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EDISON PARK: LIVING AND LEARNING IN FORT MYERS

by Prudy Taylor Board

Edison Park, one of Fort Myers’ oldest, most prestigious subdivisions, is an important testimony to the pervasive influence famed inventor Thomas Alva Edison has had on this city.

To reach Edison Park, you must travel south on palm-bedecked McGregor Boulevard, one of the city’s main thoroughfares, to the entrance of Edison’s winter home. Directly across the Boulevard is Edison’s laboratory and a few hundred feet further south is the entrance to Edison Park.

The entrance is marked by the statue of a Grecian maiden holding an urn and was modeled after the famous gate in Chestnut Hill, a wealthy suburb of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Developer James D. Newton officially unveiled the statue and the subdivision on April 7, 1926.
It was indeed an occasion. Mina Edison officiated, accompanied by her ailing husband who had risen from his sickbed to attend. Another dignitary on hand was New York State Senator Charles Stadler. Stadler, in addition to being a legislator and millionaire, was active in real estate and developed several subdivisions in Lee County including Stadler’s Central Heights, Seminole Park, York Manor Park and Stadler’s Farms.² The three were friends of Newton.

Newton, still active in real estate development in Lee County today, moved to Fort Myers from Philadelphia in 1924 when he was about nineteen. Newton’s friendship with Edison began after the two met for the first time while Newton was developing Edison Park, his first business venture in Lee County. Newton recalled recently: “Many times I worked right along with the crews and one day I was down in a ditch along McGregor Boulevard shoveling dirt. I’d just dug down and gotten a shovelful and was hefting it up over my shoulder. I looked up and saw Mr. Edison in his Model T Ford looking down on me. Noting the shovel in my hands, he smiled and from then on, we became good friends. I think he liked people who weren’t afraid to spit on their hands and pick up a shovel and do a little hard work.”³ Newton still cherishes an inscribed photograph of Edison which reads: “All things come to him who hustles while he waits. To my young friend, Jimmie Newton.” It is signed “Thos. A. Edison.”

Despite the almost manic quality of the times, for it was the height of the boom in Florida, Newton established a reputation for integrity and excellence. Homes built within Edison Park’s fifty-five acre site were either Moorish, Spanish or Italian in design. Lots averaged

James Newton at the Entrance to Edison Park.

Photograph courtesy of Prudy Taylor Board.
two-and-a-half acres. Sidewalks were six feet wide. Eight-foot parkways between the curbs and sidewalks were planted with palms, hibiscus, crotons, and bougainvillea. Each owner received a written guarantee that the developer would provide curbing, city water and sewers, gas and street lights. The local press heaped praise on Newton for his work. One editorial gushed: “Edison Park stands out today as an example to all would-be developers of the past and all developers who may come to this city in the future. . . . [It was] built by men who kept faith. You developers, old and new, go and do likewise.”

Newton did, in fact, decry the puffery and flummery of the era, for in his sales brochure describing Edison Park, he wrote: “To the visitor who thinks of Florida as a land of artificiality and real estate booms, the first glimpse of the palm-lined avenues and the homelike character of Fort Myers, the northernmost tropical city in the United States, comes as a distinct surprise. There is none of the feverish excitement, the glitter and bombast one has come to believe is the Florida of today.”

Thomas Edison and Henry Ford.

Photograph courtesy of James D. Newton.
Further on in the brochure, Newton suggested that Florida was a state in transition, and he emphasized a home in Edison Park as an investment in living. The brochure declared: “Think what it means to be able to live out of doors all the year 'round – to play golf or tennis or go swimming at Fort Myers Beach every day in the year! Think what it means to see children’s eager faces tanned as brown in January as in July! To be able to sit in your patio in the evening, looking up at the Southern Cross in the heaven above, while soft breezes, from the Gulf stir the fronds of towering palms . . . .”

Ever the good businessman, Newton did not neglect the financial aspect. “From the viewpoint of investment, Edison Park offers the best opportunity for sound financial profit in the whole state of Florida today,” he wrote. Echoing a problem that is only today being rectified, Newton asserted:

For years the development of Fort Myers lagged, because of the handicap of poor roads. Since 1920, when new roads began to be built, the population has increased over 300 per cent. To show that this increase represents permanent and not speculative growth, the number of building permits increased 800 per cent in the
same period. In the first fourteen weeks of 1925, five hundred and nineteen building permits were issued, an increase of 1000 per cent in three and one-half months, as compared with the whole twelve months of 1924!7

At the same time Edison Park was being developed, Fort Myers was suffering, as reflected in part by the statistics above, and from still another problem which Lee County has only recently alleviated – overcrowded schools. The Fort Myers Press reported in January 1924: “Overcrowded schools are now a big problem. There is one building short and overflow is mostly local. There are 10 to 40% more pupils in every building than should be there. Soon it will be tourist season to add to the overcrowding. There are 8 buildings now in use.”8

In September of the following year, double sessions were scheduled at Gwynne Institute – Lee County’s first modern school building, constructed in 1911 – because of a lack of schoolrooms for the more than 2000 students then registered.9 According to “The History of Old Lee County Schools,” compiled by historian E. H. “Ned” Loveland, 2290 school children were enrolled in school during the 1924-25 school year. The following year that number had grown to 3104.10

However, plans involving Edison Park were underway to solve the problem. During 1925, Lee County voters adopted a $350,000 bond issue to build two schools – Edison Park Grammar School and another designated simply as “Colored School.” By October, local architect I. W.
Iredell had completed the plans and specifications which were advertised in newspapers in Florida, Baltimore and Georgia.\textsuperscript{11}

According to the January 1926 minutes of the Lee County Board of Public Instruction, the J. M. Lawton Company won the contract with its bid of $149,500 to build Edison Park. Completion was scheduled for August 1st.\textsuperscript{12} By March, the School Board had settled on property in Edison Park as the site and voted to buy the entire block 25 from Newton’s firm, the New Home Development Company, for $68,000.\textsuperscript{13} James D. Newton remembered that transaction. “The School Board didn’t have much money so we took school warrants,” he remarked.\textsuperscript{14} Records indicate the Board paid $26,500 in cash and the balance in $500 installments due at six-month intervals. There were delays in completing the building. In fact, the school did not open until March 30, 1927; however the cornerstone was laid on March 13, 1926.

The laying of the school cornerstone was an event rivaling the opening of the subdivision in importance. According to an article in the \textit{Fort Myers Tropical News}, all the schools in the city were closed at noon so schoolchildren could take part. Masons of Tropical Lodge 56 were in charge and visiting Masons were instructed to meet at the Elks Club to form a procession of cars to the school site. Music was provided by the Fort Myers Concert Band.\textsuperscript{15}

On hand were City Superintendent of Schools Howell L. Watkins and County Superintendent J. Colins English. (English who has an elementary school named after him on Pine Island Road in North Fort Myers, went on to become State Superintendent of Schools.) According to Newton: “The Edisons and I were present at the laying of the school cornerstone. In it were placed a photograph of the unveiling of the Edison Park entrance along with a coin.”\textsuperscript{16} These items, the coin was a dime, were removed in ceremonies commemorating the school’s 50th anniversary in 1977. Also enclosed were lists of students and faculty. A Cuban Laurel tree, donated by the great inventor was planted on the school grounds that day. Today’s schoolchildren are shaded by that same tree as it has flourished over the decades.

In the years that followed, the school became a center of activities not only for its school body and the residents of the subdivision, but also for the community which attended its 700-square foot auditorium, the largest in Lee County. The Lions’ Club Minstrels were put on there each year along with little theatre productions, dance recitals by Betty Satchell’s students, fish fries,
fashion shows and concerts. A recent issue of the Fort Myers Sun praised Edison Park for its contribution to civic affairs: “It was in the pleasant auditorium of that school that ‘Miss Effie’ Winkler Henderson McAdow, who taught piano and voice to three generations of the community’s children, the late Harry Fagan (president of the First National Bank) and Mrs. George Mann (wife of contractor George Mann and mother of State representative Frank Mann) . . . staged the first events which began the powerful and prestigious Community Concerts.”

The roster of former Edison Park PTA presidents reads like a local who’s who. It includes Chesley Perry, president emeritus of the Fort Myers News Press; Frank Watson, attorney for the City of Fort Myers; Circuit Court Judge Robert Shafer; deceased architect and builder William Frizzell; former County Commissioner Walter Shirey; bank president Chad Wiltshire; advertising executive Dan Harlacher, and local attorney and former member of the Board of Trustees of Edison Community College Travis Gresham, to mention only a few.

Local architect Bill Rivers graduated from Edison Park in 1945. He remembered both the tension of the war years and the flavor and character of life in Fort Myers. The moral code was simple and rigidly enforced. He recalled an incident which took place on the school playground. “I said something like, ‘Damn, I don’t want to do that,’ meaning play soft ball or something similar and one of the kids heard me. Whoever it was told our sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Redmon,
and she took me straight to our principal, Miss Bullock. I had to stay after school in Miss Bullock’s office for an entire week."^{18}

Sexual permissiveness was a phenomenon of the far distant future, because Rivers also recalled trying to kiss a third grade girl, now a teacher in Lee County, whose name was Jenny Lee Hanshaw. The result? “She slapped me,” he reported with a laugh.^{19}

Those years were tense, as another incident Rivers recounts demonstrates. “We went there during the war years and it was an extremely sensitive time,” he says. “Many of the teachers were the wives of pilots stationed at Buckingham Air Force Base in East Fort Myers. I remember one day I heard a rumor the war had ended. This was long before it actually did, but I came back from lunch and told some of the kids. The teachers descended on me and pulled me aside they were so anxious to hear what I had heard.”^{20}

Lee County Superintendent of Schools Ray Pottorf was principal of Edison Park School from 1960 through 1964, and he termed those years as “some of my most satisfying professional experiences. It was a close knit community and extremely supportive of the school,” he asserted.

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Built in 1886, the Thomas A. Edison winter home on McGregor Boulevard in downtown Fort Myers is one of that city’s oldest homes and also one of the first prefabricated houses built in this country. It was constructed in Fairfield, Maine of spruce and shipped to Fort Myers on four sailing schooners, then assembled on its present site. It is a fine example of early Florida architecture with its excellent ventilation accomplished by its typically high ceilings and open porches on four sides.

Photograph courtesy of Edison Winter Home.
“Parents were very involved with their children, the school’s activities and the PTA. Parents were also concerned about their children’s educations.”\textsuperscript{21} Some of that cooperation was demonstrated when Edison Park teachers, residents and PTA members along with now retired School Superintendent Ray L. Williams and then Deputy School Superintendent Pottorf built a block-long sidewalk which runs along Edison Avenue. It took them three years to raise the money for construction materials and then they built it themselves.\textsuperscript{22}

Former third grade teacher Mattie Belle (Mrs. Charles) Gibson also shared fond memories of the school. She taught there from 1929 until 1963, with the exception of eight years leave she took to raise her child. “Fort Myers was small and Edison Park was a new school and, of course, it was a very good neighborhood. Many of the privileged children went there,” she reminisced. “Many of the young people attending Edison Park have remained here and have their careers here.” She praised Miss Pearl Bullock, now deceased, who was the principal from the school’s opening in 1927 until her retirement in 1959. “Miss Bullock was the very best principal,” Mrs. Gibson noted. “She knew the background of every student, the parents, even the grandparents and she ran the school well.” (Miss Bullock herself was a product of Lee County Schools graduating from the Fort Myers High School class of 1915.)

One of Mrs. Gibson’s most vivid memories and favorite stories centers on Doug Grace, an attorney who today lives on Marlyn Avenue in Edison Park. “Doug Grace,” she recalled in an amused voice, “was one of my third graders. And one day he got caught in his seat and we had to call the janitor to free him. Poor Doug was very upset because he thought the janitor was going to have to saw off his arm to free him. Nothing we could say would reassure him.”\textsuperscript{23}

The Halgrim family – including Bob, Sr., Robert C. Halgrim, for years curator of the Edison winter home, who received his diploma from Edison on the school’s stage – are among the Edison Park alumni. Today Halgrim’s son, Robert P. Halgrim, has taken over as curator of the Edison home. Another son, Tommy, is principal of Harlem Heights Elementary School in Lee County.

Edison Park has lived up to developer Jim Newton’s sales slogan, “Built To Endure,” but in enduring it has changed. It remains a desirable neighborhood, but it is no longer populated entirely by long-time residents. This is reflected in the school as well, for the principal no longer knows each pupil and his or her background.

Today this historic subdivision with its fine school, its winding, neatly landscaped streets and gracious homes dozes in the sun expressing, as Newton once put it, “none of the feverish excitement, the glitter and bombast one has come to believe is the Florida of today.”\textsuperscript{24}

The graceful maiden with the urn stands as a symbol of what Edison Park was and is.

\textsuperscript{1} In 1947 Mrs. Mina Miller Edison donated the Edison Winter Home and Laboratory to the City of Fort Myers which opened it to the public as a museum. It is open every day of the year except Christmas.


\textsuperscript{3} Vince Smith, “Go Placidly,” \textit{Lee Living Magazine}, (February 1979): 42-44.
4 *The Palm Leaf*, December 4, 1926.

5 Edison Park sales brochure, printed 1924 by the James D. Newton Realty Co., Inc., p. 3.


8 *Fort Myers Press*, January 22, 1924.


10 E. H. Loveland, “The History of Old Lee County Schools (1887-1926),” an unpublished manuscript available at the Learning Resources Center of Edison Community College.

11 Minutes of the October 7, 1925 meeting of the Fort Myers Board of Public Instruction, compiled by Loveland, *ibid*.


14 Interview with James D. Newton, April 1980, Fort Myers, Florida.

15 *Fort Myers Tropical News*, May 13, 1926.

16 Interview with James D. Newton.

17 *Fort Myers Sun*, February 20, 1980.


19 *Ibid*.

20 *Ibid*.

21 Interview with Ray L. Pottorf, April 1980, Fort Myers, Florida.


23 Interview with Mrs. Charles Gibson, March 1980, Fort Myers, Florida.

24 Edison Park sales brochure, p. 3.