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**AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**Edison: Invention Laboratory at Menlo Park  
TRANSCRIPT

**Narrator:** In the late winter of 1876, the scattered residents of Menlo Park, New Jersey, eyed a curious new building. It could easily have been mistaken for a school or a Quaker meeting house. In fact, it was a laboratory — a 5,000-square-foot facility entirely dedicated to nurturing the ideas of one man, an up-and-coming entrepreneur by the name of Thomas Alva Edison. No private laboratory in the country was so well-equipped. From the apothecary jars filled with all manner of chemicals and organic materials, to the scientific instruments and shop tools, Edison had everything he could possibly need to make the natural world bend to his will.

**Lisa Gitelman, Historian:** He had this keen sense that he needed different kinds of resources in order to invent, and so Menlo Park becomes a kind of a blank slate on which to come up with this idea of invention that's uniquely his.

**Paul Israel, Thomas Edison Papers:** Edison took a real risk in going to Menlo Park. You had to be pretty bold to build this new thing — invention laboratory. But it was because he had this vision of how to become a great inventor.

**Narrator:** It was May of 1876 — and Edison was anxious to get down to work. His staff was already in place: a small group of experimental assistants and skilled machinists, many of whom he'd worked with for years. From the very beginning, Menlo Park thrummed like a hive. In the long, open rooms of the laboratory, as many as a dozen men were at work at once — conducting experiments, cutting patterns, banging together crude machines. The plan at Menlo Park, as Edison put it to a friend, was to bring out "a minor invention every 10 days and a big thing every month or so."

**Nancy Koehn, Historian:** This was astoundingly revolutionary, you know, "I want to invent. I'm going to be about invention," right. And, "I don't really want to be bothered lots of times with very much else."

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**Nathan Myhrvold, Inventor and Entrepreneur:** Most successful inventors throughout history were largely people trying to accomplish a task. They had a day job, effectively, and invention was a way of furthering that. Edison decided that invention was his day job.

**Robert Rosenberg, Thomas Edison Papers:** And nobody had the kind resources that Edison had. He could say, "You work on this kind of carbon, and you work on this kind of carbon, and you work on this kind of carbon."

**Neil Baldwin, Biographer:** He would keep track of how many hours he spent in a row on something and try to beat his last record.

**John Staudenmaier, Historian:** Edison loved the chase. He wanted to break open very interesting and challenging problems with a lot of promise in them.

**Lisa Gitelman, Historian:** The drive had something to do with technical inquiry. A kind of ambition to know where to figure out things that nobody had thought of yet. It wasn't just like answering questions that everybody knew were there and didn't have answers yet, it was like even coming up with the questions and answering them.

**Narrator:** "We work all night experimenting and sleep till noon in the day," Edison's chief experimental assistant, Charles Batchelor, told his brother. "Edison is...indefatigable...."

**John Staudenmaier, Historian:** It was a rowdy group of guys. It was kind of like a frat house, but they had the added thing of saying, "We're on the leading edge of progress, right here."