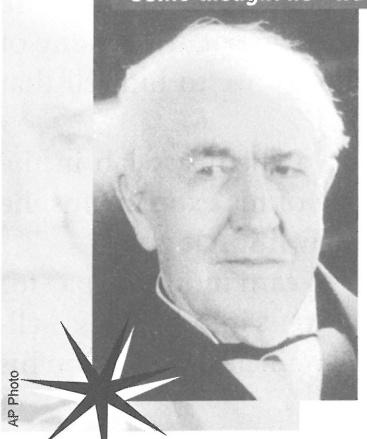
Thomas Alva Edison

Some thought he "wasn't quite right in the head."



AP Photo

As a boy:

He was born in 1847 in Milan, Ohio, and even as a young boy, his curiosity was always getting him into trouble.

He always wanted to know "why." At age three he fell into a grain elevator and almost drowned in the grain because he wanted to see how the elevator worked. And at age four, his father found him squatting on some duck eggs in a cold barn to see if he could hatch the eggs instead of the mother duck.

He had very little formal education because his teachers thought his constant questions were a sign of stupidity. So, when he was seven, his mother, who had been a teacher, took him out of school and taught him at home.

Some of the neighbors thought this strange child with the small body and unusually large head who asked so many questions must be "addled," and even the local doctor feared that he might have "brain trouble" because of his very large head.

He loved to read and chemistry books were his favorite books, but he did more than just read them. He tried many of the experiments the books described to prove to himself that the facts in the books were really true.

When he was about ten, he set up a chemistry lab in the basement in his home, and during one of his experiments, he set the basement on fire and nearly blew himself up.

Then when he was twelve, in order to earn money to pay for the chemicals for his experiments, he went into business selling candy and newspapers on the local train and worked on his scientific experiments in his spare time.

He was forced to stop his experiments temporarily when a stick of phosphorus started a fire in the crude lab he had set up in the baggage car. The conductor threw him and all his equipment off the train at the next stop.

It seemed he was always experimenting. Once he gave a friend a triple dose of seidlitz powders, hoping that enough gas would be generated to enable him to fly. This resulted in terrible agonies for his friend and a whipping for him.

At sixteen he was given the chance to learn how to be a telegraph operator, and he then became as fascinated by electricity as he had been by chemistry.

Unfortunately, he was a very undependable telegraph operator because his mind was usually more on the ideas in his head than on the work he was supposed to be doing.

During his first year as a telegrapher, he was fired from four jobs because he spent so much of his time reading books, performing experiments, or catching up on his sleep.

In telegraphy circles he became known as "The Looney" because he spent so much of his time reading and experimenting.

The other telegraph operators laughed at him and made jokes about his shabby clothes and shaggy hair. And his employers were often impatient with him, considering him to be "an impractical, dreamy young fellow who would probably never amount to much."

As a man:

By age twenty-one, he had changed from experimenter to inventor and had decided to work on his inventions full time. He had so many ideas for inventions that he knew he would have to work very hard to do everything he wanted to do.

As the market for his inventions grew, he found he needed a larger facility. So in 1876 he moved to Menlo Park, New Jersey, where he established his own research center. There he gathered together the best craftsmen and scientists he could find and put them to work in what he called his "idea factory."

A year later he introduced his first great invention, the phonograph, to the world. With his invention of the phonograph, he became a celebrity, but this was just the beginning.

In 1879, after many months of hard work, he demonstrated his greatest invention—the electric lightbulb—which changed the way people lived forever.

All through his life he asked questions and wanted to know "why." Then he proceeded to figure out a new and better way of doing things.

He had infinite patience and seldom became discouraged. He tackled every problem with a positive attitude and never gave up until he had solved it. He frequently worked eighteen

hours a day, and during his life, he was granted more than a thousand separate patents for his inventions.

It is because of his natural curiosity and belief in hard work that our world today is a much better place in which to live.

No other man has done so much to apply scientific discovery to everyday life as he did with his inventions of the phonograph (which he considered his greatest invention), the electric lightbulb, the typewriter, the dictating machine, the electric dynamo, the motion picture camera, and many others. He also improved such inventions as the telephone and the telegraph.

Never discouraged by what other people called his "failures," he saw them as necessary steps in the scientific process.

He made and directed the first silent movie and invented the "talking picture" by combining two of his greatest inventions: the phonograph and the motion picture camera. Through his inventions of the phonograph and the motion picture camera, he has probably done more to entertain the world than any other man.

Although he became a multimillionaire, he remained modest and was always happiest when in his lab working on a new invention.

He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1928, and on the day he died, at age eighty-four, President Herbert Hoover asked everyone in America to turn off their electric lights for one hour in tribute to the inventive genius of this man.

He was one of the greatest inventors the world has ever known and more than attained his goal of trying to improve the well-being of the common man. He has provably brought more comfort and pleasure into our daily lives than any other inventor in history.

"Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration."
—Thomas Alva Edison (1847–1931)