

# Keeping Thomas Edison's legacy alive in NJ



Charley Hummel of Wayne has spent a lifetime collecting, showcasing, trading and repairing original Thomas Edison inventions. (Saed Hindash/The Star-Ledger)

By Guy Arseneau/For Inside Jersey magazine

His formal education consisted of three months of schooling, after which he was described by a teacher as “addled” and summarily dismissed from the public education system.

As a teenager, he suffered a loss of hearing that plagued him for the rest of his life. Yet, in spite of these disadvantages, Thomas Edison, “The Wizard of Menlo Park,” ushered in the age of electricity and brought the miracle of recorded sound to future generations.

By the time of his death in 1931, Edison’s innovative genius served as the seminal overture for today’s indispensable technology, such as the internet, television, iPods and smartphones. Just ask Charley Hummel. He has spent a lifetime collecting, showcasing, trading and repairing original Thomas Edison inventions.

The one-time deli owner, police officer and former board member of Edison’s Menlo Park Museum, Hummel is considered one of the world’s foremost authorities on the inventor.



This signed photo of Thomas Edison, framed in wood and glass taken from his Menlo Park laboratory, is among the items in Charley Hummel’s collection. (Saed Hindash/The Star-Ledger)

Operating out of his comfortable, two-story ranch-style home in Wayne, stacked floor to ceiling with more than 10,000 items that include Edison’s clothing, canes, phonographs, advertising signs and machines, Hummel casually refers to himself and Thomas Edison as “the original Jersey Boys.”

Hummel flies to Europe and Asia up to six times a year to display Edison collectibles and inventions, and has logged more than a million miles in the past four decades. He also travels

extensively throughout the United States, riding in his well-worn van, introducing today's "children of the internet" to the man whose vision helped to make social networks and eBay part of daily life.

"We need to know where we've been in order to get some understanding as to where we're going in the future," Hummel says. "I see so many kids today with their faces buried in laptops and other computer devices, and yet they don't have a clue about the man who was so instrumental in starting the whole revolution in electronics and mass communication. Kids today rely on iPods to hear up to 1,200 songs, but they don't realize the debt they owe to Edison, who started it all."

Hummel's encyclopedic knowledge about Edison has made him a popular guest on the Discovery and History channels.

"A couple of times," he recalls, "I've had producers come to my house to evaluate my collection. By the time they were through with the grand tour, at least two of the producers bought Edison phonographs from me."

Edison is highly revered in Japan, says Hummel, especially at Sony Corp. "For many people in Japan, Edison is something of a founding father in the area of electronics and communication. I've been fortunate to win the confidence and support of Sony in hosting numerous shows and displays concerning Edison and his inventions. Oftentimes, I can go to a Japanese department store and set up an Edison display for two to three weeks at a time and give thousands of people an opportunity to learn about him."

Closer to home, Hummel showcases Edison inventions at local collectible shows.

"Twice a year, in March and October, I host displays right here in Jersey of Edison collectibles and inventions," he says. "My biggest satisfaction is introducing kids to this man and helping them understand what an enormous impact he had on all of our lives."

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