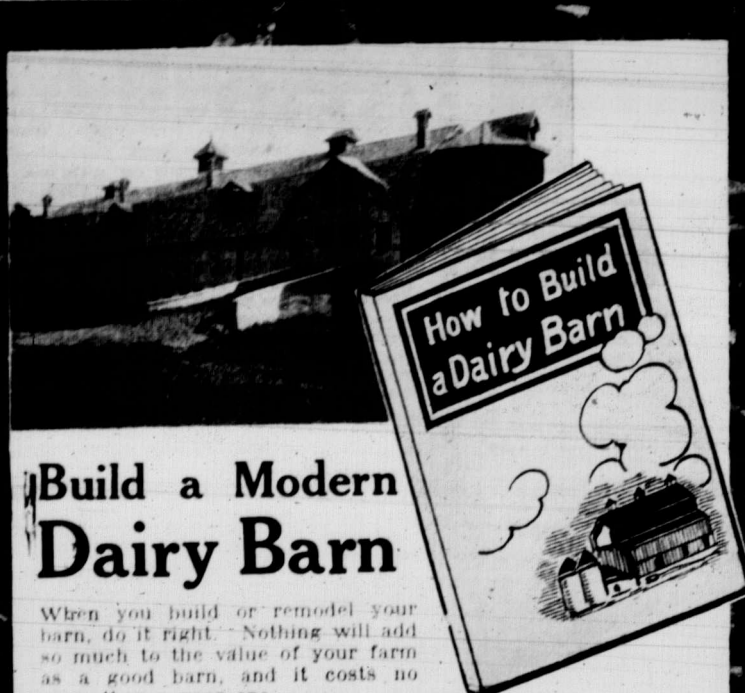




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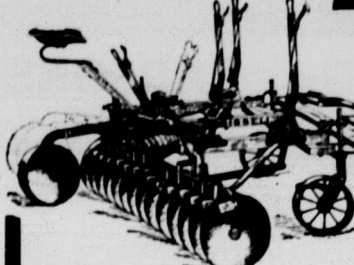
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THE "OLD MAN" OF ORANGE

Thomas A. Edison, manufacturer, is the largest individual user of carbolic acid in America.

Under normal business conditions, he uses about a ton a day in the manufacture of his new diamond-disc gramophone records. All of this acid comes from England and Germany. When war was declared the entire supply was suddenly cut off. Carbolic acid is used in the manufacture of high-power explosives, and both England and Germany needed all they could get. The Edison factory faced a shut-down that threatened to throw hundreds of employees out of work and cost the company many thousands of dollars a month. No chemical company in the United States would undertake to furnish carbolic acid within from six to nine months. The news was brought to Edison when he was at work in his laboratory at Orange, New Jersey.

The "old man," as he is affectionately termed by his workers, paused in his labors, pulled out a pencil and did some rapid figuring. Then he drummed with the pencil upon his desk—a characteristic habit formed in his early days when he was a telegraph operator. Edison could not think properly without a pencil between his fingers.

He immediately began to investigate the various processes of obtaining carbolic acid, and set his chemists to work on experiments to determine the most practical and efficient method of manufacturing it synthetically. After a few days of hard work he was convinced that the sulphonic process was what he wanted.

"Start a plant of our own," he finally announced. And at once the entire factory force—or as much of it as was required for the purpose—was set to work to put the new plant into being.

"Don't talk—act," he instructed his managers.

Now it is no easy task to establish a carbolic acid plant in this country. Ordinarily, the acid is made from the coal tar obtained from English and German coal. The coal tar made from American coal contains such a small percentage of carbolic acid that it has not been found commercially practicable to extract it. So Edison set to work to manufacture carbolic acid "synthetically."

Synthetic carbolic acid is not an imitation, but the real carbolic acid, purer than that found in the tar itself. A synthetic process of manufacture is a process of uniting various elements to form a compound. Edison's task was to evolve a process and plant for making a synthetic carbolic acid as pure as found in the coal tar itself, so there would be no change in the technique of manufacturing his disc phonograph records. So he abruptly dropped all his other work and set three shifts of men to work, each shift working eight hours a day, to make plans for manufacturing phenol synthetically from benzol, from which carbolic is made, and to build the new plant under his direction.

To meet the emergency space was provided in the factory buildings. An area was cleaned up and made ready for the machinery. A part of the machinery was purchased; what could not be purchased was made on the spot. Another force of factory workers was set at the task of making the required tools and equipment. On the eighteenth day after the formula was established, the plant was in operation and was turning out a thousand pounds of synthetic carbolic acid a day—enough to keep the disc factory running without interruption. Edison's prompt action had saved the situation.

And in the meantime, the chemical companies are "struggling and sweating," as Kipling would say, eight months behind the "old man" of Orange, who, despite his sixty-eight years, stayed down at his office till 2:58 a.m. on the morning of my visit to finish a job that he had begun at 8:32 of the morning before, and who registered both dates on his time ticket, which he punches as punctiliously as his office boy.

"Inspiration?" he once retorted in response to an inquiry. "Umph! Inspiration is ninety-eight per cent. perspiration."

—Kendall Banning, in System.

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