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A Myth Reflects a Generation's Technological Disillusionment: Edison and the Electrification of Fort Myers

by MICHELE WEHRWEIN ALBION

OVER the past century and a half, Thomas Alva Edison has been variously regarded regionally, nationally, and globally as a wizard, an American icon, and a genius. He ushered in the modern era with his invention of the incandescent light, phonograph, and improvements to the battery, telephone, and motion picture. But accompanying Edison's accomplishments is a body of myth. Two related myths regarding the introduction of technology in Fort Myers, Florida, reflect Edison's ability to inspire fiction. These myths demonstrate how one generation's frustration with the failure of contemporary technology prompted it to create a tale of the previous generation's rejection of technology.

A legend exists in southwest Florida regarding Edison's attempt to provide electricity to Fort Myers. It probably originated in the 1930s but first appeared in print in 1947 when *Fort Myers News-Press* reporter Ronald Halgrim declared that "Edison offered to light Fort Myers with electricity free of charge but the village officials turned down the offer because they thought the glass enclosed lights would keep the cattle and chickens awake at night."¹ The legend of Edison's offer to electrify the town and the townspeople's alleged rejection persists, as does an accompanying myth that claims the inventor was so angered by this earlier rejection of

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1. Ronald Halgrim, *Edison Centennial 1847, 1947, Pageant of Light* (Fort Myers, 1947), 7, Pageant Programs 1947 file, Edison & Ford Winter Estates, Fort Myers. This is the first documentation of the myth, although oral histories confirm the story had been told for years previously. In an interview with the author, Chesley Perry, resident and former editor of the *Fort Myers News-Press*, confirmed the existence of the myth. Long-time resident Allen R. Ellis remembered the myth differently. According to his version, the town fathers refused Edison's offer because they were afraid the inventor would blow up the city. Nevertheless, Ellis' recollection confirms a perception that the town refused Edison's offer out of ignorance. Chesley Perry, interview by author, Fort Myers, January 13, 1993; Allen R. Ellis, interview by author, Fort Myers, January 10, 1994.



Thomas Edison, circa 1880s. *Photograph courtesy of the Edison & Ford Winter Estates, Fort Myers.*

his offer of electrification that he refused to provide lighting for the Edison bridge which was completed in 1931. These legends illustrate Edison's influence on the region's history and reflect on

those who created the myth. Unfortunately, they obscure the true history of Fort Myers' adoption of new technology.

The actual history of the introduction of technology in Fort Myers is infinitely more complicated. Following a serious illness, Edison spent the winter of 1885 convalescing in St. Augustine. After steady improvement, he grew restless and traveled to the state's west coast. On March 20, 1885, he arrived in the small frontier town of Fort Myers, which he described as "about fifty houses . . . mostly a cattle town— mostly cattle and saloons,— and the residents were mostly cattlemen or fishermen; cowboys were a very common sights [sic] on the streets."²

A decommissioned Union encampment, the newly incorporated town of Fort Myers had 349 residents, a fledgling newspaper, and primitive technology.³ At that time, most American urban centers were illuminated by networks of gas. Smaller, more remote areas relied on kerosene. Fort Myers residents used the most accessible and affordable technology to light their homes: tallow candles.⁴

During his visit to Fort Myers, Edison and his business partner Ezra Gilliland resolved to make the town the site of their winter residences. The inventor departed, "promising to return next year and do great things for Fort Myers with a forty horse-power engine and an electric light to illuminate the bluff."⁵ It was a stunning announcement.

As technology historian David E. Nye has noted, "In the 1880s the electric light was hardly the commonplace of today, controlled by a casual flick of a wall switch. It bordered on the supernatural

2. Thomas Edison, interview by anonymous, transcript, c. 1917, Edison General File, 1917, Edison National Historic Site, West Orange, NJ.

3. "Population Report," Records of the City Clerk, Fort Myers, October 6, 1995. This is a comprehensive population report combining information from U. S. Census records and tax rolls.

4. Kerosene, the lighting of choice for other rural Americans, was largely unavailable to Fort Myers residents. It was shipped to the state's isolated west coast, then brought up the Caloosahatchee River by schooner. Advertisements from the region document an exorbitant price of ninety cents for five gallons of kerosene. At the same time, lard sold for one-half cent for seven pounds. As a cattle town, Fort Myers rendered a great deal of lard that was then available at reasonable prices. See *Fort Myers Press*, February 10, 1895.

5. W. R. Lawson, "Florida: The State of Oranges-Groves," *Blackwood's Magazine* (September 1885), 325-26. Lawson's is the first documented instance of Edison's promise to light the town. The *Fort Myers Press* does not make independent references to Edison's promise until March 10, 1887, when it asked, "When will Edison light our town? We answer we do not know. . . ."

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and the Edison light . . . astounded people because it violated the natural order."⁶ The promise to Fort Myers represented almost inconceivable advancement, a technological leap of unparalleled proportions: light without the nuisance of spark, unbearable heat, or the danger of open flame.

The electric light was also the symbol of unfettered progress, the harbinger of other modern conveniences. On Edison's mere word, the *Fort Myers Press* boasted, "at the present rate of progress Fort Myers will be ready for electric lights and street railways before the winter is over."⁷ A municipality with a greater bovine than human population was thus offered a firm place on the cutting edge of technology far in advance of her frontier neighbors. When the initial members of the Edison party arrived in early 1886, the newspaper reported, "We have now got some of them, and when Mr. Edison arrives with his newly made wife, Fort Myers can laugh at her neighbors and defy competition."⁸

Thomas and Mina Edison arrived for their honeymoon in March 1886. The newly constructed Edison residence contained *electroliers*, electric chandeliers manufactured by Bergmann & Co., a subsidiary of Edison's own electric company.⁹ Some of these elaborate devices had been removed from Edison's disassembled Menlo Park laboratory.¹⁰ Despite the *electroliers*, the inventor of the incandescent light likely used tallow candles or kerosene during his 1886 visit. The site had no electricity, as the dynamo, a generator to produce electricity, had not yet arrived.¹¹

Edison and Ezra Gilliland personally supervised the installation of the dynamo in April 1887. The first illumination occurred at his Fort Myers laboratory that spring. According to a visiting reporter from the *New York World*, the test bulbs connected to the generator "burst out into a radiance that threatened to obscure even the bril-

6. David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940* (Cambridge, Ma., 1990), 2.

7. *Fort Myers Press*, December 12, 1885.

8. *Fort Myers Press*, February 27, 1886.

9. Invoice, "Catalogue and Price List, Edison Light Fixtures," box 6, Edison Company for Isolated Lighting Collection, Edison National Historic Site. For more information on Bergmann & Co., see Harold C. Passer, *The Electrical Manufacturers, 1875 to 1900* (Boston, 1953), 94, 100, 102-104.

10. Invoice, "Catalogue and Price List, Edison Light Fixtures," box 6, Edison Company for Isolated Lighting Collection.

11. *Fort Myers Press*, April 21, 1887. The dynamo to power the electric lights arrived in April 1887.

liant sun of Fort Myers.¹² But a great deal of time had passed since Edison's initial promise. Pressing problems with his phonograph division and a pregnant wife called him back to New Jersey.¹³

By 1888, Fort Myers residents were restless. "We hope Mr. Edison will turn on our electric light this winter," lamented the *Fort Myers Press*. "[H]e probably will, as everything is here, at his laboratory, that is necessary; all that is required is putting up the poles and . . . stringing the wires. Fort Myers will be a lively place next winter."¹⁴

The inventor did not return. Enmeshed in business problems in New Jersey, he dissolved his partnership with Ezra Gilliland when Gilliland made a secret alliance with one of Edison's competitors.¹⁵ Rather than associate with his former partner, Edison avoided Fort Myers until he could acquire Gilliland's neighboring property.¹⁶

In the intervening years, the townspeople of Fort Myers grew frustrated. With the date of Edison's next visit indefinite, residents eventually resolved to light the town themselves. In October of 1897, the town council contracted with the Seminole Canning Company "to furnish the town of Fort Myers with ten incandescent lights."¹⁷ On New Year's Day 1898, the newspaper reported that "a soft light suddenly appeared in all the stores and houses connected with the electric light plant, and for the first time electricity was used as lighting power in Lee County."¹⁸ According to the *Fort Myers Press*, the new lighting system was adopted without difficulty: "At the power house everything worked smoothly, and the plant was pronounced a perfect success."¹⁹

In 1901, Edison returned to Fort Myers and later converted Gilliland's home into guest facilities. In the years to follow Edison

12. *New York World*, March 28, 1887. The reporter, Sidney Smith, had arrived in Fort Myers prior to the delivery of the main dynamo. His quotation refers to the power generated by a smaller dynamo, one large enough to power the Estates only.

13. Neil Baldwin, *Edison Inventing the Century* (New York, 1995), 182-86, deals in depth with Edison's troubled phonograph business.

14. *Fort Myers Press*, January 14, 1889.

15. Gilliland's betrayal of Edison is documented in Matthew Josephson, *Edison: A Biography* (New York, 1959), 328-33, and Baldwin, *Edison: Inventing the Century*, 187-91. The dissolution was devastating to Edison who regarded Gilliland as his closest friend. In later years, when relaying details of his early visits to Fort Myers, Edison never mentioned Gilliland.

16. Edison departed Fort Myers on May 4, 1887, and did not return until February 27, 1901. See *Fort Myers Press*, May 5, 1887 and February 25, 1901.

17. Minutes, Fort Myers City Commissioners, October 9, 1897.

18. *Fort Myers Press* January 6, 1898.

19. *Ibid.*

and his family returned regularly to Fort Myers, at last bringing the town the fame he had promised in the 1880s.²⁰

Many years later, citizens sought to find a way to thank the aging inventor for his contribution to local history. On February 11, 1931, his birthday, Fort Myers honored Edison by naming a new bridge after him. Despite failing health, Edison agreed to ride in the parade and to participate in a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the span.²¹

On the day of the event, the eighty-four-year-old inventor untied the orange and green ribbon, let out a whoop, and waved his hands above his head. The crowd of 10,000 watched the spectacle and cheered as Governor Doyle Carlton delivered a speech praising Edison as the man who had, among other things, "brightened the paths of humanity in every land."²²

The dedication of the Edison bridge prompted further enhancement of the original myth of Edison's aborted attempt to electrify the town. The amended version now declared that the inventor was so outraged by the city fathers' rejection in the 1880s that, forty-five years later, he refused to electrify the Edison bridge.²³

No existing documentation suggests lights were ever considered in the initial planning of the \$667,159 bridge.²⁴ It was not until 1935, four years after Edison's death, that the town commissioners were compelled to provide streetlights on the span. That year, the Buffalo, New York, office of *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* received an anonymous postcard featuring an image of the Edison Bridge. The writer informed *Ripley's* that "this attractive bridge crossing the Caloosahatchee river was dedicated to Thomas Edison by the people of Fort Myers. It is more than three years old and has never had an electric light on it."²⁵ *Ripley's* published an illustration of the span in

20. The Edisons returned to Fort Myers for all but the following years: 1905, 1911, 1913, 1917, and 1921. See Josephson, *Edison*, 417. The *Fort Myers Press* and later the *Tropical News* printed front-page articles on each occasion of the Edisons' visit. Frequent reports of their activities followed. The papers contain no mention of the Edisons during these years.

21. *Fort Myers Press* and *The Tropical News*, February 9-12, 1931.

22. *Fort Myers News-Press*, February 12, 1931.

23. Ellis, interview; W. Stanley Hanson, Jr., interview by author, Fort Myers, November 30, 1993.

24. *The Tropical News*, February 12, 1931.

25. Anonymous, March 12, 1935, Collection of *Ripley's Believe It or Not!*, World Headquarters, Orlando.

April 1935 with the caption: "The Thomas A. Edison Bridge-Fort Myers, Florida— Has Never Had an Electric Light on It."²⁶

Ripley's cartoon was a great embarrassment to the city which, in 1937, sought to rectify the situation. With a \$10,000 donation from Florida Power and Light, the city council ordered fifty-four street-lights for the bridge.²⁷ At midnight on Thanksgiving Day, November 25, 1937, Mayor David Shepard received a Western Union telegraph signal from Edison's son, Charles, lighting the bridge. It was thus dedicated "in honor of a man who did so much for the benefit of mankind, lighted as henceforth it shall be."²⁸

Existing documentation suggests Fort Myers citizens of the 1880s and 1890s possessed little or no resistance to technology.²⁹ On the other hand, residents in the 1920s through the 1940s became disillusioned by their own new technology and overburdened public services. This disappointment with contemporary technology prompted the creation and acceptance of the myth of Edison's alleged refusal to electrify the bridge named for him. The myth also functioned as a release to hide residents' embarrassment over the *Ripley's* cartoon. The citizens could deflect blame for the absence of lights onto a vindictive inventor and ignorant ancestors.

This harsh judgment of the earlier generation also emanated from a disdain for the area's traditional agricultural economy. The sons and daughters of these farm families, as well as new residents to the area, shared a common contempt for those engaged in, or with roots in, the cattle trade. In a letter to Mina Edison, one resident commented on the conflict between new and old residents, stating "there was quietly passed among *some* of the newcomers the mischievous slogan, 'Eliminate the Cracker.'"³⁰ Residents embarrassed by

26. *Ripley's* published a syndicated column featured in newspapers and magazines throughout the United States. Edison Bridge Cartoon, April 23, 1935, in *Ripley's* Collection.

27. Minutes, Fort Myers City Commissioners, June 14, 1937.

28. Ronald Halgrim to Charles Edison, November 25, 1937, Thomas Edison Bridge, box 1, Collection of the Edison and Ford Winter Estates, Fort Myers.

29. *Fort Myers Press* accounts for the period contain no reports of electrical fires and only one instance of an outage prior to the turn of the century. In fact, contemporary reports on new technological systems are consistently glowing. A December 1898 edition of the *Fort Myers Press* contains accounts of the success of the Boston subway, electrical systems in the Philippines, and hydroelectric plants at the headwater of the Delaware River.

30. C. W. Carlton to Mina Miller Edison, May 2, 1929, Mina Edison primary box, 1928-1934, Collection of the Edison & Ford Winter Estates.

the cattle trade joined forces with new residents seeking to modernize the community to create a receptive audience for the myth.

In addition, the town's declining infrastructure played a role in the myth's creation. Like greater Florida, Fort Myers' economy was devastated by a land bust in 1926 and by the Great Depression. The economy did not rebound until World War II. During this difficult period, the city commissioners received complaints from fifty-four residents "calling attention to the dangerous condition of the wires used for transmission of electric current by Florida Power and Light. . . ." Petitions from citizens stated that "in many of our streets said wires appear to lose large quantities of insulation thereby constituting a serious danger to our community."³¹ Furthermore, the town's coal gassification plant, fraught with technical difficulties since its inception in 1923, compounded the existing problem of overdue repairs to electrical wires. Low gas pressure, broken mains, shoddy machinery, and frequent gas leaks plagued plant employees and city residents. Interruptions to service became an everyday occurrence.³²

The situation was not yet rectified when World War II transformed the town from bust to boom, further straining the already-overburdened public services. The creation of two modern air fields— Page and Buckingham Fields— in 1942 brought a large influx of servicemen to the area. They, in turn, brought wives and other family members, increasing the population a full one-third during this period.³³

The technological disillusionment of this wartime generation created a receptive audience for the myth. If they experienced so many problems with their own new technology, it seemed logical to assume that their ancestors, whom they perceived as unsophisticated, would have had similar difficulties.

The history and myth of Fort Myers' adoption of electricity demonstrate Edison's role as a catalyst for, if not the provider of, new technology. The creation of the myth further demonstrates how one community crafted a "usable past" in an effort to alleviate their disillusionment over a decaying infrastructure as well as to ease their discomfort over their agrarian roots.

31. Minutes, City Commissioners of Fort Myers, September 7, 1937.

32. *Ibid.*, January 5 and 6, 1940, August 19, 1940, April 23, 1941.

33. The population of Fort Myers remained in the vicinity of 10,000 from 1930 to 1940. By 1945 the population had jumped to a record 15,198. "Population Report," Records of the City Clerk, Fort Myers, October 6, 1995.