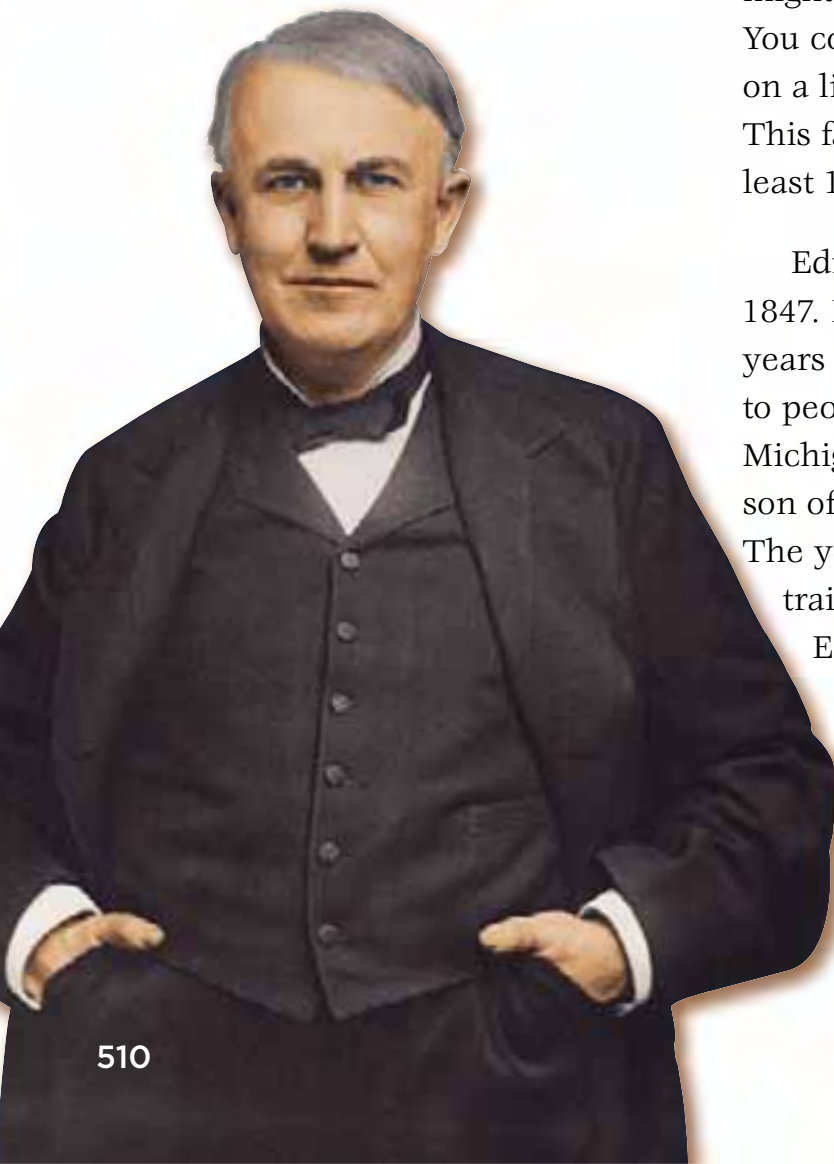


# Thomas Alva Edison, Inventor

*by Robert Cohen*

The next time you enjoy a movie, you might want to thank Thomas Alva Edison. You could thank him, too, when you turn on a light or use a battery-powered toy. This famous inventor is responsible for at least 1,000 inventions we use everyday.

Edison was born in Milan, Ohio, in 1847. He began working when he was 12 years old. He sold newspapers and food to people on trains headed for Detroit, Michigan. When he was 15, he saved the son of a man who ran the railroad station. The young boy had wandered onto the train tracks with a train approaching. Edison was able to pull the boy out of the way in the nick of time.



That turned out to be one of the most important events in Edison's life. As a reward the boy's father taught Edison how to use a telegraph. Afterward Edison began to work for Western Union Telegraph Company. He became fascinated with the telegraph and began working to improve it and other mechanical devices.

Edison's first invention was the stock ticker, which recorded the purchase and sale of stocks. Over the next fifty years, he invented a motion-picture camera and made improvements to the electric light bulb. His favorite invention, however, was the phonograph. Edison discovered that he could record sound on cylinders coated with tinfoil. He made a machine that had two needles. One of the needles recorded sound, and the other one played the sound back. When Edison talked into the mouthpiece, the sound vibrations created by his voice made indentations on a cylinder, which were then recorded. The first words he recorded were "Mary had a little lamb."

Not everything Edison worked on was a success, however. He also had a few failures. Take, for instance, Edison's interest in cement. He started the Edison Portland Cement Co. in 1899. He wanted to make everything out of cement, including furniture,

pianos, and houses. Concrete cost a great deal of money at the time, and the idea never took off. He also worked on machines to process iron ore, which were never successful either.

Edison believed in working long hours, and sometimes he worked more than twenty hours a day. He said "Genius is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration." He set a goal in 1876 to have one major invention every six months, and he came very close to that goal. During his life Edison applied for and received more than 1,093 patents, the most ever issued to one person. He enjoyed designing new things, but he also wanted people to actually use them.



# Answer Questions

Edison's successes make our everyday lives easier. To honor Edison, President Herbert Hoover ordered all electric lights dimmed for one minute on October 21, 1931, a few days after Edison's death.

## Some of Thomas Edison's Inventions

1869

Universal stock ticker



1872

Automatic telegraph system



1877

Phonograph



1879

Incandescent light bulb



1891

Motion-Picture camera



1896

Fluorescent electric lamp



1914

Electric miner's safety lamp



**Tip**

Skim for clues.

**Directions: Answer the questions.**

- 1. An important event in Edison's boyhood was**
  - A inventing a motion-picture camera.
  - B working at a cement plant.
  - C saving someone's life.
  - D winning a fortune.
  
- 2. Reread the time line on page 512. During which decade was the phonograph invented?**
  - A 1860s
  - B 1870s
  - C 1880s
  - D 1890s
  
- 3. Why might you want to thank Thomas Edison?**
  - A He was a great writer.
  - B He invented many of the things we use every day.
  - C He told funny stories.
  - D He started an art museum.
  
- 4. Based on what you have read in the selection, would you have enjoyed working with Thomas Edison? Explain why or why not.**
  
- 5. How did Edison make everyday life easier? Use details from the selection in your response.**

**Writing Prompt**

Write a news article about one of Edison's inventions. State what the invention is, when it was created, and what it does. Include reasons why the invention is important.

