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Thomas Edison

Thomas Alva Edison was an American inventor and entrepreneur. Filing over 1,000 patents during his lifetime, he influenced several components of the movie industry. He conducted experimental research in lighting, telegraphy, sound recording, and moving photography, and established industry standards, such as 35 mm film and sprockets.

Born February 11, 1847, in Milan, Ohio, Edison attended both public and private schools in Port Huron, Michigan. He held various jobs in the telegraph industry during the 1860s, and in 1868 the journal *Telegrapher* published his design for a duplex telegraph, a system that allowed messages to be sent in opposite directions on one wire simultaneously. He soon gained a reputation as an innovator in the field of telegraphy; he would go on to use his expertise in this area to help him develop landmark technological products.

The filmmaking pioneer Eadweard Muybridge, who had been on the lecture circuit touting his short moving picture, *Animal Locomotion*, visited Edison's lab in February of 1888. Realizing that Muybridge was on to something with his "zoopraxiscope," a device for projecting filmic images, Edison initially suggested a partnership. Although the partnership never materialized, Edison did adapt Muybridge's zoopraxiscope, turning it into a much more efficient projecting device that came to be called the Kinetoscope. On August 24, 1891, Edison filed patents for the kinetograph (camera) and the kinetoscope (the viewing implement), and Muybridge was largely forgotten.

Edison founded the Edison Manufacturing Company in 1887, building its first studio, which he called the "Black Maria," in 1892. *Scientific American* covered the first public demonstration of the Kinetoscope on May 9, 1893. For the event, Edison created a one reel melodrama, *Dashed to Death* (1909); ever utilitarian in his approach, the inventor recorded a car being driven over a cliff at Palisades, New Jersey, not merely as an aesthetic phenomenon, but to discover a formula for a steel axle that could withstand the fiery crash when the vehicle hit bottom.

Edison used the Black Maria to promote Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, before that troupe toured Europe, including producing film images of Annie Oakley demonstrating her skills as a sharp-shooter. Edison also shot scenes of boxing at his studio; interestingly, while live boxing was prohibited by law, viewing images of the brutal sport in a kinetoscope was not. In 1894 or 1895, William Kennedy Laurie Dickson (1860-1935) and William Heise produced the earliest synchronized sound motion picture, the "Dickson Experimental Sound Film," depicting Dickson playing the violin.

A shrewd businessman, Edison wisely secured patents or copyrights where applicable. Significantly, copyright law did not recognize motion pictures as a separate entity until 1912; before this time, Edison sent what were known as positive paper prints—a technique developed by Dickson—to the Copyright Office at the Library of Congress. Derived from short films, these prints were copyrighted as a series of still photographs gathered together in sequence; they provide us with a record of early 20th century life, including the attire, popular buildings, and technologies of the time.

Edison and the co-inventors in his employ created films based on popular subject matter that had been captured by still photographers during the post-Civil War period. Of particular note, they produced short scenic and travel films, with images of buildings and natural wonders—Coney Island and Niagara Falls, for example—and new-era modes of

transportation. Edison's cameras even recorded significant events of the day, such as William McKinley's inauguration and assassination, the Galveston hurricane (1900) and the San Francisco earthquake (1906).

Although he was not always the one who invented many of the gadgets on which he worked, Edison had a keen technological eye and improved on several mechanical devices designed by others. This was the case in regard to his work in the burgeoning film industry, as he was able to apply his previously acquired knowledge of telegraphy and sound production in phonographs to the development of other forms of presentation. In essence, then, it may be said that Edison functioned more as what we would understand today as an executive producer of films, rather than as their creator. Remarkably entrepreneurial, Edison realized that he could use the popular new medium of film to advertise his kinetoscope, which he did in *The Moving Picture News* (1913), and elsewhere. After an extraordinarily productive life, Edison died on October 18, 1931.

Ralph Hartsock

Further Reading

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