



# Genius Restored

The restoration of the Edison & Ford Winter Estates pays homage to America's foremost fathers of invention

by Chelle Koster Walton

In 1885, it cost Thomas Alva Edison an estimated \$8,415 for the land and structure construction of his Seminole Lodge on the Caloosahatchee River in Fort Myers. One hundred and twenty years later, it took more than \$10 million to restore it, the gardens, and other property structures.

Edison's widow, Mina, willed the property to the City of Fort Myers in 1947. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, it was in definite need of some TLC as the twenty-first century rolled around. So a private, nonprofit corporation, of which Chris Pendleton serves as president and CEO, was charged with managing and restoring Edison's two mirror-image houses, plus a caretaker's house, gardens, and the neighboring winter home of colleague Henry Ford.

The restoration of one of the nation's most-visited historic homes kicked off with emergency funding from





A \$10-million restoration has returned the Edison & Ford Winter Estates property to its former glory.





**From top to bottom: Edison with friend and neighbor Henry Ford; Edison's laboratory, where he searched for a natural source of rubber; Edison Pier on the Caloosahatchee River; Edison with his wife, Mina, who willed the property to the City of Fort Myers.**



the city and Lee County in January 2003. To further forestall the decay, the Florida Department of State's Bureau of Historic Preservation awarded the project \$2.85 million in October 2003. The Edison-Ford Winter Estates Foundation pledged an additional \$3 million in private funds to the city to help restore the structures and the gardens, the latter of which had strayed severely from Edison's research gardens and the practical and decorative gardens Mina had planted.

As it turns out, Hurricane Charley in August 2004 actually helped with the gardens' restoration. Well before summer storms rearranged the landscaping, officials at the estates had decided to replace recent-year plantings with the type of vegetation Edison, Ford, and their wives had planted. Orchids, fruit trees, and vegetables were among the wives' favorites, while Edison planted a variety of rubber plants and trees for experiments and unusual species such as African sausage trees for their possible research value. Charley took the first drastic step toward removing plants that had been added since that time with little rhyme and some reason.

"It was time for us to clean out a lot of the dense vegetation that doesn't allow things to grow underneath them, and Charley did that for us," said Pendleton after the hurricane. "A lot of what went down was so non-historic that we're not that upset about it. Most of the landscaping in Edison and Ford's time was experimental or useful. After them, a lot got planted with vegetation that was popular at the time. Our plan is to again make it a useful landscape using Edison's design. Because of his deafness, the visual quality of the gardens was important to him. Everything was linear in design, and we will return to that with the tree-lined allées he had."

The result of the restoration is a much cleaner, high-impact look, both in the gardens and the homes. Remaining riverside is the stand of bamboo that prompted Edison to choose this particular piece of real estate back in 1885, when he was sailing the Caloosahatchee looking for his ideal retreat from the northern winters that were compromising his health. No one knows who would have planted bamboo in Fort





**The Edison estate's massive banyan tree was a gift from Harvey Firestone in 1925 (top); the estate's restored Caretaker's House opened to the public for the first time in 2006 (bottom).**

TOP PHOTO COURTESY OF EDISON & FORD WINTER ESTATES; BOTTOM PHOTO BY BRIAN STROMLUND

Myers back in those days, but for Edison, who was looking for material to use as filament for the electric lightbulb, it made the decision easy. He plopped down less than \$3,000 for thirteen acres with a cow trail passing through the middle and an old Cracker shack built in the early 1860s by the cattle-wealthy Summerlin family.

The shack, the oldest structure on the property, had been used by cow hunters when they drove their cattle down what is now McGregor Boulevard. The estates' recent renovation opened that shack—which later became known as the Caretaker's House—to visitors for the first time in July 2006. It holds period automobiles in its chauffeur's garage, and its galleries host art exhibitions. Classrooms get used for hands-on science and invention classes for kids and parents, Elderhostel, and meeting space.

The restoration of the Caretaker's House and the gardens coincided with a makeover of the Edison Home to return

the property to its yesteryear appearance with true historic integrity. More than 86 percent of the rehabilitated original materials from the 1880s Edison structure were reused in the restoration. "When we started, the house was literally falling down," says Pendleton. "It was really tough times right after 9/11."

The corporation chose 1929 as the period of interpretation for the restoration because at that time Henry Ford was living next door and Edison had sent his original lab to Ford's historic Greenfield Village in Michigan, built his second rubber-botanical research lab, and expanded the Caretaker's House to include the garage and upstairs chauffeur's living quarters. Parker/Mudgett/Smith Architects out of Fort Myers was hired along with Linda Stevenson, an historical architect from Bradenton, as the consultant.

"The challenge was keeping this an operating attraction while the workers were restoring it," says Pendleton. "The

restoration people were like actors answering the visitors' questions." The process of restoration itself became an attraction. Home & Garden Television (HGTV) featured the project as one of twelve National Trust Save America's Treasures on its series Restore America: A Salute to Preservation. The project also received the Architectural Award of Excellence from the Southwest Florida chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the Award of Merit from the Florida Society of Landscape Architects, and the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation Award for outstanding achievement in restoration/rehabilitation.

Edison, unequivocally a man of many talents, sketched his twin homes himself in a style staff characterizes as vernacular country house or rambling river house. Alden Frink of Boston designed the homes from Edison's visions. Because wood was scarce in these parts, Edison had all the lumber shipped from Maine and assembled on the grounds. He and his new bride, Mina, moved into the main house in 1886 while his friend and partner, Ezra Gilliland, set up housekeeping in the other.

Through the years, Gilliland left and Edison converted the second home to a guest house and kitchen. (The original kitchen was built in a separate building, as was the practice of the time, to prevent a fire from burning down the entire house.) Edison later added wide veran-







## Ten Ways to Visit the Edison & Ford Winter Estates

1. For great gifts and historic flora, stop in the **Museum Store, Garden Shoppe, and Historic Cottage Shoppe** for free.
2. Self-tour the **Laboratory and Museum** (\$11 for adults, \$10 for Florida residents, \$4.50 for children ages six to twelve).
3. Take a **guided tour of the homes and gardens**, including the lab and museum (\$20 for adults, \$18 for Florida residents, \$11 for children, \$9 for Florida resident children).
4. Choose a new **self-guided audio wand tour** (same prices as above) instead of or in addition to the guided tour.
5. Sign up for a special **botanical tour** Thursdays and Saturdays at 9 a.m. for in-depth knowledge on the gardens and what is currently blooming and fruiting (\$24 for adults, \$10 for children).
6. The **Estates Membership** program includes free admission, program and store discounts, monthly mailings, and other benefits. Membership also includes free admission nationwide to hundreds of other museums, gardens, and historic sites. Cost is \$50 for individuals and \$75 for a family membership. Business memberships are also available.
7. **Classes** at the estates include Elderhostel Day of Discovery and are planned throughout the year with topics including architecture, restoration, and horticulture. Check the estates' Web site for more information.
8. Young visitors can take advantage of the site's **children's activities**. The Wild Wizard program takes place once a month on Sundays. Check the estates' Web site for a schedule of dates and topics. Week-long summer camp sessions enlighten future inventors when school's out.
9. Starting November 30, 2007, celebrate the holidays historic-style during the thirty-second annual **Holiday House**. It runs through the month of December (except Christmas Eve and Day), starting at 5:30 p.m., with the last tickets sold at 9 p.m. (\$15 for adults, \$1 for children).
10. Check the Web site for **other special events**, such as the programs hosted at the estates during the seventieth annual Edison Festival of Light in February 2008. During the last weekend in March, half of the two-part Black Maria Film Festival will return for one night to the estates; visit [www.blackmariafilmfestival.org](http://www.blackmariafilmfestival.org) for details.

For more information about the Edison & Ford Winter Estates, call 239-334-7419 or visit [www.efwefla.org](http://www.efwefla.org).

das, French doors, and a pergola between the two homes. By 1915, he and Mina had three kids and lots of guests. The focus of Edison's life shifted from pure research to family, and they built one of the first aboveground swimming pools. Always the experimenter, Edison introduced cement, artesian wells, generators, and pioneering methods of water use into the system. Restoration of the swimming pool, Edison tea house area, and one of the original Edison generators is expected to be completed by fall 2007.

In 1929 Mina hired a landscape architect from New York named Ellen Biddle Shipman, one of America's foremost landscapers and the first woman landscaper of renown. In addition to designing the estate's garden master plan, she created Mina's Moonlight Garden, a concept that was in vogue at the time. Recently restored to the tune of \$100,000 by another female landscape artist, Ellin Goetz of Naples, it includes a reflection pool, Edison's beloved bougainvillea, a green lawn, and fragrant night-blooming blossoms, plus white and blue flowers that would have shimmered in the night as the moon and stars reflected off the pool. Edison's office at one end of the garden has been devoted to an exhibit about Shipman's work, which included the estates of the most fashionable names of the day.

"Orchids were all the rage at the time. Edison's wife very much loved them, and they collected them in the Everglades and throughout Florida," says Pendleton. "During the 1920s, the orchid collection [at the Edison estate] was written up in newspapers all over the country as the most extensive in Florida. We've restored it along Orchid Lane, a line of mango trees along the fence line between the Ford and Edison homes. We've also restored Mrs. Edison's rose gardens and the allée of royal palms—thirty-five trees—on either side of the homes along McGregor and the riverside."

As for the Edison homes themselves, the biggest change devotees will notice is that one can no longer enter into them from the fourteen-foot-wide porch. Plexiglass barriers on the first floors, however, permit an





**Clockwise from above: The restored Edison residence; Edison and Mina among some of the property's flora; Mina's Moonlight Garden, also recently restored; an antique car in the Edison & Ford Museum.**

HOUSE PHOTO BY BRIAN STROMLUND; OTHER PHOTOS COURTESY OF EDISON & FORD WINTER ESTATES

uncluttered view of the library and living room, done up with the same color schemes and furnishings as Mina left them. The exterior was restored to its circa-1929 gray shade with a seafoam green porch ceiling, white trim, and brick-colored wood shingles on the roof. The light green, it turns out, was one of Mina's favorite colors.

"The more we get into the restoration, the more we learn about the Edisons," says Pendleton. Gone are the unsubstantiated stories told over the years, such as the one that said original lightbulbs still burn and that Edison could not tolerate the smell of cooking food, thus the separate kitchen. Pendleton says they've been unable, however, to discount the one that says that Edison demonstrated the region's first electric light at his Fort Myers laboratory and that the V-8 engine was virtually invented on the Fords' porch.

"The Mangoes," the Fords' smaller,

humbler Craftsman-style home, has gotten a new coat of paint, and for the time being visitors can still traipse through its downstairs rooms, decorated simply, as was their style, with antiques from the period.

Ongoing restoration will continue the return to yesteryear's look and even, where the gardens are concerned, smell. "It's an evolutionary process," says Pendleton. "The visitor experience over the next few years will be more and more according to how Edison used the property."

Future projects include research on and restoration to Edison's second laboratory and environs. The original acreage will expand to twenty-six, the parking lot will be moved, and restoration will begin on a research garden Edison maintained around the famous banyan tree that his colleague and fellow Fort Myers winterer Harvey Firestone gifted him back in 1925.

Much of Edison's experimentations at the time were geared toward finding botanical sources of rubber for Firestone's tires and other industrial applications. Newly freshened exhibits in the estates' museum give visitors a sense of the impact this man had on modern-day America. His 1,093 patents cover everything from cement and baby high chairs to the phonograph and typewriter.

"He touched every piece of American life," says Pendleton with obvious admiration and perhaps a touch of obsession. "This is not just about historic houses. That's what makes us different."<sup>1</sup>

*Times of the Islands* travel and cuisine editor Chelle Koster Walton has written thousands of articles on Florida travel, history, arts, and cuisine for publications and organizations such as *The Miami Herald*, *St. Petersburg Times*, *Away.com*, and *Visit Florida*. She is author of eight travel guidebooks.