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## **“I Have No Pride”: William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, an Autobiography**

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An early pioneer of cinema technology, author, photographer, and film director W.K.L. Dickson's was one of the first people to perform a new type of subjectivity that we understand as multimedia. Working in the laboratory of Thomas Alva Edison, Dickson's papers, photographs, and films have been carefully preserved as part of the Edison Papers Project and an examination of this archive rises to the level of autobiography. Authors Wyn Wachhorst, Paul Israel, and Charles Musser help to bring to life the world of the Edison Laboratory, the world's first pure research and development company. Dickson's own work speaks across the decades. He inscribed himself into the world's earliest cinema and tells his own story from cinema space and through the materials in his copious archive.

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**W**illiam Kennedy Laurie Dickson is as notable for nearly slipping through the cracks of history as he is for developing early motion picture technology. Working for Thomas Edison, Dickson counted himself among Edison's "muckers," a group of experimenters who were given the tools and support to imagine the future and develop the technological innovations to make their dreams a reality. What they achieved is substantial, as Edison's laboratories produced—among other innovations—incandescent lighting, urban power grids, and systems for recording sound and motion pictures. Behind Edison were the muckers whose achievements outstrip those of any fictional hero. One of the greatest of those was W. K. L. Dickson.

Dickson is most closely associated with the development of motion pictures, a technology so significant it is difficult to assess its complete cultural influence. Curiously, when I sought to discover more about Dickson, I found that his Edison-era archive had not been the topic of a rigorous discourse analysis. It is my contention that an analysis of this archive can shed light on this intriguing figure and expand understanding of his contribution to the transformation of world culture.

Dickson was fortunate to have worked for Edison for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that his papers, photographs, and films have been preserved. He worked for Edison for twelve years beginning in 1883 and his archive includes his professional papers and correspondence and two published books that document the work at the laboratories. Some of the most intriguing materials in Dickson's archive are visual: photographs he took as official company photographer as well as films he created

beginning with his earliest cinema experiments. One of the more unique aspects of Dickson's visual archive is how often Dickson was both the author of the photograph or film and its subject. Most significantly, as the inventor of cinema, his archive is—by definition—the first to include films. Dickson performed a new type of subjectivity that we understand as multimedia. As both the creator and subject of photographs and films, and as the author of accounts of activities at the labs, an examination of this archive peers into the life and work of Dickson through different lenses, each bringing into focus a different aspect of his life and work. There emerges an unusually detailed “picture” of Dickson crafted by Dickson himself. I assert that an examination of Dickson's Edison-era materials rises to the level of autobiography, and further, deserves to be recognized as the world's first multimedia autobiography.

### **What Is Autobiography? What Is Multimedia?**

When James Cox asked, “What is autobiography?” he decided, “to hold to the definition I believe we all know: a narrative of a person's life written by himself” (Cox, 1989, p. 12). It emerges from the subject's own memory and experiences, as opposed to biography that generally takes into consideration many participants' ideas. Another aspect of autobiography significant to this project is that autobiography can only cover a portion of a subject's life. It cannot begin at birth and end on the deathbed, as can biography. Wyn Wachhorst (1981) noted a similar construction in myth: “Hero myths do not always present the whole cycle from birth to death; there are special forms of hero story to reflect each stage in the evolution of the human personality” (p. 83). Autobiography has a unique relationship to truth and fictional form. Wachhorst examined Thomas Edison's careful crafting of his public face. As Dickson was an active contributor to Edison's crafted image by serving as company photographer, he had to be well versed in the popular techniques of visual communication of his era, creating images that communicated a specific message to journalists and by extension, to the public at large.

Autobiography and biography have occupied a tense literary space between fiction and non-fiction. Henry Adams (1931) wrote, “The historian must not try to know what is truth, if he values his honesty; for, if he cares for his truths, he is certain to falsify his facts” (p. 457). The subject of veracity especially as it relates to the use of photography is discussed by Timothy Dow Adams (2000) in *Light Writing and Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography*, “Although autobiography was once thought of as nonfiction, as a subgenre of biography—and is still often classified under biography in libraries, bookstores, and catalogs—in recent years scholars working with the genre have almost universally come to the realization that whatever else it is, autobiography is not simply nonfiction” (p. xi). For all of these reasons—issues of created narrative; of truth verses fiction; and the limited time frame included in the archive—an examination of Dickson's Edison-era papers, books, photographs and films more closely resembles autobiography than biography. The Dickson archive consists of materials created by Dickson himself, including photographs and films where he acted as both photographer/

cinematographer and subject; Dickson's twelve years with Edison are a partial story; in the books he wrote while in Edison's employ, Dickson carefully shaped and crafted his own image, often sacrificing truth in favor of self-aggrandizement.

As one of the earliest developers of motion picture technology, Dickson marks the point in time where autobiography was forever changed. Today, we take for granted that motion pictures can be an autobiographical form. Dickson's archive is the first to include motion pictures of the self. When we consider these archival elements against the accepted definition of multimedia, "using more than one medium of communication, artistic expression, etc.," (OED) one can see that it is the very inclusion of the motion picture that positions the archive within the acknowledged world of multimedia.

There is no small significance here. By inventing the moving picture and by extension, positioning himself as the subject of early motion pictures, Dickson did more than add an important technology to the world. He changed the way we present ourselves to the world. He altered the way a person can tell their own story. And arguably, as the first filmmaker, he enjoyed the position of being the only filmmaker who did not work within a tradition of filmmaking. All who came after him could not help but create films that would reference or critique Dickson's truly seminal work. After Dickson, the deluge. Today, it would be difficult to imagine the autobiography or biography of an individual that did not include cinema. Take for example the archive of an important public figure like Ronald Reagan. The cinematic archive of Reagan's life offers the examiner fictional films, kinescopes of television commercials, television broadcasts of political speeches, and home videos, to suggest an incomplete list. But an important distinction between the cinematic archives of Reagan and that of Dickson is that Reagan was often recorded as an actor or paid spokesperson, speaking the words of a screenwriter, delivering a performance at least partly crafted by a film director. Even in his political life, Reagan used a stable of talented speechwriters. Each time Reagan was filmed, filmmakers were working to an established set of techniques and traditions that had been developed over many decades. To consider the cinematic archive of Reagan is to listen to many voices speaking at once. Dickson's creative control over virtually all aspects of his archive—as writer, photographer, filmmaker, and subject—give us a glimpse of Dickson's personal aesthetic choices. In each case, the work is sole and personal to a degree few can claim. These choices present themselves to the viewer as the written word, as the photograph, as cinema, and even as recorded sound, each layer informing, illuminating, and at times contradicting the other. The act of examining this archive can naturally be described as a multimedia experience.

### **Context as a Question of Corporate Culture**

In order to analyze Dickson's archive, it helps to understand the specific set of conditions under which it was created, namely the corporate culture of the Edison Laboratories. What was this culture? What rules, business practices, and policies defined the parameters of Dickson's world? An important part of the answer can be found in an

examination of Edison himself, as he was a ubiquitous presence at the laboratories, often actively participating in the engineering of many, if not all, of the projects in development. According to Wachhorst, he was a man who was very appreciative of the fact that a positive public image could make it easier to keep his enterprises afloat. He seems to have treated his image as a commodity in itself; at its best, separate and unconnected to the success or failure of individual inventions. Paul Israel (1998), the author of *Edison: A Life of Invention*, and managing editor of the Thomas Edison Papers at Rutgers University, describes Edison as a man who, “delighted in his international celebrity and the attention of reporters for whom he was always willing to provide interviews” (p. 372). This talent dovetailed effectively with his business acumen and general good judgment regarding emerging consumer markets. Israel further described Edison as, “A charismatic figure who readily inspired both assistants and financial backers to believe in his creative abilities, Edison proved equally adept at convincing reporters of his genius” (p. 372). Israel expands his portrait of the culture of the work environment when he revealed:

Some misconceptions that found their way into press accounts were not accidental. Edison actively worked to advance his image as a modern-day Prometheus who had single-handedly transformed the world with his inventions ... and often made claims that the historical record would find hard to justify. (p. 372)

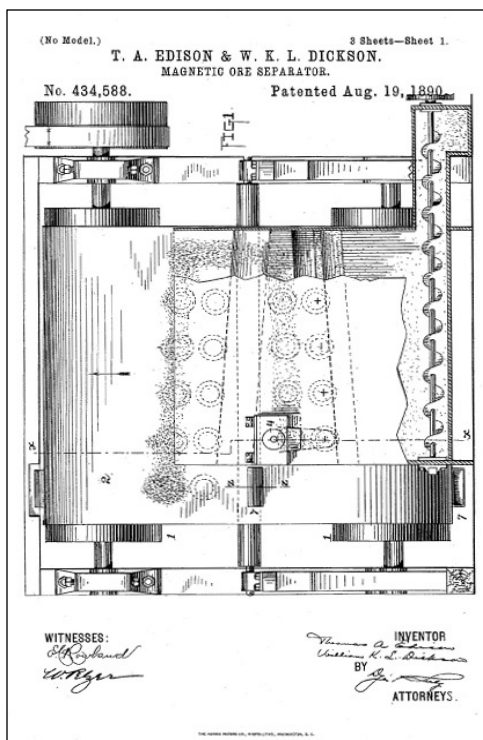


Figure 1

The culture of the work environment is put into perspective when Israel describes Edison’s attitude regarding the practice of assigning credit: “Dickson, like so many of Edison’s assistants, willingly accepted the prevailing ideology of both the patent system and the Edison laboratory that men working under Edison’s employ were only developing his ideas and deserved no independent credit” (p. 373). Edison’s entire business model was based on the attainment of crucial patents that would give him a measure of security and advantage in the business world. Staff inventors would often receive ongoing royalty checks for innovations, but Edison would own the patent itself. Yet there were occasional exceptions to this rule, and Dickson enjoyed the rare privilege of being named a co-patentee with Edison on the magnetic ore separation device, patent #434,588 (Fig. 1).

In the case of the magnetic ore separator, Edison could afford to be generous with credit, even sharing the patent, as the device was virtually obsolete as soon as it was completed. Owing to its financial impracticality in the face of massive ore strikes in the northwestern United States, the ore separator was never put into use and as Wachhorst stated, "Edison abandoned his white elephant in the New Jersey highlands" (Wachhorst, p. 98). Still, Edison bristled when Dickson openly advertised this shared patent in one of his books, stating in a letter to his colleague Norman Raff that, "The part about Dickson being a co-inventor in the magnetic separator, etc., is incorrect, as there is no co-invention ... with Dickson or anybody else" (Edison, 1895). Israel explained, "Edison may have been willing to share royalties with his assistants, but he reserved for himself all credit and public acclaim for his inventive work" (Israel, p. 373).

Norman Raff was an investor and associate in the fledgling motion picture business that amounted to the marketing of the Dickson motion picture viewing invention, the kinetoscope. Charles Musser described Raff's relationship with Edison: "Edison relied on three different groups to market kinetoscopes and films. The first and most prominent was a consortium that included ... Norman C. Raff" (Musser, 1991, p. 44). Edison's communication with Raff implies that even in the face of documentation, the culture of the Edison laboratory held that public credit was reserved for Edison alone. This is not to say that Dickson willingly accepted these rules. On the contrary, this episode suggests that Dickson was willing to bend and even break Edison's rules, perhaps in the hope of rewriting them.

Perhaps foregoing credit was a small price to pay to work at the only pure research and development company in the world at that time. These were arguably "dream jobs" in the American work environment, not to mention the fact that Edison himself could be a replete and amusing colleague and employer, as Israel describes, "Edison clearly reveled in the environment of the laboratory, with its manly comradery [sic]. At the laboratory he could tell jokes and pull pranks, as he had enjoyed doing during his days as a telegrapher" (Israel, p. 123). John Ott (brother of Fred Ott, who was featured in the short film, *The Sneeze*) worked such long hours that his own children hardly knew him. Wachhorst quotes John Ott explaining his rationale: "Because Edison made your work interesting. He made me feel I was making something with him. I wasn't just a workman" (Wachhorst, p.38). Even with the then-standard six-day workweek and relatively low pay, Edison's employees often enjoyed their work. Israel relates the story of one such employee, Charles Clarke:

Laboratory life with Edison was a strenuous but joyous life for all, physically, mentally and emotionally. We worked long night hours during the week, frequently to the limit of human endurance; and then we had time off from Saturday to late Sunday afternoon for rest and recreation... . Here breathed a little community of kindred spirits, all in young manhood,

enthusiastic about their work, expectant of great results; moreover often loudly emphatic in joke and vigorous in action. (2008, pp. 192-193)

Edison's employees seemed genuine in their enthusiasm for their workplace. Edison deserves praise for creating such a relatively amenable workplace, a unique space where personal satisfaction and fulfilling work could come together. An ocean away, a young man named William Kennedy Laurie Dickson read about such a place and dreamed of being a part of it.

### **Dickson and Edison: Initial Contact and an Initial Foray Into the Archive**

The relationship between Thomas Alva Edison and William Kennedy Laurie Dickson began awkwardly, as Dickson, not yet nineteen, wrote to "Mr. Eddison [sic]" on February 17, 1879, from London imploring him to consider him for a position in his company. The letter is forgivably fawning yet sincere as when he wrote, "I have not your talents, but I have patience, perseverance, an ardent love of science, and above all, a firm reliance on God" (Dickson, 1879). Dickson continues with his willingness to begin at the bottom, but then takes a personal turn by bringing up his mother:

I have no pride, and would willingly begin at the lowest rung of the ladder, and work patiently up, if by doing so, I might hope to attain independence and repay my widowed mother for the care and affection which she has lavished on me for so many years. (Dickson, 1879)

The use of the word "pride" is obviously meant as a negative trait, since he claims to have none of it. "I have no ego" would be an obvious contemporary equivalent. Bringing up his mother in this context gave him the opportunity to present himself as a decent and ethical young chap, cheerfully accepting the responsibility of supporting her. Dickson's following lines are at once overly personal and familiar, as if he was writing to a beloved uncle, which—based on Dickson's opinion of Edison—he perhaps imagined he could be:

I have proved like many others that with reversed fortune, friends fall away, and I would rather solicit the help of an utter stranger like yourself, upon whom I have only the claim of a common nationality, (my mother being like your own, a Scotchwoman) than be dependent upon their aid, so coldly and grudgingly offered. I am sure you will not have cause to regret holding out a helping hand to a friendless and fatherless boy. (Dickson, 1879)

That Edison would be particularly interested in Dickson's personal problems with his "cold" relatives seems a strain. Ironically, Dickson negates his earlier statement of having "no pride" as he admits to being too proud to accept charity "grudgingly offered" by his relatives or friends. It took nerve and a sense of bravado to write to a man who was already enjoying worldwide fame, for how else could Dickson have found out about

Edison and his work if not in the international press? Dickson, risking embarrassment, at least proved that he was willing to sacrifice his dignity for opportunity; in his own vulnerable and slightly pitiable way, he put his cards on the table. And Edison turned Dickson down. As autobiography, this letter is a treasure owing to Dickson's willingness to make himself vulnerable and to expose his weaknesses in the hope of engendering pity or paternal feeling on the part of Edison. A picture emerges of a young man in an unenviable state, yet possessing the courage to stake his claim in the world. Like Edison, who preferred to "tinker" at his projects, trying all possible solutions until he achieved success, Dickson learned that attempting to invoke pity from Edison was pointless.

The question persists as to how Dickson could have misspelled Edison's name. Dickson addressed this issue in one of the books he wrote while in Edison's employ, *The Life And Inventions Of Thomas Alva Edison*. This book assembled and codified many of the circulated myths and anecdotes of Edison's story and formalized the narrative of Edison's life and projects. The book also served to set the record "straight" on any number of personal and professional misunderstandings and grudges. Dickson gives context to his mistake, "outing" his source as *Paris Figaro* of 1878, relating the story of how a well-respected newspaper got its facts wrong:

Under the thrilling title of "Cet étonnant Eddison" (This astonishing Edison), the publication launches into details of the inventor's career, prefacing his sketch by the following lucid and eloquent description of the newly completed aerophone.

He informs the public that the Paris Exhibition is now the richer by the celebrated "Eddison's" latest invention, the stupendous aerophone . . . . It should be understood," continues our Gallic oracle, "that Mr. Eddison does not belong to himself; he is the property of the telegraph company. . . . (Dickson and Dickson, 1894, p. 105)

The paragraphs from *Paris Figaro* serve two purposes: it suggests that Dickson took his spelling from this trusted French publication, much as anyone might; and that hero-worship of Eddison/Edison was truly universal, his genius being one of the "givens" upon which people agreed. Dickson's book was thus a malleable thing, able to supply more than the history of Edison and his inventions, and—in this case at least—Dickson could use the book to enhance or perhaps cleanse his own image. This also suggests that Dickson was eager to set his own record straight fifteen years after the incident. Dickson obviously had a long memory and was not comfortable with the idea of permitting a mistake to go uncorrected. As autobiography, Dickson reveals his own memories as well as his fastidiousness in the writing of the "Eddison" anecdote.

But even before he was hired, Dickson proved himself to be unwilling to acknowledge defeat and made it his singular mission to win employment with Edison. He moved to the United States and wrote to Samuel Insull, Edison's secretary:



Having called several times and finding you out I [hole in paper; likely word “took”] the liberty of writing you to ask you to make an appointment with Mr. Edison for me so that I can present a letter of introduction & have an interview with him some day this week that he may have a few moments of leisure. (Dickson, 1883)

This particular note allows one to see more of his personality by revealing his emotional toughness. Dickson was obviously not easily embarrassed. It would appear that Dickson was subjected to the rather demeaning treatment of being denied a face-to-face rejection. This time, Dickson did not attempt to invoke sentiment or pity, but fought his rejection with persistence. One can imagine that Insull and by extension Edison had every reason to believe that Dickson possessed at least one important positive quality: tenacity. Dickson’s behavior finds its mirror image in Edison’s own personal work style of persistent tinkering. Perhaps Dickson’s tenacity suggested the “ninety-nine percent perspiration” that Edison famously stated to be the better part of his genius. In Dickson’s resolve it is possible to detect the strength of character that sustained him during his years of research and experiments on both the kinetos and ore-separation projects. Dickson does not seem to possess a delicate sense of tact, since an insult—such as Insull’s avoidance—had no obvious significant on him. This same dogged determination could manifest itself as stubbornness or spite as in the correction of his “Eddison” error more than a decade after the fact. Dickson secured a position with Edison in 1883, four years after his initial letter. One is inclined to add another attribute to the Dickson autobiography: patience.

### **Dickson Employed, Professional Papers from the Archive**

As I mentioned earlier, Dickson was co-patentee with Edison of an electro-magnetic ore separator, intended for extracting iron ore from exhausted mines. This memo from Dickson to Edison on November 24, 1888, illuminates Dickson’s work environment as it elucidates his personal relationship with Edison. It lists a series of changes made to an ore-milling building, indecorously referred to as the “outhouse.” It reads as if Dickson was answering a specific list of grievances or suggestions made by Edison, the memo proof that the tasks have been completed, since the list is written with fragments instead of full sentences. Statements such as, “Bell at door to call attendant, also connected with room 18,” are not particularly intelligible unless considered as answers to an earlier communication:

Changes made in ore milling outhouse, room 22

1. Means of regulating and moving magnet at a moment’s notice.
2. Scales graduated to accurately determine position of “magnet” and “dividor” [sic] (glass covered to keep out dirt)

3. New Dividor [sic] with easy means of regulating amount of “mug wump” (graduated) also trays for “mag & dia” for daily work.
4. Every ore carefully examined and stenciled—also entered in book.
5. Closet (shelved) to keep samples after separations and exp. for reference any time.
6. Shelves for large box samples.
7. Bell at door to call attendant, also connected with room 18.
8. Table to place samples for examination.
9. Door bolted and fastened between blacksmith shop and metallurgical dept.
10. Register for visitors—appointments—and ores coming in. (Dickson, 1888)

The ten chores, each accounted for by number, describe a relationship between employer and employee: orders are given; they are carried out to the letter; and verification is supplied back to the employer. Edison may have been a practical joker, but it is clear at a moment like this that he could give orders and get official verification back according to a professional set of procedures. Edison’s presence on projects is demonstrated here with a system that kept him in the path of communication and understanding. Dickson obviously followed these procedures to the letter, his meticulousness put to good use.

Dickson’s talents were also put to good use as the house photographer for the laboratory. Dickson created many iconic images of Edison and it was in his capacity as photographer that Dickson’s “pride” came into conflict with Edison’s policies regarding employees and ownership of their work. Dickson tested the boundaries of ownership with the photographs he created. Dickson signed his photographs in the lower corner, often with his initials “W.K.L.D” written with a flourish that wrapped the curved top of the letter D around and through the other letters and made his initials appear as a logo. At other times he wrote his entire name in the corner of a photograph, “W.K.L. Dickson.”

This was not an unusual practice among professional photographers; but Dickson worked amid a corporate culture that had strong ideas about credit. Dickson even copyrighted his photos in his name and noted this when he published them in his book, running a credit line that read, “COPYRIGHT PHOTO BY W. K. L. DICKSON.” This custom of copyrighting every photograph inspired Dickson to devise a system by which early cinema could be copyrighted as individual photographs, (again in his own name) one frame at a time, since there was no established procedure for copyrighting the new medium of cinema. Happily, Dickson’s copyrighting of early films such as *The Sneeze*, as a series of still photos served the purpose of preserving the films, as they were photographed back onto film medium from the Library of Congress’s paper copies (Kino International et al, 2005). If the culture of credit had been less important at the Edison

laboratories, the earliest examples of cinema—shot on unstable materials—most surely would have been lost.

### **Dickson Seeks More and More Credit**

In a revealing episode as company photographer, Dickson pressed the issue of credit when he solicited payment from a newspaper for a “Dickson” photo that appeared with a story on Edison. A memo from Edison’s private secretary, Alfred Ord Tate, illuminates an interesting aspect of the Edison corporate culture, that the practices of credit and ownership were carefully monitored by employees close to Edison:

I enclose herewith a letter from J. I. C. Clarke of “The Morning Journal” together with a communication addressed to him by Mr. W. K. L. Dickson. It strikes me Mr. Dickson’s letter’s the essence of gall. What shall I say to Clarke? (Tate, 1891)

Tate’s subsequent letter to Dickson conveying Edison’s views is particularly withering, though not especially surprising:

Mr. J. I. C. Clarke, Managing Editor of The Morning Journal, has referred to Mr. Edison your letter to him under date 11th instant, in which you demand a royalty for the use by the Morning Journal of the photograph of Mr. Edison, copy of which appeared in their issue of two or three weeks ago. Mr. Edison desires me to direct your attention to the fact that this photograph was made in his Laboratory, with his instruments, and by one of his own salaried employees, namely, yourself, and that you have no more right to claim copyright upon it than any other member of the Laboratory staff.

Mr. Edison desires you to address a communication to Mr. Clarke withdrawing your letter under date 11th instant and stating that you were in error when you applied to him for the remuneration in question. At the same time please furnish Mr. Edison with a copy of the communication which he has requested you to write.

Tate’s chastisement of Dickson in Edison’s name is more than a bit infantilizing. The lack of privacy in the matter is to the point. Both Tate and Edison knew of Dickson’s attempt to establish himself as a hybrid, independent, freelance photographer fully embedded within the Edison corporate culture, and they were not going to allow it. Just as in the list of chores given to Dickson regarding the ore-milling outhouse, the verification of the embarrassing retraction letter made this punishment official and documented.

One wonders if Dickson was a bit of a laughing stock after this incident. As autobiography, one can see a distinction not only in the tasks that Dickson performed at

the laboratory, but a shift in Dickson's relationship to the work itself. On the ore separation project, he was meticulous and followed orders to the letter. As the photographer, he ignored company policy, embarrassed his employer, and risked sanction. Dickson revealed that he possessed daring, risk-taking personality traits.

### **Dickson Expands His Role**

Shortly after the "Morning Journal" incident, Dickson initiated what could have been a conciliatory project within the Edison organization. He borrowed a page from another employee, Jonathan Lewis Young, who worked in Edison's phonograph division. Young wrote a book, *Edison and His Phonograph*, that was published in 1890. Dickson was aware of the book, as Young wrote to Dickson inquiring for photographs for it. The idea of an insider, one of Edison's own employees taking on the role of biographer/historian certainly must have intrigued Dickson, as he made the idea his own. Dickson drafted his sister Antonia as co-author of the book project, *The Life And Inventions Of Thomas Alva Edison*, published in 1894 with his name listed before Antonia's.

What gave the busy and most likely over-worked Dickson the desire to take on this additional, self-motivated project? Perhaps part of the reason was because it fit with the Edison ethos of working on many projects at once. In a company with as many talented and hard-working men as Edison's laboratory, creating a project such as this might have afforded an employee the opportunity to stand out from the "crowd." Dickson had already taken on the additional task of photographer for the company; if photographer, why not biographer? There was, after all, precedent in the form of the Lewis Young book. More to the point, someone was eventually going to tell their story. Having someone inside the company write the book could afford some measure of control for Dickson and Edison. Obviously, Dickson had much to gain. He could shape his own narrative and put his name before the public. Edison was already one of the most famous people in the country. Dickson's book could offer Edison an opportunity to control his narrative in what could be an important book. This must have appealed to Edison. And Dickson had the help of one whom he could absolutely trust in his sister.

Antonia Kennedy Laurie Dickson was a writer and poet who collaborated with her brother on two books. Dickson supplied the access to the Edison Corporation, the technical expertise, and the photographs and it was Antonia's role to coordinate the project and to add her literary flair. *The Life And Inventions Of Thomas Alva Edison* (1894) had twenty-four chapters and contained 159 illustrations and photographs, generous for a book of 362 pages. "Fawning" seems too mild a word to describe the prose; the book was deeply and devotedly reverential of Edison with many references to his innate personal superiority to other men. In this book, he is not merely more inventive, driven, and successful than the average man, but he is the very essence of virtue and goodness. Several popular tales about Edison are codified and given the voice of authority here. In all, the book elevates Edison to living, national—or perhaps global—treasure. If one pays attention to certain passages, Dickson's lionization of Edison has the

effect of raising the prestige of everything and everyone connected with him. To be the trusted employee, colleague, co-inventor, project supervisor, photographer, and biographer of one so great made Dickson greater by association. Autobiographically, this book broadens our understanding of Dickson's talents and versatility, but it also harkens to his initial inquiry letter to Edison. In this book, Dickson will go to any length to lionize Edison, risking his own dignity in the process.

Dickson may have understood the delicate dance in which Edison was engaged; that this book, written by an admiring employee, can toot Edison's horn without the great man himself engaging in a potentially vulgar display. In chapter seven, Dickson seems to be acting as Edison's mouthpiece, relating an anecdote that feels like the settling of a personal score. For the first time in the book, someone was named for the purpose of placing them in a bad light:

In the evolution of the microphone, Mr. Edison was confronted by a formidable antagonist in the person of Professor Hughes, and many choice flowers of rhetoric found their way into the daily papers. The honors of the field remained eventually with Edison, but the pretensions of his rival are among the few circumstances connected with his scientific career which have succeeded in ruffling the serene tides of his philosophical nature. "One of the biggest steals ever made," was Edison's vigorous remark at the time, "filched directly from my telephone." (Dickson and Dickson, 1894, p. 115)

Dickson was willing to take on the role of hatchet man, embarrassing Edison's rival, positioning Hughes as a thief. Later in the book, Dickson again takes part in the public humiliation of one of Edison's (rare) detractors, publishing his name:

Among the men of the time who entertained pessimistic ideas as to the ultimate success of the incandescent light, was Professor Morton, of Stevens Institute of Technology, who embodied his views in a dismal and scathing lecture, delivered before a large body of the initiate and uninitiate. These adverse criticisms called forth Edison's assertion, that some day when the Edison light had attained its apotheosis, he would erect a statue to this raven of science, inscribed with the words: "This is the man who said the Edison light would never work," framing the statue in the perfected effulgence of the new illumination. (p. 241)

Edison's incandescent light was a smashing success when this book was published in 1894. Edison already had his professional, his private, and even his moral victory over Prof. Morton. This anecdote seems unusually cruel, considering Morton's crime against science seems to have been that he had the temerity to be publicly "pessimistic" about the future of incandescent light. Either Edison or Dickson was possessed of a long and unforgiving memory; and passages describing Edison as one without ego (as Dickson

initially described himself) seem far less convincing. In Dickson's inquiry letters to Edison, he stated his willingness to do virtually anything to secure employment. By savaging Prof. Morton, that willingness to take on a distasteful task is very much present.

Of the one hundred and fifty-nine photographs and illustrations in the book, thirty-nine of them are either signed by Dickson; credited to him with the line, "Photo by W. K. L. Dickson"; or Dickson asserts ownership with the line, "Copyright photo to W. K. L. Dickson." This implies that Edison and Dickson must have revisited the issue of credit and copyright regarding photography. Otherwise, these photo credits would be in direct contradiction to the orders in the "Morning Journal" letter. This claiming of ownership puts Dickson's name before the public in an interesting and persistent way. The credit may seem like a small thing, and quite literally, it is. It is tiny type almost invisible, but it positions Dickson as a creator and as an owner. One sees Edison's photograph and immediately sees Dickson's name. The transfer of some small portion of Edison's prestige is implied by clever and repeated juxtaposition of Edison with Dickson.

### **Dickson's Chapter**

It is in chapter twenty-two that Dickson grabs his moment. In this chapter, the story of the "kinetos," the earliest motion picture camera and viewing devices are told. Dickson places the original inspiration for the kinetos on a toy invented in the early 1800s, "The initial ideas, relating to the reproduction of motion, are based upon the familiar toy known as the zoetrope or wheel of life" (p. 300). He continues:

It seemed impossible to take pictures at sufficiently short intervals to secure the absolute blending of outline essential to a faithful portrayal of life. Matters were in this unsatisfactory condition when the resources of the laboratory were brought to bear upon the problem.

And now let us hear Mr. Edison himself on the subject:

"In the year 1887 the idea occurred to me that it was possible to devise an instrument which should do for the eye what the phonograph does for the ear..." (p. 303)

There is a shift in the tone here. Dickson speaks with authority on the subject and then brings in Edison's voice, but clearly states that there existed no actual technology that could bring the idea of motion pictures to fruition: "Matters were in this unsatisfactory condition when the resources of the laboratory were brought to bear upon the problem" (p. 303). Were the "resources" of the laboratory actually Dickson himself? Dickson implied a degree ownership in this chapter that is not present in the others. Edison's contribution is limited to a comparison between his phonograph and an as-yet-uninvented motion picture device.

Obviously, his deeper involvement in this project allowed him to describe the inventions in vivid if somewhat consumer-unfriendly technical detail, as when he described their earliest efforts to create sound motion pictures, or the kineto-phonograph:

The initial experiments took the form of microscopic pin-point photographs, placed on a cylindrical shell, corresponding in size to the ordinary phonograph cylinder. These two cylinders were then placed side by side on a shaft, and the sound record taken as near as possible synchronously with the photographic image impressed on the sensitive surface of the shell. (p. 303)

Dickson paused to make certain that the reader understands, “that only one camera is used for taking these strips, and not a battery of cameras, as in Mr. Muybridge’s photographs of ‘the horse in motion’” (p. 309). The sense of wonderment of the beginning is felt here, as Dickson’s own enthusiasm for the existence of such a camera is apparent.

A remarkable aspect to the story of the kinetos is that Dickson’s team was able to solve the problem of melding picture and sound as Edison had envisioned it, by creating a motion picture system that used the mechanics of the phonograph to suggest the necessary mechanics of the film camera. Though the project was ultimately not a practical one, the fact that sound pictures existed virtually as long as pictures have existed gives one pause. This story also tells the greater story of the lab, that if you bring together people of talent and drive and give them opportunity and support, great things are possible. Dickson related just this sentiment when he wrote:

The establishment of harmonious relations between kinoscope and phonograph was a harrowing task, and would have broken the spirit of inventors less inured to hardship and discouragement than Edison’s veterans. The experiments have borne their legitimate fruit, and the most scrupulous nicety of adjustment has been achieved, with the resultant effects of realistic life, audibly and visually expressed. (p. 309)

Dickson described people who worked in the Edison lab as “inventors” instead of experimenters or muckers as earlier described; and he describes the team as “Edison’s veterans,” suggesting men trained by Edison, but not Edison himself. But most poignant is the description of plans for the future, shifting their focus from single-shot filmstrips to more ambitious narrative cinema, “Preparations have long been on foot to extend the number of the actors and to increase the stage facilities, with a view to the presentation of an entire play, set in its appropriate frame” (p. 318). This is not dissimilar to Edison’s prediction that:

In coming years, by my own work and that of Dickson, Muybridge, Marie and others who will doubtless enter the field, grand opera can be given at

the Metropolitan Opera House at New York without any material change from the original, and with artists and musicians long since dead. (p. 303)

This quotation must have meant much to Dickson as he repeated it in his next book on the history of the kinetograph. The first page of that book is a facsimile of Edison's hand-written page as he expressed those ideas.

Edison and Dickson form the basis for what we today call cinematic language. The preservation of performances of those "long since dead" is at the heart of our culture's enduring love of "classic" narrative cinema. Dickson even anticipated on-demand entertainment and the Internet as he speculated on the future of the technology:

The invalid, the isolated country recluse, and the harassed business man [sic] can indulge in needed recreation, without undue expenditure, without fear of weather, and without the sacrifice of health or important engagements. Not only our own resources but those of the entire world will be at our command. The advantages to students and historians will be immeasurable. (Dickson and Dickson, 1894, p. 319)

The idea that visual culture would eclipse live entertainment, and written and photographic accounts of historic events was apparent even in the medium's infancy, when film lengths were in hundreds of feet and film durations less than a minute. To Dickson, even crude, early cinema made other forms of media and entertainment seem like a compromise. Dickson knew perfectly well what he helped to bring about. Just as the incandescent light bulb illuminated the modern age, motion pictures would remake the visual language of world culture. Dickson may have wanted to shout from the rooftops, "Look what I did!" His second best choice was to shout, "Look what Edison did; and look at the part I played in it." This he accomplished when he wrote this book. The book may officially be the story of Edison, but it is nearly as much the autobiography of Dickson.

### **Publish and Perish**

His first book certainly did create another much-needed revenue stream for Dickson, especially in light of the fact that Edison would not permit him to charge newspapers and others for "his" photographs of the inventor. He and Antonia wrote another book that was published only one year later in 1895. This book, much shorter at only fifty-five pages, focused on the kinetos. It was titled, *History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope, and Kinetophone* by W. K. L. Dickson and Antonia Dickson. Dickson placed himself at the center of this book, and paid only cursory attention to Edison.

Perhaps he was emboldened by the relative success of his first book. This history is "all Dickson" and says so on the cover, "Copyrighted and Designed by W. K. L. Dickson." The first spread, as I mentioned earlier, is a portrait of Edison (Copyrighted by W. K. L.



Dickson) with a facsimile of Edison's hand-written introduction to the book, repeating ideas covered in *The Life and Inventions of Thomas Alva Edison*, notably, "In the year 1887, the idea occurred to me that it was possible to devise an instrument that could do for the eye, etc." He continues, "The following article which gives an able and reliable account of the invention has my entire endorsement. The authors are peculiarly well qualified for their task from a literary standpoint and the exceptional opportunities which Mr. Dickson has had in the fruition of his work" (p. 4). Edison makes it clear at the start that the ideas were his and that any meaningful work completed by Dickson was done thanks to him.

The unusual thing about this book is that Edison is mentioned in the first sentence of the first chapter, "History of the Invention," but then, rarely again. Dickson's word choices cut Edison out of the picture. Experiments were "entered upon" (p. 8) at the Orange laboratory, but often without direct reference to Edison. Dickson repeats information regarding the development of cinema from the kinetos chapter of *The Life And Inventions of Thomas Alva Edison* and gives pride of place to the kineto-phonograph with a fresh story:

The crowning point of realism was attained on the occasion of Mr. Edison's return from the Paris Exposition of 1889, when Mr. Dickson himself stepped out onto the screen, raised his hat and smiled, while uttering the words of greeting, "Good morning, Mr. Edison, glad to see you back. I hope you are satisfied with the kineto-phonograph." (p. 19)

Dickson makes it clear that work on this innovative piece of technology was done while Edison was out of the country. He describes the photographic department as a fertile place where many inventions emerged, but does not mention Edison or imply his influence or inspiration:

The photographic rooms, with their singular completeness of appointment, have been the birth-place and nursery of the kinetoscope; and the more important processes connected with the preparation and development of the film, together with innumerable other mechanical and scientific devices, are still carried on in this department. (p. 19)

Compared to Dickson's first book, Edison is conspicuous by his absence. Absent too are Dickson's colleagues like William Heise, Charles Brown, and others who worked with him on the kinetos. Instead, the book shifts gears and instead describes many of the early subjects of the kinetoscope including the notables and celebrities of the day. As the book nears its close, Dickson poses the question, "What is the future of the kinetograph? Ask rather, from what conceivable phase of the future it can be debarred" (p. 52). Perhaps Dickson should have wondered about his own future.

The book finishes with a few paragraphs by W. E. Woodbury, the editor of the book, and it is nearly as fawning to Dickson as Dickson's biography was to Edison. Dickson's original copy of the book, as seen in the archive of the Museum of Modern Art, as well as the facsimile edition of the book produced by the museum, have Dickson's own blue pencil marks on the book. He didn't make any notable deletions from Woodbury's essay except for the following sentence "His mother was Miss Elizabeth Kennedy-Laurie, of Woodhall, Kirkcudbright, Scotland, a brilliant scholar, musician, and renowned for her beauty," Dickson crossed out the end of the sentence, "which has apparently descended to her son" (p. 54). Such a moment is pure autobiography as one can see Dickson's own hand shaping and reshaping his narrative. Edison gets a brief mention in the essay as the idea man who left the actual execution to Dickson, "When Edison conceived the idea the working out of the arrangement was intrusted [sic] to W. K. L. Dickson, a clever young electrical engineer" (p. 54). And in a passage sure to rub Edison the wrong way, Dickson is described as, "chief of mining of the electro-mining and kinetographic work at Edison's laboratory in Orange, having matured the magnetic separation of iron and other ores; is co-patentee with Edison of magnetic ore-separation, and has completed for the inventor the kinetograph, kinoscope, and phono-kinoscope" (p. 55). Dickson again disregarded the established culture of the Edison laboratory. This slim book is autobiography created by Dickson. By leaving out his collaborators like Heise, it manipulates and distorts the truth as it tells its "true" story. At the same time, this book reveals another aspect to Dickson's personality: a tendency toward risk-taking to the point of self-harm.

Simply put, Edison was displeased with Dickson's new book. He wrote to Norman Raff:

Friend Raff:

I object to the little book gotten out by Dickson. The part about Dickson being a co-inventor in the magnetic separator, etc., is incorrect, as there is no co-invention in the Ogden business with Dickson or anybody else. I have given Dickson full credit for his labors in my manuscript letter, and I object to lugging in outside things in a Kinetoscope book. Mr. Dickson will get full credit for what he has done without trying to ram it down peoples throats. I have seen him and he will see you, I am not especially stuck on having my own photograph in the book. It looks too much like conceitedness and self glorification on my part, and the public never takes kindly to a man who is always working his personality forwards. It's the thing they want to know about and not the man for whom they do not care a d\_\_\_\_. (Edison, 1895)

In the postscript he asked Raff to "say what you will do," which implies that he wishes Raff to seek a remedy against Dickson as a colleague in the kinoscope business. Worth noting is the fact that while Dickson was preparing his book on the kinos, he was still a full-time employee. Charles Musser in his book, *Before the Nickelodeon*, describes the

environment at the laboratory at that time and it would appear that the work environment had grown unpleasant for Dickson. Edison had hired William Gilmore to manage the kineto department, placing him above Dickson in the corporate hierarchy. And Dickson flouted Edison's rules more seriously than writing an embarrassing book. Dickson advised outsiders—the Latham brothers—on the development of a film projection system that amounted to a serious conflict of interest:

Kinetograph activities slowed during the winter months and were then seriously disrupted in April of 1895, when Dickson left Edison's employ. Although this break may have occurred as early as April 2d, it was not made public until late in the month. Dickson's position had become untenable. He had been fighting with Gilmore for control over the motion picture business and for primacy in the inventor's affections. At the same time he was helping two aspiring competitors (the Lathams and the founders of the American Mutoscope Company) develop their own independent motion picture technology. (Musser, 1991, p. 51)

Dickson worked with the Lathams in secret developing a projection system. Dickson and Edison's relationship quickly devolved. By April, Dickson left Edison's employ. Dickson eventually teamed up with the Lathams and others to found the American Mutoscope Company, but first, he had unfinished business with Edison. Their final correspondences involved the signing over by Dickson of copyrighted materials, specifically the paper copies of kinetoscope films that he had registered with the Library of Congress.

How did Edison feel about losing Dickson? Seven months after Dickson left Edison's employ, he sent this letter in response to an inquiry regarding Dickson:

Your favor of the 30th came duly to hand and I beg to state that Mr. Dickson has not been in my employ for some time and we are not the best of friends.

I would prefer that you communicate with him direct, his address is 166 Cleveland Street, Orange, N. J. (Edison to Fish, 1895)

That Dickson would be described in actively disparaging terms perhaps comes as little surprise. Edison must have felt he had given him much, and said as much in the kinetoscope book, referring to the exceptional opportunities he had afforded Dickson. Dickson seems to have craved something Edison was not willing or able to give him; perhaps the credit he felt he deserved. Or perhaps Dickson's "tin ear" when it came to matters of tact and diplomacy prevented him from seeing any problem with the book, even to the point of failing to acknowledge the efforts of Heise and others. For whatever his reason or reasons, Dickson clearly claimed credit beyond what Edison's corporate culture would permit. Dickson's autobiography in the form of the *History of the Kinetograph* was also his epitaph with Edison.

## Dickson's Visual Autobiography: The Photo Archive

Dickson created visual messages and helped to craft the visual identity of Edison and of his organization. He created many revealing self-portraits, positioning himself as both subject and object of the photographic phrase. His control of the process enabled him to present himself to the world as a carefully crafted image.

The photographs here examined come from Dickson's two books, *The Life and Inventions ...* and *History of the Kinetograph ...* as these photographs are Dickson's personal edit of his work, the pieces that he chose as representative of Edison and himself. The photograph captioned "Edison and His Chief Assistants, 1889" tells an interesting story as related by Charles Musser:

Edison and his colleagues with the "perfected" phonograph on which they had worked for three days with little rest. This photograph was taken by W. K. L. Dickson at 6:00 a.m. June 16, 1888. Surrounding Edison, who is seated at center, are (left to right) Fred Ott, Dickson, Charles Batchelor, A.T.E. Wangemann, John Ott, Charles Brown, and George Gouraud. (Musser, 1995, p. 6)

The photo (Fig. 2) depicts the exhausted band, emerging from the laboratory into the dawn light with their prize—the improved phonograph (Dickson and Dickson, 1894, 117). This photograph captures the historical moment of triumph and at the same time shows the relatively unvarnished reality of the moment in the tiredness on the faces of the men, most notably a thoroughly spent-looking Edison.



EDISON AND HIS CHIEF ASSISTANTS, 1889.

Figure 2

Fred Ott, Batchelor, and Gouraud gaze in the direction of Edison (or perhaps the phonograph) with what appears to be admiration. The other men—including Dickson—look directly at the camera, claiming their moment of triumph with quiet dignity, another extraordinary day in their lives as members of the Edison team. Edison is depicted as every bit the "worker bee." Dickson is the photographer and subject and one can detect his raised left hand at the moment he squeezed the camera shutter bulb

concealed there. This photo has the feel of modern photojournalism, the camera making possible the preservation of the precious moment and the technology affording an ease of use that makes the creation of an impromptu photo possible. Dickson is proudly a "chief assistant" here, placing himself just a hair below the status of Edison himself. Charles Batchelor and John Ott appear to be placing their hands on Edison's back in a warm gesture. The photo testifies to and supports the idea of the friendly, band of brothers

environment described by employees. Dickson did not list the names of the people in the photo in his book. The caption “chief assistants” spoke to the culture of anonymity in the Edison organization.

Dickson broke with the culture of anonymity in the photograph captioned “Edison and his Orange Laboratory Staff” (p. 284-285). It included an illustrated key so that everyone got his moment of glory. With the exception of Edison’s front and center placement, the men at first appear to be randomly arranged, but closer examination reveals that several of the “chief assistants” from the previous photo are clustered nearest to Edison, a more prestigious placement. The story behind this photograph is revealed in a letter written by Dickson to Dyer and Seely, legal advisors to the motion picture department. It helps to understand that the group photograph actually had to be created as a montage, Dickson cutting and pasting the various, individually photographed employees to create the illusion of the group:

I am endeavoring to do all honor to our Edison men and even after getting items all together have a month’s hard work enlarging retouching, cutting up, etc., etc. and then placing them according to your instructions finally to receive a shower of abuse from those placed in their own estimation too far from Edison. (Dickson to Dyer, Seely, 1894)

This letter paints a picture of tensions that came part and parcel with Dickson’s duties as photographer as it illuminates the competitive nature of the workplace among the band of “brothers.” The photo bears the credit, “Copyright photo by W. K. L. Dickson” and again, Dickson is both subject and object here. This is one of the thirty-nine photos credited to Dickson in this book suggesting that Dickson and Edison must have come to a compromise on the issue of photo credits and photo copyrights.

The photographs captioned, “Edison experiments with micrography” (Dickson and Dickson, 1894, p. 301) and “Edison in the ore-milling department” (p. 321), are images that contain traces of Dickson. Both credited and copyrighted to Dickson, the photos depict Edison participating in and contributing to Dickson’s two major projects at the laboratory. Dickson gives his projects additional weight through these photo illustrations and creates an indelible association between Edison and himself. Edison could be standing in for Dickson. The transfer of identity is complete.

### **Dickson’s Visual Autobiography - The Motion Picture Archive**

From the first successful camera test, a sense of play can be perceived in Dickson’s filmmaking. In the filmstrip known as “Monkeyshines, no. 2” (Kino, 2005) made in 1889 by Dickson and his colleague William Heise, one can see the subject of the film playfully bending and waving before the camera lens. In this early recognizable strip one can perceive the cultural shift that will be brought about by cinema. As these frames from the filmstrip illustrate (Fig. 3), by capturing movement, there is a sense that cinema has

captured and preserved a moment from life itself. Obviously, it is the capture and preservation of movement over time that is the essential difference between this medium and still photography. The still photograph preserved a moment in quiet dignity, but cinema in its infancy was by definition undignified. The subject had to move with deliberate, even frantic motion to be perceived by the lens, by the film stock, and ultimately by the viewer. Add to this the simple fact that the first cinema subjects were Dickson's fellow laboratory workers and the feeling of fun and freedom are put into context.

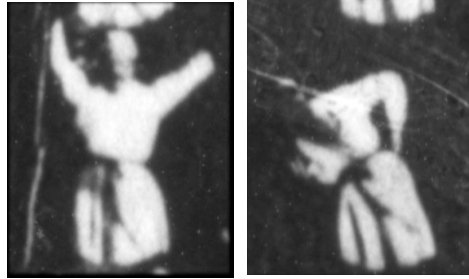


Figure 3

The band of brothers inscribed themselves into these early cinema experiments and even into the earliest distributed films. More than this, one can perceive a new comfort level with modernity, as filmmaker Dickson embodied a sense of play with the camera and with cinematic space that this new medium afforded him. At its most basic level, "cinema is involved with different sorts of space," wrote David Bordwell (2004), "The arrangement of the *mise-en-scene* creates the composition of the screen space. That two-dimensional composition consists of the organization of shapes, textures, and patterns of light and dark ... the composition also represents a three-dimensional space in which the action occurs" (Bordwell and Thompson, p. 208). Cinema space is that convincing yet illusory world where Dickson, as innovator, felt familiar and comfortable enough to play with the ideas of physical presence. He performs one of the earliest stated functions of film, that "presence" no longer refers to actual physical presence. As Edison suggested when he wrote that future patrons of the opera would attend performances "with artists and musicians long since dead," Dickson played with the idea that he could be "present" in cinema space while not physically, actually present. With a sense of humor, he implies that cinema space is the preferable one, a space where one never ages, and attempts to complete the illusion by directly addressing an "audience" where Dickson can "see" and even "speak to" a viewer, and that communication is possible across the two worlds of cinema space and real space.



Figure 4

In this frame shot by a motion picture camera in 1892 (Fig. 4), Dickson congratulates Heise on their successful creation of motion pictures (Musser, 1995, p. 15). Looking at this image, one wonders if Heise was the performer in the "Monkeyshines" film tests. Dickson and Heise play with time and space in both the idea behind this clip and its execution. As they congratulate one another in cinema space, they cannot literally know that this particular film experiment will be a success. They play with the idea of motion pictures as a time machine, creating a cinematic moment while referencing its success as a completed product. They play with the anticipation of their completed, perfected cinematic images and challenge the idea of

what is “real.” Though Dickson and Heise created a rather simple visual joke, they stumbled upon the idea that cinema can afford the filmmaker an opportunity—through persistence—to perfect time itself, just as Dickson, Edison, and his experimenters perfected any number of inventions through persistence. One can get a sense of Dickson’s sense of humor and play.

In “Dickson Greeting” (Fig. 5) created in 1891 (Kino, 2005), Dickson again plays with the idea of cinema space verses real space as he “greet” the viewer across time. He implies that he can see the receiver of the greeting and invites interaction. He embodies the concept that cinema could make the face-to-face ritual unnecessary. Our perfected self can stand in for us, communicating precisely as we would have it.



Figure 5

In “Dickson Experimental Sound Film” (Fig. 6) created in 1894-95 (Kino, 2005), Dickson again defies space and time by creating a sound film as he plays the violin into the sound-capturing horn. The act of creating the work of art *is* the work of art. Again, time folds over on itself but in this instance, sound adds to the illusion, as the viewer sees sound being recorded and played back “simultaneously,” as we hear a recording of sound



Figure 6

as it is fed into the recording device. Absurdist touches are added as two men dance together in a close embrace, and another figure enters frame left and walks toward Dickson, seemingly unaware that he is “in a movie.” This anticipates a seamless integration of cinema into our ordinary lives, capturing quotidian moments and transforming them into meaningful ones. The two dancing men keep serious expressions for the most part, but there is a brief moment when one of the dancers half-grins at the camera. This suggests that they were given specific performance instructions and that this piece represents a carefully shaped and designed presentation. It would be decades before synchronous sound would be perfected for motion pictures, but this early attempt is ambitious and hopeful. Each of these films has a strong autobiographical component and helps one to visualize and understand episodes in Dickson’s story. One can imagine him directing the other muckers in their dance as we add another talent to Dickson’s prodigious list of accomplishments, that of musician.

## Dickson After Edison: A Coda

After Dickson left the Edison laboratory, he made motion pictures his life's work. He wrote another book, this time a solo effort, lovingly dedicated to his wife and to his sister Antonia. *The Biograph in Battle* is the story of Dickson's intrepid filming of the Boer War as he ushered in the era of modern filmed news. Published in 1901, a photograph of Dickson shows him seated in riding clothes, a cigarette in one hand. He looks directly at the camera, a small grin on his face. Is this the picture of a happy man? He certainly had every reason to be happy, as he was now the boss of his own company and could create whatever workplace culture he desired. But one thing did not change for Dickson: his desire to have a hand in all aspects of creation. In the corner of the photograph is the unmistakable signature, but this time with an additional flourish: "Yours truly, W. K. L. Dickson."

Dickson did achieve the fame that had eluded him during the Edison years, as advertisements printed in the back of the *Biograph...* book attest. In one ad, "celebrated telephoto lenses as used by Mr. Dickson in Africa" (Dickson, 1995, p. 299), are promoted. In another, Dickson is quoted in an endorsement of a flashlight. Neither ad used his likeness. It would seem that the Dickson name alone carried sufficient weight.

Fame did not elude Dickson; it simply faded away. It faded in the way that it does for most "famous" people, little by little and over time; just as it will fade for many we now know as celebrities. He never achieved success or notoriety on a par with Edison, but few throughout history can make that claim. The archive has revealed Dickson to be an interesting and innovative man who seemed utterly comfortable in the era of modernism he helped to create. As Wachhorst noted, "The chief aim of modernism was 'to rise above all theologies, creeds and cults to a universal faith grounded in universal evolution'" (p. 125). Dickson helped bring about a truly universal "faith" in the form of motion pictures. This technology fixes the subject in cinema space, a space that is defined by modernism. From this space Dickson tells us the story of his time with Edison. The laboratory was the place where many people carved out interesting and meaningful careers, unsung but not entirely forgotten. Wachhorst describes these "true heroes" as "those whose myopic enthusiasms and pedestrian virtues nurture the world. Like Edison, they work while we sleep. They keep the shop" (p. 223).

Dickson's archive provides a meaningful piece of the Edison laboratory puzzle, the story of a man who by all accounts achieved everything he set out to do during his years with Edison: he was hired; he succeeded at every project Edison put him to; he broadened his horizons by initiating projects, such as his books, that were not strictly within his skills set; he challenged rules he thought unfair; when he finished his work, he put down his tools and left. And he went on to other challenges.



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