

Gem City



SPARK



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A Spark in the Night

Wikipedia notes Laramie is the “Gem City of the Plains,” but the Web site does not elaborate on how that came about. Most area residents know of the city’s namesake, French fur-trapper Jacques La Ramie. The surprising story behind “the Gem City of the Plains” is rather less known.

Thomas Alva Edison, the consummate inventor, created the incandescent lamp which now lights the world. He planned, installed, and operated the first central power plant which was the foundation of the world’s electric industry, and he held 410 patents by the end his career.

Early Wyoming newspapers document that in July of 1878, Mr. Edison, along with more than a dozen distinguished international scientists traveled to Separation, Wyoming, (now non-existent, but then 13 miles west of Rawlins) to view the solar eclipse in totality.

The trip required much preparation, but little diversion. This was arranged in a second trip – a game hunt – with pack horses through the mountains to Battle Lake in the Sierra Madres, southwest of Laramie.

The Sheridan Press (Jan. 7, 1932) quotes Separation’s telegrapher, noting “their combined knowledge of game killing was about equal to mine of parallaxes and spectrums, and when they (returned)...their total bag consisted of one sparrow hawk!”

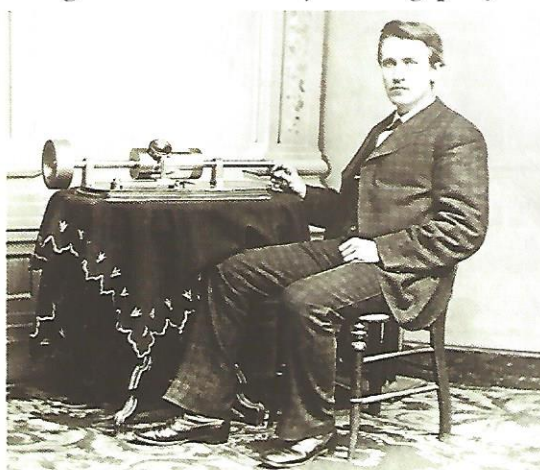
Edison’s “take,” however, came in the form of inspiration. As with most inventors, genius comes in flashes, and seldom full-fledged. Others had developed variants of short-lived incandescence as early as 1800. Edison worked years on the concept before his flash of genius that very night in

camp at Battle Lake in Wyoming. His bamboo fishing rod and the light of the bright stars in the Wyoming mountains created inspiration for the right material with an extended filament life.

Edison and others had tried platinum, cord, wire, hair, and silk, but Edison’s new concept of a high resistance lamp in a very high vacuum employing carbonized bamboo successfully created the first commercially-practical incandescent light of a longer life.

Returning to his labs on the East coast via Laramie, Edison quickly perfected the concept in December 1879, employing “a filament of carbon of high resistance,” to successfully complete his patent.

In January 1932, *The Republican Boomerang*, reported that Laramie’s Robert Galbraith, and master mechanic at the Laramie Union Pacific Railroad shops in the 1880’s, was the organizer of that very hunting party.



Thomas Alva Edison, sitting next to one of his early phonograph designs. CREDIT: The Edison Museum

Galbraith returned to Laramie in 1932 for a visit with UW’s Dr. Grace Raymond Hebard, to confer on the possibility of formally changing Battle

Lake’s name to “Lake Edison” through the Wyoming State Legislature.

Renaming Battle Lake did not occur, but research provides much corroborative anecdotal material.

“Everything Wyoming claims about Battle Lake is true,” *Denver Post’s* Zeke Scher wrote in 1979. Laramie was home to the first electrical plant in the Rocky Mountains, thanks to Edison’s experience here, and his motivation to develop electricity’s necessary infrastructure. From the earliest of its availability, Laramie has lit up the night sky like a gem, fittingly having earned its name “Gem City of the Plains.”



Thomas Alva Edison in 1878, aged 31. PHOTO: Wikipedia, public domain

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