

SONS *of THE* PHONOGRAPH

By Jana F. Brown



When the School's physical archivists unearthed a gift from Thomas Edison, history revealed that the inventor's two eldest sons spent three unhappy years at St. Paul's, competing with their father's real baby.

Ill-prepared academically and desperately homesick, Thomas Edison's sons, Thomas Alva, Jr. and William Leslie Edison, wrote dozens of letters home during their St. Paul's School tenure, with little response from their famous father.

"I have a great many reasons why I am so discontented here, so many it is very hard to tell them all," then 16-year-old Tom Jr. of the Form of 1895 wrote to his stepmother, Mina, on November 23, 1892. "I am glad mamma above all things that somebody takes an interest in me. . . . I have tried over and over again to be popular with the boys and masters but failed in every attempt."

In an undated excerpt to Mina from Tom's younger brother Will (Form of 1896) – who was generally the more contented of the two – he expressed similar feelings: "I am very unhappy and miserable. I am crying all of the time."

Mina Edison was often her stepsons' only compassionate ear, having inherited the job of primary caregiver from Thomas Edison's first wife, Mary, who died in 1884 when her sons were eight and six. A product of finishing school, Mina Edison believed in education and sent her stepsons to Dearborn-Morgan School in West Orange, N.J., to help them prepare for St. Paul's. Her husband was not a proponent of classical education, explained Edison biographer Michele Wehrwein Albion, feeling that traditional academia would not prepare his sons for the realities of the working world.

"It wasn't St. Paul's fault," said Albion, explaining the boys' despair. "Mina's brothers, Theodore and John [of the Form of 1893], were attending St. Paul's. Mina was trying hard to establish a support network for Thomas and William and the boys got along well. A lot had happened in their lives before St. Paul's. Their mother had died. [Edison] was never really involved in the boys' lives so they were sent off to stay with relatives for years. Their education was quite erratic. He left a vacuum."

The fate of Thomas Alva Edison, Jr., in particular was sealed the year after his 1876 birth, when his father vaulted to fame for his groundbreaking phonograph invention. Sharing a name with a man *Life Magazine* would declare the "Man of the Millennium," constantly seeking his approval, and competing for attention with

the elder Edison's work – which later included the light bulb – would become lifelong hardships for young Tom, and his desperate cry for attention was apparent in his early letters.

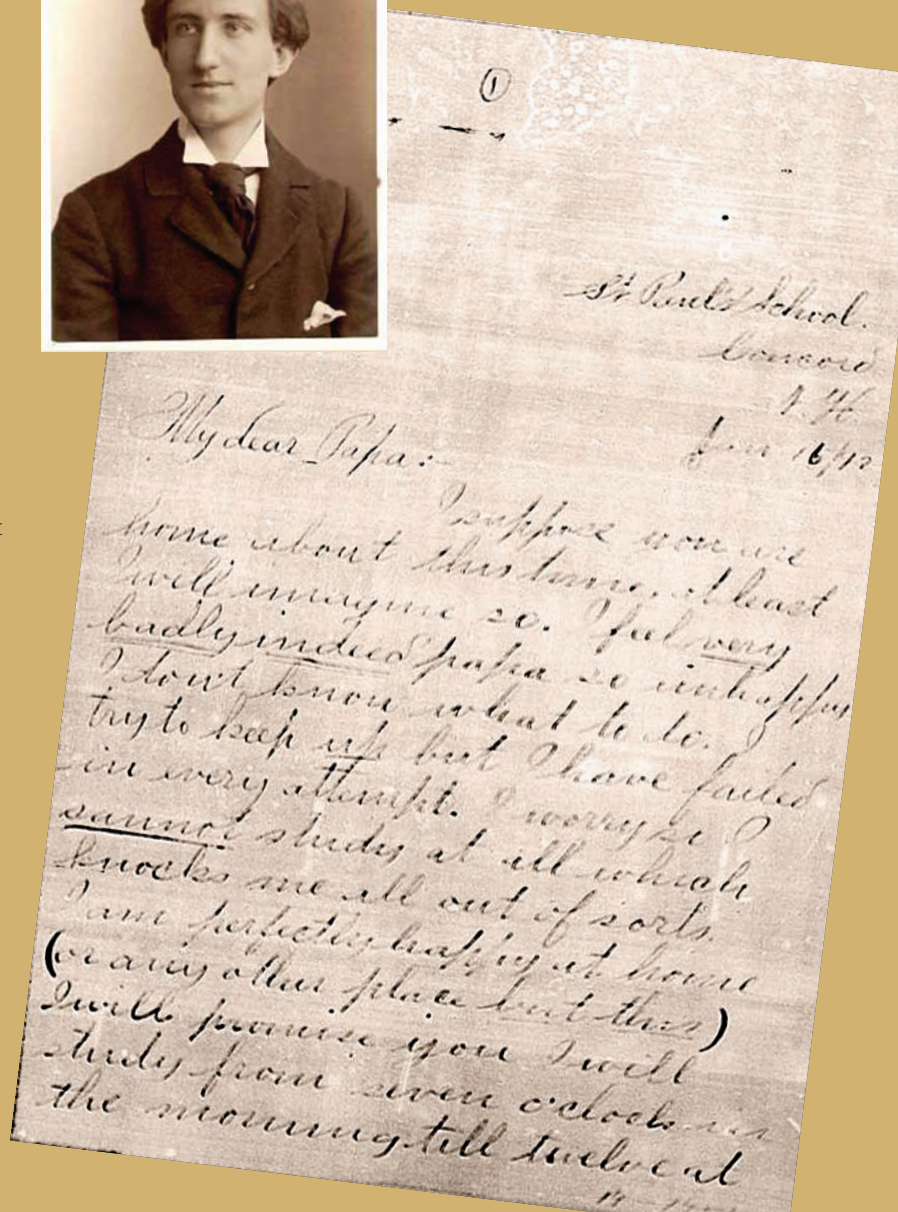
"Tom had the burden of his name and having the world expect him to *be* Thomas Edison," said Albion, who noted that Tom and Will wrote to Mina requesting their famous father's autograph for St. Paul's peers. "He was the faintest carbon copy of his father, but he had all of his father's unpleasant traits in abundance and I think that made their relationship more difficult."

The Edison boys' correspondence chronicles their frequent illnesses during their time at St. Paul's – real and imagined, or designed to elicit sympathy, as in this line from an April 29, 1892, letter from Tom to Mina, "Well, mamma, I guess I will close as I feel very dizzy." Will's correspondence detailed his various ailments,

including colds and a leg injury.



Thomas Alva Edison, Jr.
(Form of 1895)



First Rector Henry Augustus Coit wrote to Thomas Edison on January 18, 1893, describing young Tom as “morbid” and adding that his misery was having “the worst impact on Willie.”

“For the interest of the boys, the matter must be settled,” he wrote. “They are both undisciplined and governed only by the feelings of the hour.” Thomas Edison finally granted the boys their wish, withdrawing Tom by the Easter break a few weeks later and Will at the end of the 1892–93 academic year.

Information on Tom and Will’s lives at St. Paul’s can be gleaned primarily from their letters home. Records from the late 19th century show that the boys were enrolled at the School from 1890 to 1893, entering in the Second and First Forms, respectively. Both boys lived in

William Leslie Edison
(Form of 1896)



PHOTOS OF EDISON BOYS: EDISON NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

the Old Infirmary and the new Lower School (an 1891 letter home from Will indicates they were present at the laying of the building’s cornerstone). Tom participated in the Scientific Association while Will was a member of the Bicycle Club and the Choir. Both were avid tennis players. The names of both Edison heirs are carved into the wall in the Upper Dining Room.

The Edison family’s connection to St. Paul’s resurfaced last year when General Services staff members Fred Farwell and Scott Russell – the School’s physical archivists – made an archaeologist’s find during a house-cleaning project in the attic of Payson Science Center: a phonograph donated to the School by Thomas Edison in 1893 (see sidebar).

It’s ironic that the very invention that symbolized the wedge between a father and his sons was bequeathed to the School upon the departure of the Edison boys from St. Paul’s – years shy of earning diplomas, but likely not a moment too soon for Rector Coit.

Could Edison’s gift to St. Paul’s have been a peace offering to Mr. Coit for keeping a watchful eye on the inventor’s hopelessly homesick brood?

“[Edison] didn’t respond to their letters and it must have been very painful for the boys,” said Albion, the former curator of the Edison and Ford Winter Estates in Fort Myers, Florida. “I think they were special projects for the Rector.”

A June 26, 1891, letter from Dr. Coit to the senior Edison expressed optimism about the boys’ future at St. Paul’s. “The boys have had on the whole a good year,” he wrote. “...Willie does not do himself justice – I think he’s a very bright & able boy.”

“In the end, he realized there was too much of a deficit educationally,” said Albion of Rector Coit. “They had no proper preparation, they were homesick, and neither one of them was particularly secure socially, so that complicated matters. They appear to have lived lives of quiet desperation – sometimes not so quiet, as in their letters home. It’s surprising they lasted at the School as long as they did.”

As famous as he was to the world in his role as inventor, Thomas Edison was equally famous on the home front for his workaholicism and resulting neglect of his two eldest sons. Albion described him as an “inattentive father” who had high expectations of his children, but equal difficulty connecting with them. Edison’s inventions were his babies. Biographer Neil Baldwin’s book *Edison: Inventing the Century* includes an entry in the index entitled “Edison, Thomas Jr., Edison’s neglect of.”

The famous inventor was not alone in his familial neglect. He was the product of Victorian-era parenting, which subscribed to the theory that fathers were to provide discipline and financial support and – to their sons in particular – tough love of the highest degree to raise strong men. Mothers were left with childrearing responsibilities including affection and nurturing.

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“Dear Gramma:-
I am very
unhappy and miserable
I am crying all the time
and if Tom does not come
by Saturday I am coming
home. Because I can’t stand
it I am very unhappy!
Dr Coit thinks that I can
come home because I ^{have been}
in the infirmary ~~every~~ ^{last} ~~time~~
since I have been here
from your son.
Will Edison



Long before their time in Millville, during their years at St. Paul's, and long after, the Edison boys' quest for their father's love and approval endured. A letter written by Tom to his father a month before he enrolled at St. Paul's pleaded, "Now, Papa, I want you to write a good long letter no matter if it is about a thing that I don't understand. Write it."

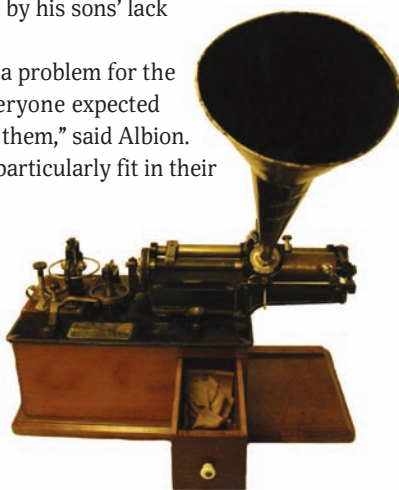
There's no documented response to that plea, but Edison was known to respond to his sons' letters with impersonal, marked-up copies that corrected their spelling. Despite their perpetual homesickness and bouts with illness, the boys did at times share their optimism and humor with their parents. Will wrote of bicycle races on the Lower Grounds and often sent small drawings for his younger siblings, Charles and Madeleine. Tom wrote to his stepmother on November 10, 1892, "My happiest moments are spent down in the laboratory, working out problems in electricity of which...I am very fond indeed."

Another 1892 letter from Tom indicates he and his brother appreciated their New Hampshire surroundings, explaining to Mina that they often used their bicycles to take "long rides...admiring the beautiful country" and spent hours in their canoe. "We go out quite often in it," he wrote, "and enjoy the pleasure of skipping around the ponds very much indeed."

In the years that followed their departures from St. Paul's, the Edison boys battled their famous name, falling prey to opportunists in financial schemes and disappointing those who expected them to emulate their father. Will became estranged and reconciled with his father several times. At one point, Tom legally changed his name at the behest of his father, who was embarrassed by his sons' lack of success.

"The fame was a problem for the boys because everyone expected a great deal from them," said Albion. "But neither one particularly fit in their father's shoes."

The inventor's gift – an Edison Class M electric phonograph, circa 1893.



An Incredible Find

During a routine cleaning project in the attic of Payson Science Center last spring, staff members Fred Farwell and Scott Russell, who serve as the School's physical archivists, made an exciting discovery.

"An old filing cabinet from one of the barns has a card in it that says Thomas Edison gave the School the gift of a phonograph in 1893," explained Farwell. "We asked around and nobody knew anything about it. Most thought it had been lost in the Big Study fire [of 1961]."

Farwell and Russell tried to unearth the phonograph during a series of digs in the history-rich bottle dumps in the woods that encircle St. Paul's, to no avail. While moving vintage steam motors, telescope parts, and other delicate objects from Payson last April, however, Farwell stumbled upon a box with a signature funnel poking out from the top.

"I knew right away I had found the phonograph," he said, a huge grin spreading across his face. "I noticed the funnel and underneath it was the phonograph. We saw a plaque on it that said North American Phonograph Company. We've been all over this campus, all through the woods. We thought it was long-gone, so to have it is amazing."

The second puzzle was to pinpoint the exact model and date of manufacture to match the phonograph with Edison's last-known visit to St. Paul's in 1893. The phonograph recovered by Farwell is an electric model, which pre-dates the widely produced hand crank version. Thomas Edison briefly licensed the patent for his phonograph to the North American Phonograph Company in the early 1890s, which coincides with the dates Tom Jr. and Will attended St. Paul's. Further detective work by Edison biographer Michele Wehrwein Albion, who consulted phonograph expert Charley Hummel, identified the well-preserved SPS phonograph as an Edison Class M that runs off a 2.5-volt, 2-amp battery and uses wax cylinders to record sound.

"This was a very heavy phonograph and cost upwards of a couple hundred dollars," Hummel wrote to Albion.

Class M phonographs were manufactured from 1888 through the turn of the century.