MINA MILLER EDISON

DAUGHTER, WIFE AND MOTHER
OF INVENTORS

A Brief Biography by John D. Venable
Mina Miller Edison is resplendent in turn-of-the-century raiment. She was about forty years old when this picture was taken.

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“Saw a lady who looked like Mina. Got thinking about Mina and came near being run over by a street car. If Mina interferes much more will have to take out an accident policy.”

Thus wrote widower Thomas Alva Edison in his short-lived diary* when, in 1885, at the age of 38, he was courting the beauteous, just-turned-twenty Mina Miller. Seven months later, on February 24, 1886, they were married. As the second Mrs. Edison, Mina shared with the great inventor the last forty-five years of his life.

It was indeed a life shared. Despite the universal acclaim heaped upon her illustrious husband, Mina amply succeeded in carving her own niche in the world. She was a remarkable woman.

Their disparate backgrounds and ages boded possible difficulties. Mina was one of the middle children of eleven born to Lewis and Mary Valinda Alexander Miller of Akron, Ohio. Lewis was an inventor and manufacturer of note. His invention of a reaper with a moveable cutting bar and other farm machines earned him a fortune and helped to revolutionize agriculture. But his talents did not end there. Lewis was dedicated to improving education in both public and church schools. His basic Methodism, however, was strongly tinged with ecumenism.

Although educational opportunities were meager in central Ohio when he was growing up on a farm there, Lewis Miller was an apt pupil and an avid reader. He either attended school or taught at the elementary level until he reached his majority in 1850. He and Mary Valinda saw to it that members of their burgeoning brood were exposed to and appreciated the values of education and culture. This indoctrination with education and culture strongly influenced Mina and, through her, the raising of her children.

*During his eighty-four years Thomas Edison meticulously recorded his research findings in thousands of notebooks (fortunately still preserved), but he kept a personal diary for less than two weeks - from July 12 through July 21, 1885 - when he was an aspirant for Mina’s hand in marriage.
Thomas, on the other hand, was one of four children who survived beyond six years of age. As a youngster in Milan, Ohio, where he was born on February 11, 1847, and later in Port Huron, Michigan, to where his family moved seven years later, he had little exposure to formal education. After only six months in a Port Huron school, Thomas was withdrawn by his mother, a former schoolmarm, when a teacher referred to him as “addled” and accused him of being a dreamer. He never attended school again. His mother became his teacher. His native intelligence and piercing inquisitiveness, nurtured by that discerning mother, produced one of history’s foremost intellects, even though his formal education was limited to those six months.

Unlike the wealthy and successful Lewis Miller, Tom’s father, Samuel Edison, was a man of middle circumstances, not poor, but definitely not rich. In Milan he had owned and operated a small shop for making wooden shingles. Later, in Port Huron, he became a feed-and-grain dealer. The Edison homes in Milan and Port Huron were modestly substantial, but hardly comparable to the Miller home in Akron.

Tom’s mother, the former Nancy Elliott, was the daughter of a Baptist minister and, before her marriage to Samuel, had taught in a high school in Vienna, Ontario. She, more than Samuel, encouraged and guided Tom’s youthful experiments in chemistry and electricity. Tom quickly became an omnivorous reader.

**ENTER THE MATCHMAKER**

Although both Mina and Thomas began life in Ohio, this geographical coincidence played no part in their meeting, which was something less than accidental. In fact, a self-appointed matchmaker launched their romance.

The year was 1885. Mina had graduated with distinction two years earlier from Akron High School. The program for the graduation exercises listed her as the deliverer of an essay entitled “Among the Foundations,” a reference no doubt to the fundamentals of a good life rather than to charitable trusts. After a year seeing Europe on the Grand Tour, a privilege reserved for the young of the affluent, she now was in Boston studying music and the classics at Miss Johnson’s, a finishing school.

By 1885 Edison already was internationally famous for his invention of the phonograph, his launching of the electric power and light industry, and other achievements. His regular milieu was his laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey, and his places of business in New York City and elsewhere.
Had it not been for Ezra Gilliland, a business associate and close friend of Edison, it is unlikely that Mina and Thomas ever would have met.

The death of his first wife, Mary Stillwell Edison, on August 9, 1884, had left Thomas unprepared for his new responsibilities to his three young children. He had married the pretty Mary when she was sixteen. Edison’s forte was test tubes, not tending tykes. He was one of the nation’s most eligible bachelors, he needed help, and he enjoyed female companionship, even though his hours away from work - his first love - were few and irregular. Old friend Gilliland, whom Edison called Damon (shades of Damon and Pythias), and his wife, nicknamed Momma G. by Edison, set out to correct the situation.

The Gillilands enticed Edison to visit their Boston home in early 1885. Damon and Momma G. proceeded to arrange for a succession of attractive women to meet their illustrious guest. Whether this was done with or without Edison’s consent remains arguable. That Edison enjoyed the attention he was getting is attested to by a telegram he fired off to Samuel Insull, his young assistant back in New York. “Come to Boston,” Edison wired. “At Gill’s house there is (sic) lots of pretty girls.”

His off-and-on stays at Woodside Village, Gilliland’s home, were punctuated by return trips to his Menlo Park laboratory and once by a visit to Florida, for reasons of health. But he spent as much time as possible in Boston. There was reason enough for his being drawn back there. That reason was Mina Miller who, above all the other attractive women numbered among the guests of the Gillilands, filled Edison’s heart almost to the exclusion of his dedication to work.

To quote from the late Matthew Josephson’s masterful biography EDISON, “finally, there appeared a striking brunette from Ohio, whom Mrs. Gilliland knew well, and whose visit was carefully planned. She was Mina Miller, the daughter of Lewis Miller, of Akron, Ohio, a wealthy manufacturer of farm tools.”

“Mina Miller is here and is going to play and sing for you,” Gilliland announced to Edison and other assembled guests.

Again to borrow from Josephson, Edison was “staggered” by Miss Miller, not just by her beauty or by her pianistic and vocal abilities (which concededly were not extraordinary), but more by her aplomb and poise at the age of twenty in the presence of a world-renowned figure. Edison had had his fill of fawning women. From that moment on he pursued his courtship of Mina.
Since her home town of Akron was rather far removed from his usual peregrinations, Edison became a post-office romeo, pressing his suit through the mails. Return letters apprised him that Mina and a large portion of the Miller clan would be spending the summer at Chautauqua Lake, near Jamestown, in western New York State. Then, as today, what is now known as the Chautauqua Institution* flourished. Annually it attracts thousands upon thousands of summer residents and visitors to participate in its broad cultural, religious and recreational programs.

Chautauqua began in 1876. Lewis Miller was its co-founder with the Reverend John Heyl Vincent, who later became a Methodist bishop. Originally established as a camp-type training school for Sunday school teachers, Chautauqua soon attained stature as an outstanding center for summertime adult education. Such was its reputation that Chautauqua could grant university credits to its program participants.

As smitten as Edison was with Mina, it was also true that she gradually - yet swiftly - grew to prefer her ardent but older suitor over rivals for her affections, both in Akron and Chautauqua. Edison had entered her life at a time when two young Chautauquans - George Vincent, son of Chautauqua’s co-founder, and Edward Everett Hughes, son of a well-to-do Pennsylvania family - were squiring Mina.

Thoughts of Mina were interfering with Thomas’ work and sleeping habits. The constant encomiums he heaped upon Mina even started to get under the skin of his oldest child, daughter Marion Estelle, who was only eight years younger than Mina. Marion quite obviously was jealous of Mina; so much so that on July 17, 1885, Thomas wrote in his diary: “(I am) constantly talking about Mina, whom Damon and I use as a yardstick for measuring perfection. Makes Dot (his pet name for daughter Marion) jealous. She threatens to become an incipient Lucretia Borgia.” Jealousy of a stepchild-to-be so near her own age was just one of the problems Mina had to face up to in marrying Edison.

Unable to keep Mina off his mind, Thomas decided to attack rather than retreat. He arranged a visit to Chautauqua to pursue his quest and to get to know her family better.

*Originally known as the Chautauqua Assembly, the establishment on Chautauqua Lake is not to be confused with touring Chautauqua units of the early twentieth century which brought glimpses of culture and entertainment to hundreds of America’s small towns. These touring units borrowed not only the name but their format from the genuine Chautauqua Institution.
Visiting Mina in Chautauqua also had its drawbacks. In those prim days they seldom found moments alone. Further, Edison’s premature deafness prevented Mina and him from conversing in tones not easily overheard by others around them. The ingenious Edison had a solution: he taught her to send and receive in Morse code, in which he was expert.

One night on a chaperoned motor trip to the White Mountains, he tapped out a proposal of marriage on Mina’s palm. His training had not been in vain. Mina responded in code with a message that constituted a provisional “Yes” - provisional in that in keeping with the times, September of 1885, her father’s approval must first be obtained.

In the somewhat stilted language of the day, Edison wrote to Lewis Miller, using in part, these words:

“I trust you will not accuse me of egotism when I say that my life and history and standing are so well known as to call for no statement concerning myself. My reputation is so far made that I recognize I must be judged by it for good or ill.

“I need only add in conclusion that the step I have taken in asking your daughter to intrust her happiness into my keeping has been the result of mature deliberation, and with the full appreciation of the responsibility and the duty I have undertaken to fulfill.

“I do not deny that your answer will seriously affect my happiness, and I trust my suit may meet with your approval.”

His suit won the approval of Mr. Miller. The young woman whom Edison now referred to as the Maid of Chautauqua was to be his very own. The date for the wedding was set for February 24, 1886, hardly more than a year after they met. Oak Place, the Miller home in Akron, was to be the site of the wedding. Father Miller and his Mary Valinda spared no expense in seeing that the nuptials were an occasion to be remembered.

THE HOME EXECUTIVE

Thus, at the tender age of twenty, Mina became stepmother to the jealous twelve-year-old Marion, and to Thomas, Jr., and William Leslie, ten and eight years old, respectively. Almost overnight she also assumed the responsibility for managing two large homes, each well staffed with servants. The Maid of Chautauqua was on her way to becoming a “home executive,” a description she coined for herself some years later. Edison himself, busy with his experiments and manufacturing efforts, was delighted to have Mina assume home-related responsibilities.
In anticipation of his marriage to Mina, Thomas had acquired fourteen acres of land in tropical Fort Myers, Florida, along the banks of the Caloosahatchee River. This was to be their honeymoon haven and winter home. In those primitive days, Fort Myers was virtually inaccessible by land. Its few visitors usually arrived by boat, from the Gulf of Mexico and up the Caloosahatchee. To overcome this transportation problem, Thomas drew up plans for the structures he envisioned - their home, Seminole Lodge, and a breezeway-connected guest house first used by the Gilliland family. The lumber was cut to size and assembled in sections in Fairfield, Maine, then shipped by water to Fort Myers for final assembly. Edison’s winter home in Florida thus represented one of the early examples of prefabrication.*

At the time of their betrothal and marriage, Edison was also having constructed in West Orange, New Jersey, a magnificent modern laboratory to replace his now outgrown Menlo Park lab. He offered Mina a choice between a town house in New York City or a “home in the country” in or near West Orange. She opted for the country and together they settled on Glenmont, a 23-room mansion, fully and richly furnished, positioned high on an eminence in Llewellyn Park, a private preserve for the wealthy in West Orange, and overlooking the valley in which the new Edison laboratory buildings and factories were being erected. Glenmont and its ten-plus acres were for sale, lock-stock-and-barrel, because the original owner, a department store executive in New York City, had embezzled thousands to support his expensive tastes. It proved a wise choice, for heaven only knows how infrequently Mina would have seen her work-a-holic husband had she been twenty miles away in the city!

THE SECOND FAMILY

True, Mina Edison inherited three stepchildren when she married, but she and Thomas wasted little time before starting a family of their own. Madeleine was born about two years later on May 31, 1888; Charles came along on August 3, 1890; and Theodore Miller eight years later on July 10, 1898. The pattern was the same as that of Thomas and his first wife: the first child a girl, the next two boys.

By this time Mina definitely had to become her self-described “home executive.” Thomas, Jr., and William Leslie, sons of the first marriage, were growing into adults in everything but mature judgement.

*An even earlier example was the Lewis Miller Cottage at Lake Chautauqua. Miller, almost a decade earlier, had lumber cut to his specifications in Akron and shipped overland for assembly as Chautauqua’s first permanent home. Prior thereto, tents had served. So, perhaps coincidentally and perhaps not, two of the four homes Mina lived in during her long lifetime were prefabricated. Some hold to the theory that Lewis Miller gave the idea to his soon-to-be son-in-law.
Over the years, neither showed promise of emulating their father's abilities, and each in his own way rebelled against the cultural atmosphere Mina had introduced into the home. Thomas, Jr. had a little of his father's flair for innovation, but this was offset by a proclivity for being "taken in" by unscrupulous outsiders anxious to trade on his father's fame. An 1893 letterhead announced Tom, Junior, as the manufacturer of "The Edison Junior Improved Incandescent Lamp." He was not. There were other comparable examples.

As for William Leslie, he was something of a playboy and ne'er-do-well who, upon his father's death after years of receiving substantial financial support, tried to break Thomas Edison's will, which bequeathed most of the inventor's multimillion-dollar estate to the children of the second marriage.

Marion Estelle, the jealous step-daughter, seemingly was better oriented overall, but she was also definitely self-willed. During a trip to Europe at the age of twenty-two, she married a German soldier in Dresden, Germany. With continuing assistance from her father, she and her officer husband, Major Oscar Oeser, lived together off and on into World War I days when his extreme Prussianism resulted in her divorcing him.

Marion Edison Oser (she dropped the first e in Oeser) spent most of the remainder of her ninety-two years in the United States, reconciled at least partially with the rest of the two Edison families. Neither she nor Thomas, Jr. nor William Leslie had children. Not one of them was college-educated, principally because their self-taught father had small regard for formal education.

The course followed by the children of the second family was quite different, probably because of Mina's role as manager of home-related responsibilities. Madeleine, the eldest, went through the elementary and secondary grades in private schools in New Jersey and, for two years, attended Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, where she was a good student. Two years of college for young women in those days were unusual, even for daughters of the well-to-do. Although it proved an unsuccessful venture, she ran for the Republican nomination for the United States House of Representatives in 1934. She lost, but not by too much.

Charles and Theodore both went the private-school route before matriculating at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Each was a good student, but Theodore was the better of the two. Charles had a recognizable flair for business administration and at his father's insistence (even over Mina's protestations) he went to work in industry rather than to complete his fourth year at M.I.T. Theodore, however, graduated with a degree in physics and did post-graduate work.

Theodore established a solid reputation as an inventor and research
scientist, as a philanthropist and expert in conservation. After years of working with his father, he established his own laboratory and company in the 1930s.

Charles became president of his father’s industries, Thomas A. Edison, Incorporated, in 1926 at the age of thirty-six. Upon his father’s death five years later, he took over complete charge. However, changes in the political climate and thinking kept interrupting his business career. A Republican by birth and tradition, Charles, at the outset of the Great Depression, volunteered his business experience to help Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the newly elected President of the United States. Following successive boosts up the political ladder, Charles became Secretary of the Navy and then served as Governor of New Jersey from 1941 to 1944. Shortly thereafter, he reverted to Republicanism and espoused conservative causes.

In two marriages Thomas Edison sired six children, a daughter and two sons by each wife. All children married, but Madeleine alone bore children. And while her four sons carried the middle name of Edison, their last name was Sloane, sons of Madeleine and John Eyre Sloane. Ergo, the last name Edison died among the direct descendants of Thomas.

MINA’S OWN CAREER

The world mourned the death at eighty-four of Thomas Alva Edison on October 18, 1931. His passing after months of flagging health occurred just three days shy of what would have been the fifty-second anniversary of his invention of the first successful incandescent electric lamp. His name was legion.

His passing, however, served to focus new attention on his widow. Talented as she was, Mina’s past had been submerged in the shadow of her husband’s almost unparalleled fame. In the Oranges in New Jersey, Fort Myers in Florida, and Chautauqua in New York, she had been well known for her own good work and deeds; but beyond, many persons thought of her mainly as the wife of Thomas Edison.

Over the years preceding Thomas’ death, Mina had actively associated herself with many activities extracurricular to her being a “home executive.” Some of these activities were local or regional, others national in scope. These she continued after his passing. Additionally, she took on several more for good measure.

From the early days of her marriage, but particularly after the births and early years of her three children, Mina busied herself with a variety of organizations and causes. She was instrumental, for example, in organizing the West Orange Community League which seventy years later, still serves the recreational and cultural needs of West Orange. She was its second president, from 1912 through 1919. In the Great Depression of the 1930s, she was a (Continued on Page 17)
Mina at eight years

Mina at twenty

Young mother with her first-born, Madeleine
MILLERS ALL - (Top row, from left) Father Lewis and mother Mary Valinda Miller, sons Ira and Lewis, and daughter Mina; (middle row) son Theodore (who died in the Spanish-American War in the Battle of San Juan Hill while serving under Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, later President), daughters Mary and Jane; (bottom row) daughter Grace, and sons Edward, Robert and John. An eleventh child, Eva, the eldest daughter, had died at age sixteen. From birth to death, the Millers were a close-knit family.
COMPANION YEARS - Mina stands at the side of her Thomas in this photograph taken circa 1925, when he was in his late seventies. Several chairs such as the one he is seated on graced their home in Llewellyn Park, West Orange, New Jersey.
Mina (see arrow) dances a reel on Atlantic City’s boardwalk. The year was 1922 and she was there for a National Recreation Congress.

As a self-styled “home executive,” Mina supervises accounts, appointments and other obligations of her 23-room home served by upwards of a dozen staff members. This 1929 photograph shows her at her desk in the combination office and second-floor livingroom shared with Thomas at Glenmont, their West Orange home.
Thomas and Mina, circa 1912, stroll through their botanical garden in Fort Myers, where they had spent their honeymoon in 1886.

Florida again. Thomas and Mina celebrate his last birthday, his eightieth, in Fort Myers.
Mina, Thomas and other celebrities (note inked-in identifications) are guests of famed horticulturist Luther Burbank at his home in Santa Rosa, California, in 1915.

Mina and her second husband, Edward Everett Hughes, a retired steel company executive, are shown here in Florida in 1937. They had been friends since childhood.
The Lewis Miller Cottage at Chautauqua, New York (above) and Seminole Lodge at Fort Myers, Florida (below) are early examples of prefabricated housing. One was designed by Mina Edison’s father, Lewis Miller; the other by her husband, Thomas Edison.
Mina, in her late seventies, stands among the flowers she loved so much. Her own greenhouse at Glenmont, her home in West Orange, New Jersey, produced myriad beautiful and exotic flowers and plants, and her fourteen-acre estate was impeccably landscaped. Her winter home in Fort Myers, Florida, still stands within a large subtropical botanical garden. The simple beauty of her summer place at Chautauqua, New York, remains enhanced by stately trees and flowering plants.
“Committee of One” of the Welfare League of the Oranges to study how unemployment was affecting the League’s twenty-seven hospitals and allied agencies.

A touch of Hollywood even embraced her. She participated personally in the world premiere in the Oranges of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s “Edison, the Man,” starring Spencer Tracy and Rita Johnson.

Chautauqua, naturally, was among Mina Edison’s first loves, inasmuch as she had spent virtually every summer there since childhood. And her first love at Chautauqua, outside of her family, undoubtedly was the Institution’s Bird and Tree Club. Mina was a dedicated conservationist long before the word was in everyday use.

The Chautauqua Bird and Tree Club’s varied activities provided an important forum for outstanding conservationists throughout the United States. Mina was active until her final days in arranging for only the best speakers at the Chautauqua forum.

As an example, Jay “Ding” Darling, the renowned cartoonist and equally renowned conservationist, and Mina were close friends who admired one another for their mutual goals and good works. Thanks to Mina, “Ding” not only appeared with some frequency before Bird and Tree Club audiences, but he also was instrumental in helping her to obtain others equally expert in the field to do likewise. Not infrequently, Mina personally would pay all or part of the expenses of visiting speakers rather than deplete the Club’s treasury. An important wildlife preserve on Sanibel Island hard by Florida’s west coast is dedicated to “Ding” Darling’s memory.

Chautauqua Institution held Mina in high esteem, not just because she was a daughter of co-founder Lewis Miller, but also because of her genuine interest and administrative flair. For many years until her death, she was a Trustee of the Institution, a position she took seriously and at which she worked assiduously.

Mina’s life at the close of her husband’s career was described thusly in Matthew Josephson’s book EDISON:

“He (Thomas) absented himself for longer and longer intervals from his laboratory in the two last years that remained, during which it seemed only his will to live kept him alive, for he ate next to nothing. Often he stayed abed or sat in an easy chair at home, but still kept in close contact with his technical assistants, who daily brought him reports of the progress of the goldenrod rubber experiments.*

*Edison’s research produced a high quality natural rubber from the latex found in goldenrod, but even though through hybridization he greatly increased the percentage of latex in goldenrod, the improvement was not adequate to meet the lower cost of latex imported from overseas or, later, the cost of butane synthetic rubber.
“Mrs. Edison watched patiently over his rest and diet, and maintained an almost daily routine of motor drives with him along the country roads of New Jersey.

“In those last two years of ill health and weakness, Edison still tried to work - though usually at home, in a large room upstairs that served as his den, with Mina always there also, occupied with her own domestic, social and religious activities, at a large flat-topped desk placed at the other side of the room. Mrs. Edison had two telephones at her desk and a battery of push buttons with which she could ‘buzz’ the servants. She might be working on anything from a program for a future Chautauqua session to the affairs of the School Board of West Orange, or those of a local temperance committee seeking to curb Sunday amusements in the town, including beer drinking. She also busied herself in helping to beautify the streets and gardens of the place, and in aiding the African Americans living in the slums on the outskirts of Fort Myers, Florida, near Edison’s winter home. Facing her big desk, there hung on the wall a large framed photograph of Edison in his twenties, a youth with the expression of a dreamer. Beside it was a portrait of her eldest son, Charles, whose features - though softer and less rugged - strongly resembled his father’s.

Although Mina was close to all three of her own children, there seemed to be a particularly strong attachment between her and Charles. After Thomas’ death, Charles became generally regarded as head of the family.

Charles placed great confidence in Mina’s overall talents. Both as a public official in high office and as head of an industrial complex, he frequently turned to her for counsel.

In spite of her many activities, to Mina the health and happiness of her Thomas came first. This was the common theme in conversations and correspondence between the author (who knew Mrs. Edison for the last two years of her life) and persons from all walks of life, who also had known her over many more years.

A staunch Methodist, Mina was a large contributor to churches of her persuasion in the Oranges, in Fort Myers, and elsewhere. In later years, she also associated herself with a religious movement called Moral Rearmament, or Buchmanism after its founder, Frank Buchman, an American evangelist. The movement emphasized absolute virtue.

Her belief that healthful habits and activities contributed to the physical and cultural good of young and old alike led her into becoming an active participant and financial contributor to the National Recreation Association. In a talk to the National Recreation Congress at Louisville, Kentucky (circa the late 1920s) she closed her remarks in these words:
“We are facing a vast challenge, but I believe it can and will be met. I like to look ahead to the time when every American city and town and country district will have better opportunities for more and better play; will enjoy leisure time pursuits that build up the body and minister to the mind and spirit. One of the most important things this group can do is show our young people that the best things in life are free; that they may be had without paying a cent. Bring our children closer to the simple and the fundamental; help them to discover hobbies that they may keep all their lives; train their hands and their hearts to the joy of creating perfect things; hold up to them ideals of fine sportsmanship - and we will have a better nation tomorrow.”

PROBLEMS IN HER LIFE

When Mina married Thomas in 1886, few clouds could be seen in the skies over her future, except, possibly, the nineteen-year age differential and her becoming step-mother of three mercurial, unpredictable children. Why should there have been clouds? Her devoted and wealthy father, Lewis Miller, headed a prosperous farm machinery company, and her equally devoted husband was an ascending rocket in the firmament of fame and well on his way to wealth. The age differential proved inconsequential. Clouds, if any, however, seemed to cast their shadows from the Edison side.

But seven short years later, in the great money panic of 1893, Mina found herself extremely thankful that Thomas had already started a program of investing to assure her future security. Her father’s Akron-based company was on the verge of bankruptcy. She personally was able to come to his rescue by guaranteeing debts up to $100,000. The company weathered the storm. A number of years later, however, after Lewis Miller’s death in 1899 at the age of seventy, the Buckeye line of farm machinery was sold to the International Harvester Company.

Requests for financial assistance (frequently couched in words that more properly could have been described as demands) poured in both before and after Thomas’ death. No small number of them were from her step-children and other relatives of Edison’s family or of his first wife’s. Many such requests were honored by Mina and Thomas with regularity over the years.

All in all, however, her life continued relatively serene and secure, partly because of her own determination, insight and compassion. She continued to keep a close and acute eye on the ups and downs of Thomas A. Edison, Incorporated, the principal functioning company after Thomas’ passing. It was of little concern to her that she was not mentioned in her husband’s will because, as he explained in that document, she was already a wealthy woman by reason of provisions he had made for her during his lifetime.
Elsewhere in this recounting, mention was made of two young men who were suitors of Mina only to lose out to Thomas Edison. One was now to reenter her life scheme. He was Edward Everett Hughes, a widowed, former steel company executive.

This caption appeared under a picture of Mina and Mr. Hughes in a newspaper following their marriage:

“EDISON’S WIDOW IS BRIDE AT 70 - A lifelong friendship culminated in the marriage of Mrs. Mina Miller Edison, 70, widow of Thomas A. Edison, and Edward E. Hughes, retired steel manufacturer of Franklin, Pa., in the bride’s Chautauqua, N.Y. home, shown after the ceremony (October 30, 1935). They will spend their honeymoon in Florida, where their families often were together during the lifetimes of Edison and the first Mrs. Hughes, both of whom died in 1931.”

A Franklin, Pennsylvania, newspaper had this to say in its report on the nuptials:

“Although Mr. Hughes and Mrs. Edison were playmates when his family kept a summer home at Chautauqua in the post-Civil War decade, in after years they met seldom until he and the Edisons established a habit of wintering in Florida. The families spent a great deal of their time together there.”

In the four years before she was widowed a second time in January, 1940, Mina and Edward spent much of their time at Glenmont in West Orange. Travel was one of their principal joys. In addition to visits to Chautauqua, they traveled widely through the United States and took at least one extensive trip through much of Europe, including England, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia and Denmark.

Mina kept a detailed diary of this trip abroad, starting the day before they were to sail aboard the U.S. Statendam in the summer of 1937. This diary not only was revelatory of the size of the Glenmont staff,* but also showed the affection she felt for the staff members and others who were helping to get her and Edward ready for their departure. Excerpts from the diary for the first day she started keeping it follow:

“Lucy too was the usual loving hand which always helps to make things run smoothly.” (Lucy Bogue was a long-time employee and confidante whom Mina looked upon as virtually one of the family.)

“Johnnie as usual invaluable with his understanding. My rock in need.” (John V. Miller, her brother, was an Edison Company executive. He also handled

*At peak size when Mina’s children were young and required governesses, the staff numbered as many as 15.
many of the financial responsibilities involving Glenmont and Mina’s activities.)

“Ann with her timely and useful suggestions, one being the very paper on
which I am writing.” (Ann Edison, her daughter-in-law and neighbor, married
Mina’s younger son, Theodore M. Edison.)

“Henry Horsey making each day a joy with his willingness and happiness
in making use of our beautiful things for the use of us all. The flowers so, so
beautiful. I shall never forget one beautiful table (reflecting) his love and joy in
it.” (Henry was the butler, and like Lucy Bogue, an old-time retainer).

“The cook was equally a comfort. Everything she did was very good.”

“Scarth (the chauffeur) always attentive and right on hand to meet our every
call. I felt like capturing him and bringing him along but that seemed foolish as
Angela (her personal maid, who accompanied her on the trip) was perhaps
more of use all around.”

“Mallory (a houseman) and Anna (the upstairs maid) faithful at their posts.”

“Tom (head gardener) and Fabius (Tom’s assistant) at theirs.”

“I am trusting them all to stand by the ship keeping all in order.”

**ALONE AGAIN**

At the passing of Edward Hughes in early 1940, Mina, at seventy-four, was
to live another seven years. She resumed using the name of Mrs. Thomas A. Edison.

They were, indeed, seven eventful years. With the approach of the nation’s
entry into World War II, her son Charles, as Secretary of the Navy,* spearheaded
a campaign to modernize and enlarge the country’s naval might. With the
coming of another war era, Mina’s activities reflected current conditions. On
November 23, 1940, at Kearny, New Jersey, she christened the destroyer **EDISON**
(named for Thomas, not Charles). The following January, after accompanying
son Charles during the ceremonies at Trenton at which he was inaugurated as
Governor of New Jersey, she revisited the destroyer with him at the Navy Yard in
Brooklyn.

Traditionally a staunch Republican - even though Charles was elected
governor as an independent-minded Democrat - Mina announced she was
quitting the Republican party because of then existing conditions in its ranks in
New Jersey. The extent of her political influence may never have been polled,
but superfluous to say, candidates avidly sought her backing.

In a pox-on-both-your-houses statement, she said:

“I am ashamed of my party in this state and I expect to take an independ-
ent stand, as I feel the present Democratic party is no better.”

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*A Secretary of the Navy held full Cabinet status then. In 1947, following World War II, Congress
created the office of Secretary of Defense with supervision over the Navy, Army and Air Force.
Obviously she was commenting only on that hard-core part of the New Jersey Democratic party which did not accept Charles as one of its own. By the same token, it must have been a difficult decision for her to make. She had met most of America’s presidents since childhood, from Ulysses S. Grant through Franklin Roosevelt. Of them all, she had been closest to Herbert Hoover, who was still living and politically active at the time of her announcement.

When in 1946 the Thomas Alva Edison Foundation was formed “for the advancement of education and scientific research,” she became its honorary chairman. In another move to help perpetuate the name and fame of Thomas, in 1947 she deeded Seminole Lodge, the Edison winter home for sixty-one years, to the City of Fort Myers as a botanical garden and memorial to her husband. The fourteen-acre estate today attracts several hundred thousand visitors annually.

Her devotion to Thomas’ memory was equalled only by her admiration for her father, Lewis Miller, and his many achievements. Over her lifetime Mina gave unsparingly of her time, talents and money to institutions and activities memorializing him.

Even though a number of events recognizing Lewis Miller’s greatness did not occur until after her death, Mina’s dedicated service preceding such events unquestionably contributed to their successful achievement.

Just think of it: Oak Place, the Lewis Miller home in Akron, has been accepted by the United States Department of Interior’s National Register of Historic Places, and what is called the Lewis Miller Cottage in Chautauqua was dedicated by the Interior Department in 1966 as a National Historic Landmark. Additionally, the entire Chautauqua Institution complex was listed in 1973 in the National Register of Historic Places.

Thus it is that the four homes lived in by Mina are recognized for their historic importance - Oak Place in Akron and Miller Cottage in Chautauqua honor Lewis Miller; Glenmont in West Orange and Seminole Lodge in Fort Myers honor Thomas Edison. Glenmont, together with Edison’s nearby West Orange laboratory, comprise the Thomas Edison National Historical Park and museum, under the ownership and management of the National Park Service, an arm of the U.S. Department of Interior.

Considering that two of Mina’s homes also qualified as pioneer examples of prefabrication, it is probable then that no person other than she has experienced such a rare background. She was unique.

A treasured document in the estate of Margaret Miller Newman, a niece of Mina’s is a letter to Mina dated November 14, 1938, from Ida Tarbell, best remembered, undoubtedly, as a muckraking journalist. Miss Tarbell departed
from her iconoclastic nature to literally rhapsodize over Lewis Miller and the Chautauqua Institution. Recalling her contacts with Chautauqua as a youngster in the late-middle 1800s, Miss Tarbell wrote:

“This Chautauqua Movement had grown out of a Methodist Camp Meeting held annually at Fair Point on the pleasant lake (Chautauqua) which in my childhood had been the terminus of our most ambitious one-day excursions. The president of this association by the 1870s was a man respected in all that part of the world for his good deeds as well as for his business acumen - Lewis Miller of Akron, Ohio. Mr. Miller was to be known nationally as the father-in-law of Thomas Edison, but old-time Chautauquans put it the other way - ‘Edison is Lewis Miller’s son-in-law.’ That was enough recommendation for Edison in their minds.”

Miss Tarbell had grown up in the little town of Titusville, Pennsylvania, not far from Chautauqua.

Time was running out for Mina. She had accomplished many things, yet she felt there were so many things undone. She died at eighty-two on Sunday, August 24, 1947, at the Harkness Pavilion of the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City, after an illness of eight days. At her bedside when she died were her sons, Charles and Theodore and their wives, and her daughter, Mrs. John E. Sloane and husband. Mina was born July 6, 1865.

In its lengthy obituary, The New York Times commented: “Associated closely with her famous husband during some of the most eventful years of his life, the former Mina Miller was at the same time quietly distinguished in her own right.”

**MINA AND THOMAS, TOGETHER AGAIN**

Mina was buried side-by-side with Thomas under handsome, erect markers in a large plot in Rosedale Cemetery, Orange, N.J. It proved a temporary interment, however. Sixteen years later, their remains were disinterred and reburied at Glenmont, their former estate.

This transfer was carried out with the blessing of the Edison family, of the Proprietors of Llewellyn Park, and of the National Park Service, by now the owner and operator of Glenmont. Their simple side-by-side markers, horizontal rather than vertical, rest in a bower near the rear of the fourteen acres of landscaped grounds surrounding Glenmont, there to be viewed by the thousands of visitors to this national shrine.
Mina and Thomas share a quiet moment together in the upstairs den of Glenmont, their 23-room home in the exclusive Llewellyn Park section of West Orange. This picture, courtesy of the Thomas Edison National Historical Park, probably was taken in 1921 when Thomas was in his mid seventies.
NOTE OF THANKS

Special thanks go to the many persons who, through personal interview or correspondence, added to the author’s understanding and appreciation of the qualities of character that helped to make Mina Miller Edison the person she was. Alphabetically, they include:

Ms. Nancy Miller Arnn
Mrs. Thelda Coakley
Mrs. Ambrose Cram
Mr. and Mrs. Sidney R. Davis
Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Miller Edison
Ms. Lynn Given
Mrs. Beatrice Dolan Kramer
Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Miller
Mrs. Ben Sheppard Clayton Morrison
Mr. and Mrs. James D. Newton
Mr. and Mrs. John Edison Sloane
Miss Alice F. Stevenson
Dr. and Mrs. Clarence J. Zimmerman

All of them were acquaintances, friends or relatives of Mrs. Thomas Alva Edison during her lifetime.

Appreciatively,
John D. Venable
(whose other Edison-oriented publications include Thomas Alva Edison, the Story of a Great American; Out of the Shadow: The Story of Charles Edison; and Big Rocks and Rocky Years.)
Glenmont, the majestic 23-room home atop an eminence in the exclusive Llewellyn Park section of West Orange, New Jersey, was the residence of Mina and Thomas Edison for the forty-five years of their marriage. Today, Glenmont is owned by the United States government and is part of the Thomas Edison National Historical Park, which also embraces his famous nearby laboratory.