

The Chelsea Standard

Chelsea man recalls meeting Thomas Edison at 1929 jubilee

By Sheila Pursglove
, Special Writer

Most of us switch on a light without giving it a second thought.

But Bob Willoughby of Chelsea has incredible memories of meeting the great Thomas Alva Edison — inventor of the first commercially viable incandescent light bulb.

The date was Oct. 21, 1929, the occasion the 50th anniversary of Edison's invention - after experiments with platinum and about 2,000 other filament materials, Edison conducted a successful test with a carbon filament on Oct. 22, 1879 that lasted 13.5 hours.

Willoughby met one of the most prolific inventors in history when the 82-year-old Edison was honored at "Light's Golden Jubilee," held in conjunction with the opening of Henry Ford's Greenfield Village educational and historic landmark in Dearborn.

The event was also the dedication of the Edison Institute of Technology, later renamed the Henry Ford Museum.

"It was quite an event and I remember it vividly," said Willoughby, who was a boy of 10 when the Jubilee took place.

"We went to Greenfield Village in grandfather's Cord car. It was such a thrill."

Ford had moved 28 historic buildings from around the United States to Greenfield Village, including the Menlo Park laboratory in New Jersey where Edison — known as "The Wizard of Menlo Park" — made his discovery half a century earlier.

The huge celebration was attended by some of the biggest names of the day, including President Herbert Hoover, business tycoons John D. Rockefeller and J.P. Morgan, physicist Marie Curie, aviation pioneer Orville Wright and humorist Will Rogers.

In addition, a radio address by physicist Albert Einstein was broadcast from

Germany during the evening banquet.

Ford, Edison and President Hoover arrived in the morning at Smiths Creek Depot at Greenfield Village on a steam locomotive.

The day's events included lunch at the Clinton Inn - now the Eagle Tavern - and horse-drawn carriage tours of Greenfield Village.

Although the weather didn't cooperate, freezing rain didn't dampen the spirits of more than a million people lining the parade route to see the President and First Lady Lou Henry Hoover ride by in a convertible.

After an evening banquet, Edison, Ford and Hoover went to the reconstructed Menlo Lab, where Edison and his former assistant, Francis Jehl, re-enacted the lighting of the first electric lamp.

As Edison made the connection to light the lamp, the museum building was flooded with light, and a replica of the Liberty Bell rang out.

A plane flew overhead, sporting the word "Edison" and the dates "79" and "29" illuminated under its wings.

Drivers honked car horns, building lights flashed on and off, and utility companies around the world shut off power for one minute to honor Edison.

As part of national festivities, communities put on elaborate light displays, and people tuned in their radios, turning on lights on cue as part of the celebration. The anniversary also was acknowledged with the issue of a commemorative postage stamp.

Willoughby was able to attend the historic event thanks to his grandfather, John Riggs, a farmer who became an affluent investor, and who knew Henry Ford through Ford's brother Bill.

"I had a very unusual grandfather and he made it possible to do all kinds of things," Willoughby says. "My grandfather was a little pushy — he arranged it, so to speak.

"We met Edison at the re-enactment of the electric light. It was quite an affair," Willoughby added.

"I was right up front and the announcer was buzzing in my ear."

And Willoughby's impression of the great inventor?

"He was a brilliant man, but had wrinkled clothes and was kind of disheveled," he says.

Willoughby was given a replica of the original light bulb, sold at the re-enactment.

"Unfortunately, a student teacher took it out of my locker and knocked the tip off," he says.

Through his grandfather, Willoughby also met Henry Ford and would see him a couple of times a year at the car show.

Riggs was a passionate car enthusiast. "If there was a new car out, he would have it," said Willoughby, who has photos of all his grandfather's cars.

Willoughby inherited his grandfather's passion for automobiles, has owned many Ford cars over the years, and once owned a 1929 Model A.

Willoughby and his wife Edie, residents of Silver Maples of Chelsea for the past three years, still enjoy visiting Greenfield Village, and the building where the 1929 re-enactment was held.

Willoughby, who attended Eastern Michigan University and Temple University in Philadelphia, was a podiatrist for 50 years in Ypsilanti, the same city where his father owned Willoughby Shoes on Michigan Avenue.

A Rotarian and a member of an informal men's coffee group, he visits his hometown a couple of times a month.

Willoughby said he treasures Hoover's 1929 comments about Edison's incandescent light bulb:

"By all its multiple uses, it has lengthened the hours of our active lives, decreased our fears, replaced the dark with good cheer, increased our safety and decreased our toil."

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