

## The Celebrity Inventor (HA)



Edison suffered a hearing loss as a child. But he turned his disability into an advantage in his career as a telegraph operator. “Unlike other operators,” he said “I was not bothered by the [noise of the] other instruments.” His efforts to improve the telegraph led eventually to his invention of the phonograph, a machine that played recorded sound.

**Thomas Alva Edison was a legend in his own time. In part, his fame came from inventing things that changed people’s lives—things we take for granted today like recorded music, the lightbulb, and movies. Edison was also a legend because he invented his own image. He knew how to get publicity and make himself a star.**

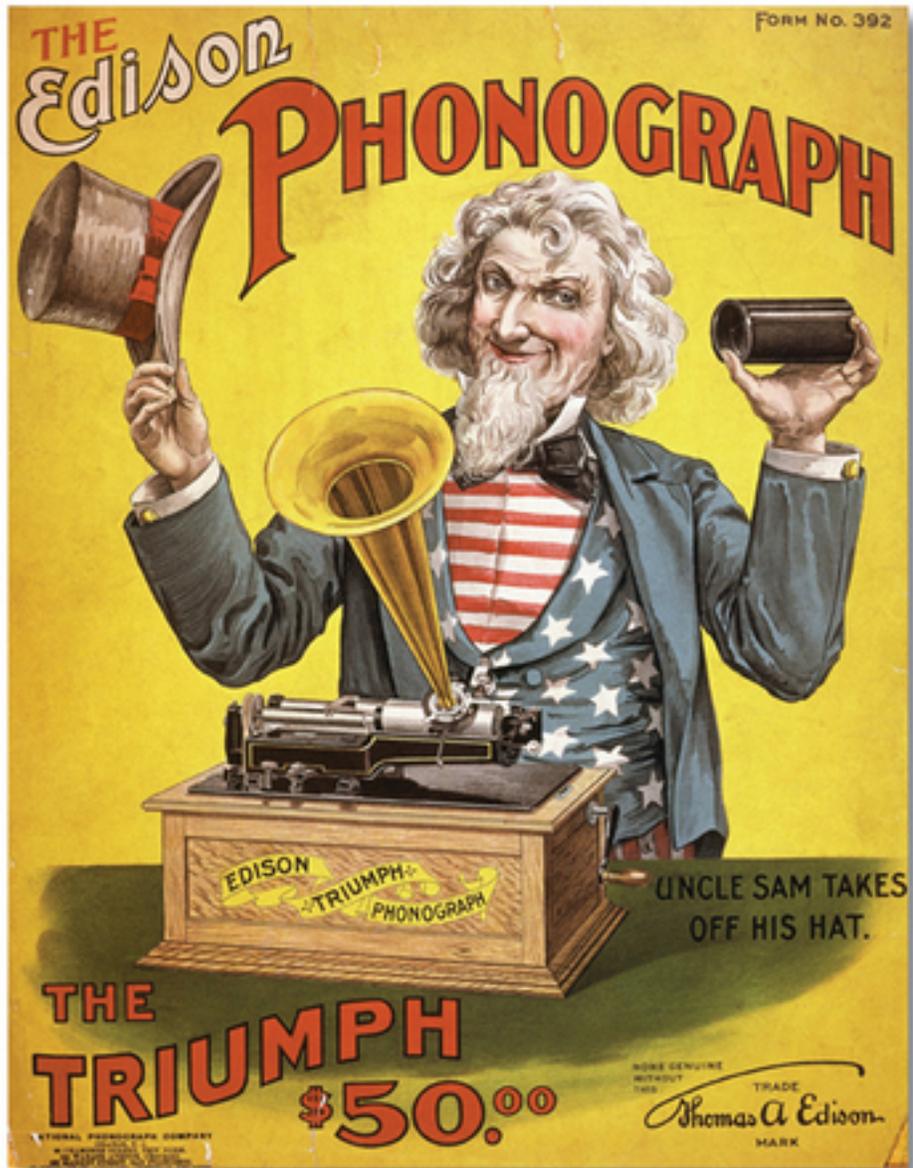
From her home in Norton, Kansas, Mrs. W. G. Lathrop felt moved to write a fan letter. The letter wasn’t going to a rock star, a movie star, or a sports hero. It was 1921, and Mrs. Lathrop was writing a fan letter to her favorite inventor, Thomas Edison. “Dear Sir,” she began,

*It is not always the privilege of a woman to thank personally the inventor of articles which make life livable for her sex. I feel that it is my duty as well as privilege to tell you how much we women of the small town are indebted to you . . . Positively as I hear my wash machine chugging along . . . as I write this it does seem as though I am entirely dependent on the fertile brain of one [who is] thousand[s of] miles away for every pleasure and labor saving device I have.*

Lathrop then filled in the specifics. She described how Edison’s inventions affected a typical day in her life.

*The house is lighted by electricity. I cook on a Westinghouse electric range, wash dishes in an electric dishwasher. An electric fan even helps to distribute the heat over part of the house . . . I wash clothes with an electric machine and iron on an electric mangle [pressing machine] and with an electric iron. I clean house with electric cleaners. I rest, take an electric massage and curl my hair on an electric iron . . . Then start the Victrola [record player] and . . . listen to [music], forgetting that I’m living in a tiny town of two thousand where nothing much ever happens.*

It is strange today to think about writing a letter like this one. But Thomas Edison was a celebrity. How did an inventor—someone who worked in a laboratory that was anything but glamorous—become so famous and well loved?



The phonograph amazed people around the world. In this advertisement, a smiling Uncle Sam shows off one of the cylinders used to play recorded sound.

## The Invention that Launched the Legend

No one but his mother would have guessed that little Thomas Edison would one day become a famous inventor. He was a poor student, “dreamy” and distracted. He doodled and didn’t complete his lessons. He had such a hard time at school that after only three months, his mother decided to teach him at home.

When he was 15, Edison learned how to run a telegraph machine. The telegraph used bursts of electric current to send messages quickly over long distances. Edison was fascinated by the machine.

It was while trying to improve the telegraph that Edison made a momentous discovery. He developed a machine that could record and transmit the sound of a human voice. He called it a phonograph.

It is hard to imagine today just how amazing this was. Until the phonograph, people had only heard the voices of those who were physically near them. But Edison had made a machine that could record a voice. The recording could be played when the speaker was nowhere to be seen. It could, in fact, be played long after the speaker had died. The phonograph seemed magical.

Soon, a promoter was traveling the country, demonstrating how the phonograph worked. Audiences were thrilled.

*You should hear me bring down the House by singing in the Phonograph . . . The effect when they hear me is stupendous, but when they hear the Phonograph reproducing my song with all its imperfections they endanger the walls with clamor.*

—Edward Johnson, 1878



Within about ten years after its invention, the phonograph had become a commercial product. For the first time, people could listen—and dance—to recorded music.

*The New York Sun* newspaper ran this headline about Edison and his phonograph on February 22, 1878: “A Man of Thirty One Revolutionizing the Whole World.” Thomas Edison became a celebrity.

Once Edison saw the public’s enthusiasm, he was more than happy to promote the new machine. By mid-1878, he published a list of ten possible uses for the phonograph. The list included recording books, music, and lectures. Edison also thought the phonograph could be used to teach languages and write letters. Today, we use recordings for all those purposes—and many more that even Edison could never have dreamed up.



“Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration,” Edison was fond of saying. His adoring public loved both images: inspired genius and hardworking inventor. In his lab in Menlo Park, New Jersey, Edison worked with assistants for two years to create a successful electric light.

## Electricity and the Lightbulb

Edison is most famous today for inventing the electric lightbulb. In fact, other inventors had been working on lightbulbs for 50 years. But it was Edison who solved the problem that had plagued them all: how to make a bulb that would burn for more than just a few minutes.

A lightbulb works by electric current moving through a filament (thread). When the filament gets hot, it gives off light. Other inventors knew this, but they had not been able to figure out what kind of filament to use. After years of trying to use platinum, Edison switched to carbon. A carbon-coated thread did the trick. It would not melt or catch fire, and it could produce light for hours.

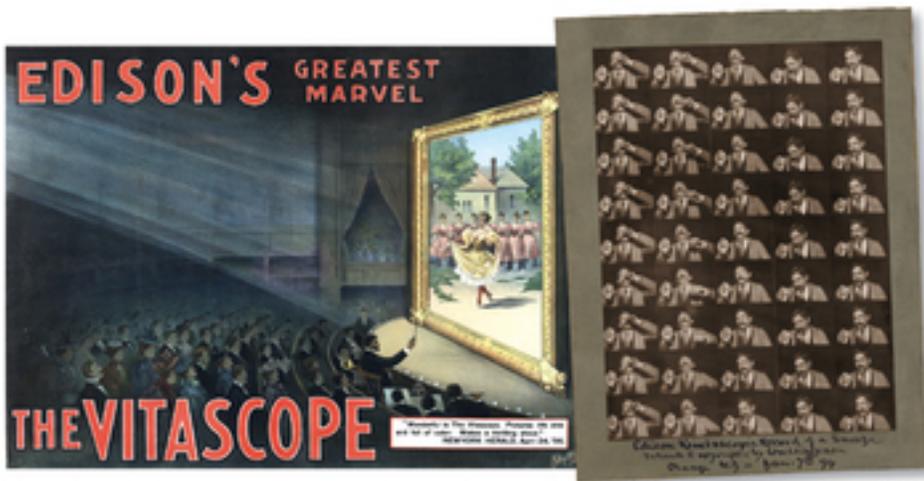
In October 1879, the *New York Herald* poetically described the light emitted by Edison's bulb. It was "like the mellow sunset of an Italian autumn . . . a little globe of sunshine, a veritable Aladdin's lamp," reporter Marshall Fox gushed. Better yet, it stayed lit for 13 and a half hours. Previous bulbs had lit up for only a few minutes.

A full year before he so impressed the *New York Herald*, Edison had announced that making a lightbulb was so simple that "everybody will wonder why they have never thought of it." Unfortunately, it was not so simple. When Edison made that statement, he was still struggling to get his electric lightbulb to work. But he was happy to keep the public interested with promises that the light from his bulb would last "almost forever."

At the same time that Edison was working on the lightbulb, he was also working on a way to distribute electricity. He planned to build a power plant on Pearl Street in lower Manhattan. The power plant would light the whole neighborhood.

Before the Pearl Street plant was finished, Edison had a private customer. William Vanderbilt, son of the railroad tycoon, wanted to outfit his house on Fifth Avenue with electricity. So Edison had an electrical power plant built in the basement. On the chosen evening, the lights came on as planned. Everything seemed to be going well— until someone noticed the smell of something burning. It turned out that the wallpaper had metallic thread in it and had almost caught fire. Mrs. Vanderbilt was not at all pleased. She demanded that the entire electrical system be removed.

At last, on September 4, 1882, the Pearl Street generator started up and a small part of Manhattan lit up. But it was not the earth-shattering event that some books describe. It had taken Edison four years to fulfill his promise of centrally generated electricity. The public had become bored. For his part, Edison was eager to start making money from his years of hard work. He was also ready to cement his reputation as an earth-changing inventor, regardless of how long it took him to follow through on his promises.



Thomas Edison was a savvy businessman. When he bought the rights to another successful projector, he took full credit for its invention and called it the Vitascope. The new movie projector could turn these 45 still pictures of a man sneezing (right) into a five-second moving picture.

## An Inventor Who Changed the World

Edison kept his inventions coming. As the 1800s came to a close, he applied himself and his staff to making moving pictures. He called his device a kinetoscope, which means "an instrument for viewing movement." He promised that it would do "for the Eye what the phonograph does for the Ear."

As with the phonograph, Edison did not immediately see how much people would like moving pictures. And as with the lightbulb, he was not the only inventor working on the device. Edison faced stiff competition. But in 1897, he starred in his own 30-second moving picture, *Mr. Edison at Work in His Chemical Laboratory*. The public loved it.

Thomas Edison had indeed changed the world. He invented—and helped invent through his competition with others—the phonograph, the electric lightbulb, the centralized distribution of electricity, the movies, and more. It is nearly impossible to imagine life today without any one of these or the later inventions they led to.

Decades before he died, Edison reached heights of celebrity and fame. The “Man Who Defeated Darkness,” the “Dean of Inventors,” and the “Greatest Citizen of the World” are just some of the titles given to him. He was happy to accept the praise, and people today are happy to accept his inventions.