

THOMAS ALVA EDISON commenced life as a newspaper boy. Although he became the world's greatest inventor he had neither a university nor even a secondary school education. He was born in a humble little cottage.

Edison may well be regarded as the "wonder man" of the present age, possessing as he did a rare inventive genius which he turned to such good service that it has been said of him he added more to the material elements of civilisation, by his own inventions and by what they have suggested to others, than any other man in the history of the world. Edison's name is assured of immortality if it were due only to the fact that the world is indebted to him for the gramophone, the motion picture and the electric light of the bulb type. But the number of his inventions runs into many hundreds including those in connection with the telephone, electric dynamos, electric motograph, electric meter and electric traction.

Edison was not a scientist within the commonly accepted scope of the term—he held no university science degrees (excepting honorary), but he had a natural bent for inventive work and properly followed it, and his efforts were always directed to achieving something that the world greatly needed. He himself admitted that "pure science" never occupied his attention very deeply, and when he had established his fame he employed a staff of scientists and highly-skilled technicians to execute his ideas. This fact gave rise to the suggestion which occasionally cropped up that Edison owed much to the ideas of his assistants, and that the fact was never properly acknowledged.

Theodore Waters, writing of Edison in "McClure's Magazine" quoted W. S. Mallory, who was connected with Edison's ore-milling venture, as having stated: "I want to say, and I know whereof I speak, for I have been with him night and day for several years, that 99 per cent. of the credit of all the invention and new work of this establishment is due personally to Mr. Edison. I have heard it stated that Mr. Edison is an organiser who uses the brain of other men. Nothing could be further from the truth than this." Several others who were associated with Edison have testified similarly.

It has been established that the paternal ancestors of Edison arrived in the United States direct from Holland. They landed about 1730 at Elizabethport, New Jersey. They went inland a few miles, and settled in the village of Caldwell, where they prospered. Longevity appears to have been a characteristic of the early American Edisons, for a former Thomas Edison attained the age of 104 years. After the American Revolution, John Edison, who was a Loyalist, emigrated to Nova Scotia where his son Samuel (the inventor's father) was born. In 1811 the family went to Bayfield in Upper Canada (now Ontario). Later John Edison moved to Vienna (Canada) where he died at the age of 102 years. The inventor's father Samuel married in 1828 a Miss Nancy Elliott, an 18-year-old teacher in

From

Newspaper Boy

to

America's Greatest Inventor

The Extraordinary Biography of Thomas Edison

by Ivan M. Levy

The great inventor is one who has walked forth upon the industrial world, not from universities, but from hovels; not as clad in silks and decked with honours, but as clad in fustian and grimed with soot and oil.

—Isaac Taylor.

the Vienna High School. Her father was the Rev. John Elliott, a Baptist clergyman of Scottish descent. Edison's father, six feet in height and of powerful physique, joined an attempt to seize the lieutenant-governor and set up a provisional government. The movement was a complete failure, and, with others, Samuel Edison fled across the border to the United States and ultimately settled in Milan, Ohio, in 1842. Here he established a workshop, and made roofing shingles, employing several men. On February 11, 1847, Thomas Alva Edison was born in this busy little Ohio town. The Edison home, a substantial-looking brick cottage, is still there, and is venerated by the inhabitants.

In his early childhood, the great inventor was very small and somewhat frail for his years, and was hardly strong enough to attend school. He was described as a rather grave, old-fashioned child, always engaged in making something or other, or asking questions with a solemn persistency. The little chap had his share of escapades and narrow escapes during

childhood. He was nearly drowned in the local canal, and also fell into a great pile of wheat in a warehouse. "Al," as he was called, was almost suffocated before he could be pulled out of the grain. Again, he was holding a skate-strap for another boy to shorten by means of an axe which, however, accounted for the top of one of Edison's fingers.

In 1854 the Edison family moved to Port Huron, in Saint Clair County, Michigan, where the inventor's father set up in business as a dealer in horse-feed, grain and timber. And now young Edison went to school at Port Huron for three months.

THAT was the only school he ever attended, but his mother, who it will be remembered was formerly a school teacher, took up the task of educating "Al." Edison, strangely enough, was always a dunce at mathematics, and many years later, when in the height of his success, his researches often called for intricate mathematical calculations, and these he passed along to his associates.

Young Edison's experimental "bias" developed at an early age, and his parents told of a curious test of a theory he applied to a Dutch boy, Michael Oates, employed for small jobs by Edison's parents. To test a theory that gases so generated might enable a person to fly, young Edison induced the boy Oates to swallow a large quantity of Seidlitz powders. The ensuing results were painful not only to the victim but also to young Thomas, for he suffered an application of a switch reserved for emergency purposes behind the family clock.

The future inventor when a mere child obtained a copy of Parker's "School Philosophy" then much in use as a text-book in elementary physics, and many were the experiments outlined in it which he tried out. The cellar of their cottage was utilised by young Edison as his first laboratory, and he had a veritable lethal collection of 200 bottles care-



(From Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper.)

How different from modern recording! Yet these remarkable changes have been brought about since 1878, when the tin-foil phonograph invented by the great Edison was first used.