, his father Samuel found him a job on the Grand Trunk Railroad that went through Port Huron. He became a "candy butcher", selling newspapers and other small goods that people would like, traveling by train. It was an exciting job, and young Al decided that he wanted to publish a newspaper himself to sell on the train, and the Grand Trunk Herald was begun. He only published the newspaper for about six months. He also sold vegetables from his father's farm at a stand in Port Huron.

At fifteen, young Al preferred to be called Tom. One morning, at the railroad station, he saved a very small child named Jimmy Mackenzie from being run over by a railroad train. A very grateful father asked if he would like to learn how to use the telegraph, and his next occupation was born. He mastered the skill in three months and landed a job in the Western Union telegraph office near Port Huron. He was a very accurate telegrapher and developed a very neat, compact handwriting was very speedy; translating words into morse code to send messages and decoding the morse code into writing when receiving messages on his telegraph instrument. As a telegrapher, he often moved from one place to another, and Tom worked in Canada, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Boston, Massachusetts. He never stopped being curious or experimenting with things.

In Boston, at the age of 21 in 1868, he made his first invention, the electric vote counter. It was way ahead of what people had seen before. He petitioned the Congress of the U.S. to buy his recorder, but they told him they didn't want to speed up voting at all, so he failed to sell it.

Tom was out of money and went to New York City and found a job there with the Western Union. He improved their universal stock ticker, which would print out stock prices in morse code on a long sheet of paper. He was able
to make the ticker print out in readable text instead of Morse code. It was a great improvement, but he was afraid to ask his employer for money, thinking he should ask for at least $5,000, so he said, "Make me an offer." He received about $40,000!

He was energized and set himself up in business in Newark, N.J., where he had several shops. When he was in Newark, he fell in love and married one of his employees, Mary Stillwell on Christmas Day, 1871. They had three children (Marion, Tom Jr. and William) from 1873 to 1878. Marion and Tom Jr. were called "Dot" and "Dash", after the symbols used in telegraph code, called Morse Code.

In Newark, Tom worked on the automatic repeating telegraph and the quadruplex telegraph, which sent out two messages in different directions at once on the same wires. He soon acquired a reputation as a first-rank inventor. Near the end of 1875, observations of strange sparks in telegraph instruments led Tom into a public scientific controversy over what he called "etheric force," which only later was understood to be radio waves.

Tom set up a new industrial research facility in Menlo Park, NJ in 1876 that had both machine shops and laboratories. He developed three of his greatest inventions here in the next five years. He took the invention of Alexander Graham Bell (the telephone) and improved it with the use of a "carbon transmitter", which would be used in telephones for the next 100 years. That research led him in 1877 to design his most favorite invention that recorded sound and played it back - the phonograph. Thomas Edison has received two "Grammys" for his success in the recording business, one in 1977 on the 100th anniversary of the phonograph, and one in 2010 for all his other technical achievements in sound recording. The amazing invention made him known around the world as the "Wizard of Menlo Park."
In 1879, the invention for which he is most well known is one he worked on really hard for a long time..... the incandescent lamp, was finally successful when Mr. Edison got the lamp to burn for 40 hours. After that, he set up whole systems of electric lighting in the United States and around the world.

His wife Mary died in 1884, only 28 years old. Two years later, Tom married his second wife, Mina Miller of Akron, Ohio. Her father was a very successful businessman. They also had three children: Madeleine, Charles, and Theodore. When he married Mina, Mr. Edison moved to a very large house called “Glenmont” near his booming business in West Orange, NJ.

It was at his laboratories in West Orange where Mr. Edison developed more than half of his 1,093 American patents for his inventions. It was here that he improved his phonograph in 1888. He invented the movie camera, which he called the kinetograph, and then improved the movie projector for individual viewing, which he called the kinetoscope in 1894. He got into the movie making business, starting in a funny little movie studio in a black building he called “the Black Maria” in 1893. He made many short movies that “talked” by using the sound from his phonographs.

Mr. Edison worked very long days and took naps where he could. This is what he said about being an inventor. "If you want a recipe for how to succeed as an inventor I can give it to you in a very few words, and it will do for any other business in which you might wish to engage. First, find out if there is a real need for the thing which you want to invent. Then start in thinking about it. Get up at six o’clock the first morning and work until two o’clock the next morning. Keep on doing this until something in your line develops itself. If it doesn’t do so pretty soon, you had better shorten your sleeping hours and work a little harder while you are awake. If you follow that rule, you can succeed as an inventor, or as anything else, for that matter."

In the 1880’s and early 90’s Mr. Edison picked up some experiments he’d started a few years before; separating iron and gold ores, work he had begun in 1879. During the 1890’s he built a full-
scale plant in northern New Jersey to process iron ore, but it was pretty much a failure. Another project he tried very hard to make work was the electric railroad. He had put a lot of time and energy into these, but they never were commercial successes, but it didn't discourage him at all; he always said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

From 1900 to 1910, Mr. Edison worked on developing the nickel-iron-alkaline storage battery, succeeding after 50 thousand experiments and spending a million dollars. He hoped to make automobiles run by electricity, but the gasoline engine, invented by someone else, won out. In many ways, Mr. Edison was very much ahead of his time. He made all kinds of things in his labs for industry. He always worked very, very hard and the name "Edison" was on almost every household appliance and Edison phonographs were in most homes in America! He had 1093 patents with the US Patent Office!
In his later years, Mr. Edison tried to make a home that everybody could afford to buy, so he decided to make houses out of concrete! Although you probably wouldn't want to live in one, there are still some Edison concrete houses in Union, NJ.

It wasn't all work for Mr. Edison though, he liked to go camping, only it wasn't exactly like we would do it today. Mr. Edison had several very famous friends who went with him, Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, John Burroughs and even the President of the US, Mr. Warren G. Harding. There had to be lots of automobiles and servants to take supplies, but the strangest thing was that the men camped in their suits on, instead of wearing something more informal! One of the things Mr. Edison liked to do while camping was to curl up under a tree in the afternoon for a nap.....in his suit!

Mr. and Mrs. Edison had a winter house in Florida, which they called Seminole Lodge. It was on a large piece of land they bought along the Caloosahatchee River in Fort Myers. They spent 29 winters there and a small lab was built for more of Mr. Edison's experiments. It was here that Mr. Edison did his last work; he wanted to find a plant that would grow in the US for a source of rubber, instead of having to rely on rubber from foreign countries. He tested over 13,000 plants, and finally found that the Goldenrod was best, but he was getting older, and he was tiring out too much to campaign for his new product.
Thomas Edison died at his home in New Jersey at the age of 84 on October 18, 1931. On October 21, the day of Mr. Edison's funeral, US President Herbert Hoover asked everyone to dim their lights for one minute in tribute to the great man who had invented most of the important things that people used in the 20th Century. He and Mina Edison are buried on the grounds of his home Glenmont, in NJ. His first wife, Mary, is buried at Fairmont Cemetery in Newark, NJ, along with two of their children.

Edison’s last three children were in the public eye more than his first three. His daughter Madeleine was very smart and even ran for Congress. She also sat on the Board of Directors of the Western Union Company. It was Madeleine who opened the Edison Birthplace to the public in 1947. Charles acted as the president of his father’s company, became the US Secretary of the Navy, and was the governor of the state of New Jersey. Theodore was most like his father, in that he tried inventing. He started out as a lab assistant in his father’s company and eventually started his own company and had 80 patents to his name.

If you want to know more about Thomas Edison, try these websites:

www.thomedison.org - Edison Birthplace Museum, Milan, Ohio

www.nps.gov/archive/edis/home.htm - Edison’s home & lab in West Orange, NJ

www.efwefla.org - Edison & Ford Winter Estates, Ft. Myers, Florida

www.hfmgv.org/village - Greenfield Village & the Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, MI.... where Edison’s Menlo Park lab was rebuilt.

www.menloparkmuseum.com - Edison Memorial Tower & Museum in Edison, NJ

www.phmuseum.org - Thomas Edison Depot Museum in Port Huron, MI