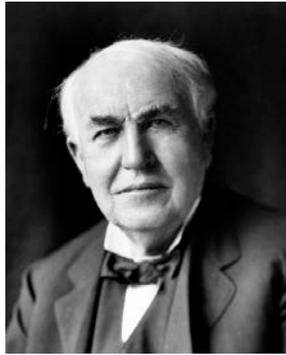


“Light’s Golden Jubilee” (October 21, 1929)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Cary O’Dell



Thomas Edison



The commemorative stamp



Edward R. Bernays

No invention—save perhaps the wheel and the printing press—has altered the world more significantly than the electric lamp. Hence, when its 50th anniversary occurred, in October of 1929, the globe reacted and celebrated its creation and creator, Thomas Alva Edison.

Like the US Bicentennial some 40 years later, the commemoration of light resulted in a wide assortment of tributes. Across the country, museums and libraries put up special displays; towns draped signs and bunting, held parades and sent up fireworks; officials issued proclamations; schools staged activities; cities illuminated their local monuments in electric light showers; stores held special sales; and the US Post Office even issued a commemorative stamp. All these activities culminated on October 21th with a special dinner and radio broadcast that heralded this once “new fangled contraption” and the opening of the Edison Institute of Technology in Dearborn, Michigan, the home of Edison friend and admirer Henry Ford.

Henry Ford (along General Electric and Westinghouse) had been the major mover and shaker in bringing off the Jubilee, recognizing in it both a way to pay tribute to his lifelong hero (and onetime employer) and a means to generate invaluable amounts of publicity. To that end, Ford retained Edward L. Bernays, the recognized father of modern public relations (and nephew of Sigmund Freud), to turn this anniversary into a landmark occasion.

It was Bernays’ by then typical all-out PR assault that brought about the majority of the celebratory events mentioned above, including a commemorative US postage stamp. But Bernays’ most audacious maneuver was saved for the radio airwaves: a live recreation of Edison’s great discovery to be carried out in a darkened nation as listeners across the country--“in every village and hamlet”--huddled around their radios, dimmed their bulbs, and lit their rooms once again with only candles or kerosene. They were to turn their lamps back on only after the great inventor, once again, achieved illumination.

That night, October 21, 1929, some 500 personal guests of Edison and Ford got to attend the “history in the remaking” in person at a plush banquet held in a brand-new, grand ballroom in Dearborn, Michigan, which also marked the ceremonial opening of Ford’s Edison Institute. The Institute—now known as the Henry Ford Museum—consisted of a museum of technology, a school system and even a reconstruction of Edison’s Menlo Park laboratory. The lab had been painstakingly taken apart in New Jersey, had its parts transported and then rebuilt in Michigan. The company even shipped in eight train carloads of New Jersey red dirt just for authenticity.

On the evening of the 21st, amid as much fanfare as could be mustered, the broadcast portion of the day-long festivities commenced as NBC Blue announcer Graham McNamee took to the

airwaves and, with a self-described lump in his throat, described to the nation--then unknowingly on the verge of the Great Depression--the luxe spectacle laid out before him. "Imagine," he said describing the ballroom and its grand T-shaped center table, "the checkered effect of black and white evening dress, the brilliant splashes of color provided by the uniforms of military attaches and the great stylists of Paris and Fifth Avenue.... I have attended many celebrations, but I cannot recall even attempting to describe one staged in a more perfect setting."

Along with the man of the hour Edison being there, also in attendance at the sit-down, candle-lit banquet, were the President and Mrs. Hoover and a who's who of the globe's most important business, technology and cultural figures, including Will Rogers, Marie Curie, Charles Schwab, Adolph Ochs, Walter Chrysler, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., J.P. Morgan, George Eastman and Orville Wright.

Though heartfelt testimonials from some of those there that night were part of the program, the evening's true poignancy and drama arrived with the rediscovery ceremony. For it, Edison, Edison's former assistant Francis Jehl (flown in for the evening), Ford and President Hoover, adjourned, via horse-drawn carriage, to the reconstituted lab to reenact the original lighting. Announcer McNamee, calling on his sports broadcasting background, recounted the events in play-by-play mode, carefully building suspense and excitement: "The lamp is now ready, as it was a half century ago. Will it light? Will it burn? Edison touches the wire. Ladies and gentlemen—it lights. Light's Golden Jubilee has come to a triumphant climax!"

And with that, as "American Heritage" magazine recounted in a 1959 article, "[T]he model of the old carbon filament lamp was turned up, [and] all over 'Menlo Park,' all over Dearborn and Detroit, and in other great cities across the country special lamps blazed up suddenly with an immense yellow refulgence, as the voice on the radio continued: 'And Edison said: "*Let there be light!*"'"

Once the Dearborn campus and the country had been flooded anew with a fusillade of light, the 82-year old guest of honor returned to the ballroom to hear an assortment of tributes from Hoover, Curie and, via shortwave radio from Berlin, Albert Einstein. The President was largely practical in his remarks, thanking Edison for saving the world from a future of cleaning up messy gas lamps and "candle drips." But he also honored Edison for successfully banishing the darkness and making the after-sunset hours possible for "righteous human activity." Einstein, meanwhile, sounded an accord of victory yet caution stating, "The great creators of technics, among whom you are one of the most successful, have put mankind into a perfectly new situation, to which it has as yet not at all adapted itself." He concluded by saying, "Good night, my American friends."

After hearing these honors, Edison himself spoke to the "four corners of the world" in a voice craggy but strong. He said in appreciation, "This experience makes me realize as never before that Americans are sentimental and this crowning event of Light's Golden Jubilee fills me with gratitude. As to Henry Ford, words are inadequate to express my feelings. I can only say to you, that in the fullest and richest meaning of the term—he is my friend. Good night."

As important as the light bulb's 50th birthday was, many of the details surrounding the broadcast of "Light's Golden Jubilee" out shown the actual content of the program itself, which was often an evening of stilted speeches lost in static and occasionally interrupted by long passages of orchestral music. Among other notable details, this 1929 recording is one of the few intact, extant recordings of pre-1935 radio.

If "Light's Golden Jubilee" marked an important date for the electric light (and for public relations and the burgeoning concept of "media events"), it also heralded an important milestone for radio. Seldom, if ever, before had so many distinguished voices been collectively,

simultaneously heard, or so many people, truly at the “four corners,” been gathered together for such a concurrent occasion. The in-home private and outdoor public theatrics which surrounded the broadcast were also important as an example of the mass media’s early attempts at audience interactivity and in laying the groundwork for a host of later media uses, techniques and applications, many that even Edison himself probably never dreamed of.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).