

# THE TRACKER

Journal Of The Organ Historical Society, Inc.

Volume XIX Number 4

Summer 1975

## Thomas Edison's Tracker Organ

by J. Paul Schneider



Thomas A. Edison and laboratory staff, second floor, Menlo Park organ. Edison seated front row, left of center, cap on head, hands the Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan.

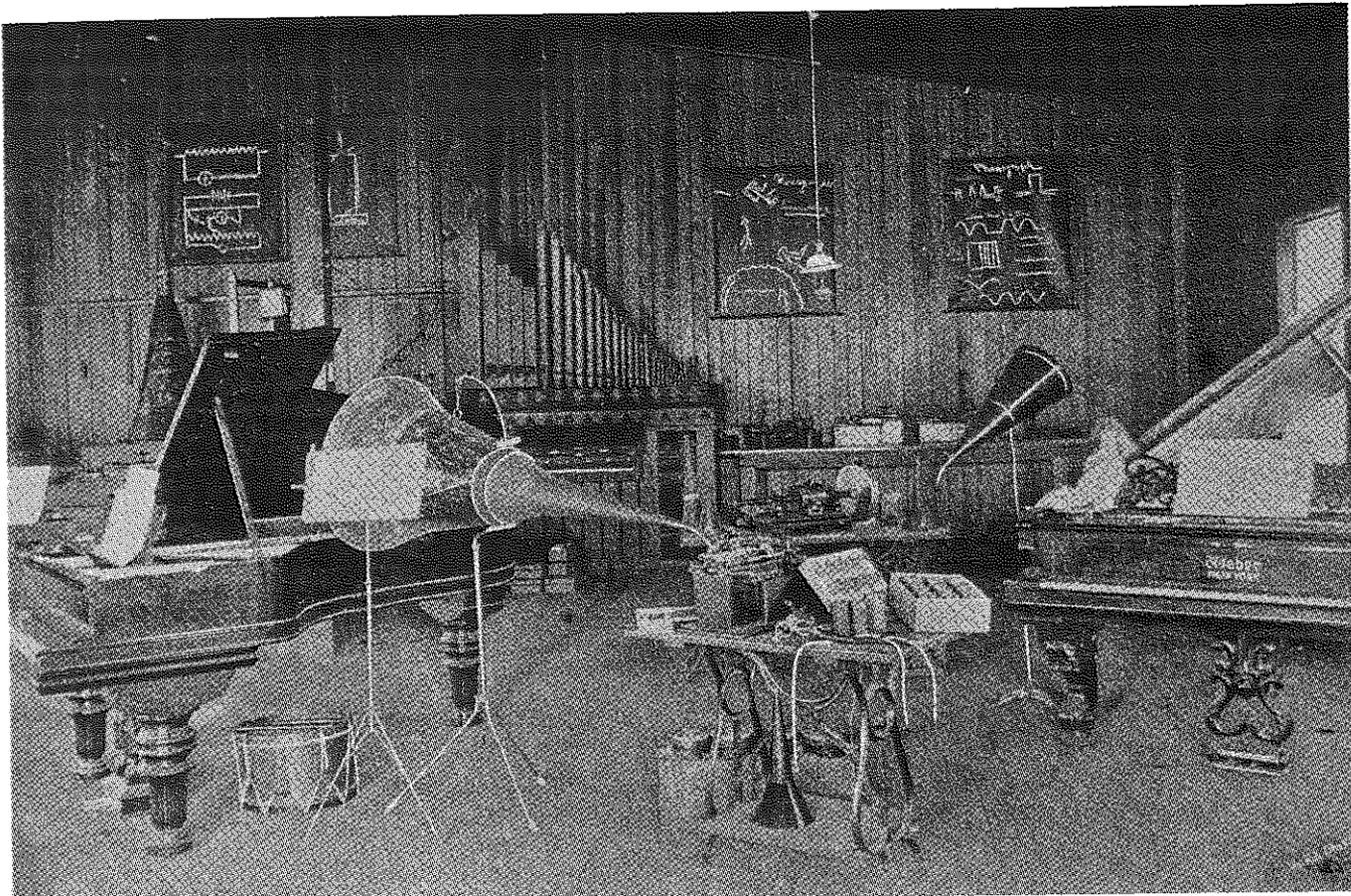
New Jersey, February 22, 1880, with original Hilborne Roosevelt in lap. Photograph from the Collections of Greenfield Village and

With each visit to the second floor of the restored Thomas A. Edison Menlo Park Laboratory at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village [near Detroit, Michigan,] I am intrigued to see the small tracker organ at one end of the room in the midst of the laboratory equipment once used by the "Wizard of Menlo Park."

In Francis Jehl's book,<sup>1</sup> *Menlo Park Reminiscences*, the author makes several references to the

<sup>1</sup>Francis Jehl was staff laboratory assistant of Thomas Alva Edison at Menlo Park and later the curator of Edison's restored Menlo Park Laboratory.

part this organ played during the inventive drama which occurred in the Menlo Park Laboratory. The organ was a gift to Edison by Hilborne Roosevelt, an inventor and organ builder, active in telephone research. Roosevelt greatly admired Edison and presented the instrument to him to aid in his sound and telephone experiments. The organ proved to fulfill other functions as when 'in Mr. Edison's opinion, Music's magic strains were needed to soothe the savage breasts of his employees.' Mr. Jehl continues, "After I began to work here (in the Laboratory), I took part in many a midnight song fest around this instrument. Lunch usually consisted of soda crackers, ham, cheese and butter, and we gathered in a

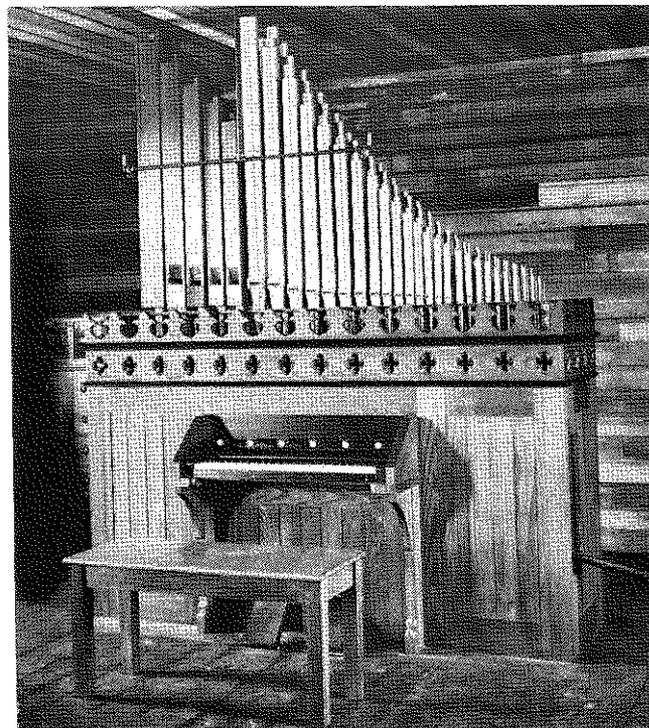


The Hilborne Roosevelt organ in the phonograph room of Edison's laboratory at W. Orange, New Jersey. Photograph from "The Life and Inventions of Thos. Alva Edison," by W.K.L. Dickson and Antonia Dickson, 1894.

circle around Mr. Edison and told stories while we ate." Someone would play a popular tune of the day, such as "Champagne Charley," while another would sing the verses and all would join in the chorus. Other songs were enjoyed as: "Dolly Varden," "Good Night Ladies," "Grandfather's Clock," "Shoo Fly, Don't Bother Me," etc. Edison himself often went to the organ and played a tune using the "pick and hunt" method.

The Hilborne Roosevelt organ was his opus 16, built in 1875, with one manual and two stops. It was later moved from the Menlo Park Laboratory in New Jersey to the Edison Recording Laboratory in West Orange, New Jersey, where it was destroyed by a fire in 1914.

When Henry Ford moved the Menlo Park Laboratory from New Jersey and restored it in Greenfield Village, Dearborn, Michigan, he gathered all available original equipment and materials to make as faithful a restoration as possible. The contract to duplicate the original Roosevelt organ was given to the Ernest M. Skinner Organ Company in Massachusetts. It is interesting to note that an employee of the Skinner firm, possibly Mr. Skinner himself, had been employed in the Hilborne Roosevelt



The E. M. Skinner organ, opus 765, 1929, duplicating the Hilborne Roosevelt organ, in the Menlo Park Restoration, Greenfield Village. Collections of Greenfield Village and the Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan.

(Continued on page 7)

## Thomas Edison's Tracker Organ

*(Continued from page 3)*

factory. The instrument which we now see at Greenfield Village is one of the few tracker action organs built by Mr. Skinner, his opus 765 manufactured in 1929.

It is a one manual of 56 keys, with stop tabs arranged from left to right above the manual as follows: Open Diapason 8', Stopped Diapason Bass 8', Dulciana 8', Stopped Diapason Treble 8', Melodia 4', Tremolo. The pipes are of spotted metal except for a lower octave seven which are wood. The bellows are pumped either by two foot pedals or by a hand lever located at the side of the case. The exterior case wood appears to be of chestnut or ash.

The restored Menlo Park Laboratory with its complex of buildings, as well as the Henry Ford

Museum, dedicated to Thomas A. Edison, were completed and ready for "Lights Golden Jubilee," the 50th Anniversary re-enactment of Edison's invention of the first successful electric light, on October 21, 1929. Mr. Edison, President Herbert Hoover, Mr. Francis Jehl and Mr. Henry Ford were present among other guests on this occasion. "Oh Suzanna," one of Edison's favorite tunes, was played on the organ.

As plans are being formed for the observance of the one hundredth anniversary of electric light at Greenfield Village, with descendants of Thomas A. Edison in attendance, perhaps the little organ will again sound forth for this celebration.

Sincere thanks are due to Mr. Robert G. Koolakian, Curator of Edisoniana at Greenfield Village, for his assistance in the gathering of this information.