



# HOLY COW! HISTORY: MAMA EDISON'S FAMOUS FIB - INSIDE SOURCES

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*Photo: Thomas Edison*

A story is making the rounds on social media, an uplifting tale from the past meant to inspire us today. But did it really happen? Sort of. Well, not really.

Thomas Edison's place in history has taken a beating recently. Revisionists have made it cool to fawn over his rival Nikola Tesla at the expense of poor Tom. That's a pity because although Telsa was long denied the fame he rightly deserved, building up one person while tearing down another is a poor way to rectify matters.

Despite the naysayers, Thomas Edison was a genuine genius. He played a crucial role in creating the lightbulb, phonograph, motion pictures, electric power generation and many more innovations too numerous to mention. Each, in its way, revolutionized America and the world. Having just one of those accomplishments on your resume would be remarkable; having them all is the stuff of legend.

So it stands to reason that Mama Edison was proud of her son. What mother wouldn't be?

He was the seventh and final child born to Sam and Nancy Edison. Being the baby of the bunch made him the apple of Nancy's eye, and he adored her in return. He was a loyal, obedient "good boy." Until he set foot inside a school classroom and turned into Tommy the Tuned Out.

A traditional learning environment and Thomas Edison weren't a good fit. He struggled. His grades weren't good. And he was miserable, too. Though in fairness to the inventor, schoolrooms in the mid-1800s weren't fun places. They were led by no-nonsense teachers who ran the class with the intensity of a Prussian drillmaster and didn't scrimp on spanking those who didn't learn their lessons.

Plus, Edison was going deaf in one ear. It's believed scarlet fever early in childhood caused the damage that eventually cost him the hearing in one ear and seriously damaged it in the other.

On top of that, modern researchers and medical professionals strongly suggest he may have suffered from ADHD.

Put it all together, and it's hardly the ideal situation for producing a scholar. Suffice it to say, young Edison's performance didn't set academia ablaze. Which is where the modern heart-jerker social media post enters the story.

According to the meme, young Tom trudged home from school one day holding a folded note and announced, "My teacher gave this paper to me and told me to only give it to my mother." Mama Edison ripped it open, turned on the waterworks, and read aloud through

her tears, “Your son is a genius. This school is too small for him and doesn’t have enough good teachers for training him. Please teach him yourself.”

Whereupon, the mother tearfully hugged her son in a scene straight out of a Lifetime movie. But wait — it gets better.

The story goes on to say that many years after the mother died, Edison was going through her papers and found the old note. Reading it for himself for the first time, he was horrified to discover it actually said, “Your son is addled. We won’t let him come to school anymore.” Edison bawled like a baby before rallying to write some appropriately mushy sentiments about the power of a mother’s love in his diary.

A touching story. If only it had actually happened!

A few slender slivers of truth are woven into the tale. For instance, we know Edison was a very poor student. We know there were issues with him at school, too. And, according to his Library of Congress bio, there seems to have been an incident where a teacher did call him “addled.” (For the addle-minded out there, it means confused; unable to think clearly.)

An unpleasant tiff apparently followed, with Mama Edison snatching her son out of the classroom and homeschooling him. She was a former teacher, after all, and eventually decided no one could instruct her boy better than she could. And even that lasted only so long.

By the time he was a teenager, Edison was fully consumed by his twin life passions: Science and entrepreneurship. He struck out on his own, and the rest is, well, history.

Edison was all too human and occasionally liked to make a good story better by fudging the facts to his benefit. Take his hearing loss. He told several different tall tales about what had caused it.

So while the story circulating on social media is about as historically accurate as young George Washington chopping down a cherry tree and then refusing to lie about it (never happened), there are still valuable takeaways.

Thomas Edison did face formidable learning challenges. Nancy Edison did go out of her way not only to teach him at home but also nurtured and encouraged his scientific mind. And that mind did go on to forever change our world.

If that’s not worthy of celebrating, what is?