

STORIES of New Jersey

and boxes and bottles were packed in all the available space, swaying dangerously with every movement of the train. One day the train hit a piece of loosely laid track, shook and bumped back safely. But down from one of the shelves in the mail car came a bottle of phosphorus. Edison was there at the time. He leaned to catch it, missed, and the phosphorus hit the floor, exploding into flame. Conductors and trainmen rushed to put it out, but though the car itself was scarcely damaged, Edison's equipment--chemicals, test tubes, printing press and all--was ruined. When the train reached the next stop, the wreckage of printing and chemical supplies was tossed off the train. And Tom was too.

Some of the inventor's biographers say that once the fire was put out, one of the conductors boxed his ears so severely that his hearing was permanently injured. Edison himself had another story accounting for the deafness which developed later. He was hurrying to climb on the train one day with both arms full of papers. The conductor, to help him, lifted him into the car by his ears. He heard a sharp crack, and after that, he said, his hearing grew worse. He never complained of his deafness, insisting that it helped him in his work. He was always able to give his full attention to the job in hand, he said, because he was not bothered by outside noises.

J.U. Mackenzie got Edison a railway telegrapher's job in Canada where he worked from 7 o'clock in the evening until 7 the next morning. Instead of sleeping during the day, he worked at his experiments, which had changed now from the field of chemistry to electricity. If there were any sleeping, it was done on the job. But there was a difficulty. Each operator had to signal the main office every half hour while on duty. Shortly, however, Edison built a wheel-like contrivance which operated the telegraph key automatically at half-hour intervals. It worked well, but one night while he was asleep a train wreck was only narrowly averted. He was charged with neglect and called for a hearing. Before the examination, Edison went back to Port Huron.

He might never have gotten another telegraph job if he had not been ingenious enough to send messages through to Canada when the telegraph wires were broken. He used the steam whistle of a locomotive to flash the dots and dashes by sound to the operator at Sarnia, Canada. This exploit won him a position as night telegraph operator at Lenawee Junction, Michigan. He did not keep it long. For five years he drifted from town to town, remaining until he tired of the place or was fired because his experiments interfered with business.

Edison came finally to Boston where a friend of his had offered to get him a job. He arrived penniless, hungry and with only a linen duster covering his threadbare clothes. In October of that year, 1868, he applied for his first patent--an automatic vote recorder. His backing was the \$100 savings of a telegraph operator who worked with him in the Western Union office. Unlike most first inventions, the vote recorder worked perfectly when it was demonstrated before a Congressional committee in Washington.

While he was in Boston he invented a stock ticker that operated by telegraph, and he began a stock quotation service to convince Boston brokers of the value of his device. He realized that the financial center of New York would offer him wider opportunities. Though deeply in debt, a situation too common to worry him, he managed to borrow money for his fare and one evening in the spring of 1869 he boarded the night boat for the city that he was later to brighten with the electric light.

The young inventor's first breakfast in New York was a cup of tea which he begged from a tea taster working behind the window of a warehouse. He trod the streets looking for work, borrowed a dollar from a friend for food, and influenced an acquaintance to allow him to sleep in a chair in the battery room of the Gold Indicator Company, a concern that telegraphed gold and stock quotations