

■ ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS

The Edison Etherizer



To electrify North America, Thomas A. Edison (1847–1931) proposed using direct current (D.C.) rather than the alternating current (A.C.) suggested by his rival, George Westinghouse, Jr. (1846–1914). To undermine acceptance of A.C. for household use, Edison terminally “Westinghoused” test animals in 1887 and then advocated similar use of A.C. upon death-row inmates. When the State of New York tried Edison’s “Westinghouse [electric] chair” in 1888, the first victim survived a 17-second electrocution before succumbing to a 72-second one. This debacle and D.C.’s economic costs backfired on Edison, and America adopted his rival’s A.C. Over a half century after the botched electrocution, Thomas A. Edison, Inc., of New Jersey manufactured an apparatus for passing “multitudinous air streams” through an ether-adsorbing “channeled carbon mass” whose heat-conducting container was surrounded by a “crystallizable liquid.” Heats of “adsorption and solidification,” designed into this apparatus by 1946, were counteracting the chill of vaporizing ether, the inefficiency of which had plagued earlier bubble-through vaporizers. After inscribing the signature of “Thomas A. Edison” on the front of their “Edison Etherizer” (pictured above from the Wood Library-Museum Gallery), the New Jersey team powered it with A.C. Quite an ironic posthumous salute to one-time D.C.-advocate, Thomas Alva Edison ! – (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists, Inc. This image appears in color in the *Anesthesiology Reflections* online collection available at www.anesthesiology.org.)

George S. Bause, M.D., M.P.H., Honorary Curator, ASA’s Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology, Park Ridge, Illinois, and Clinical Associate Professor, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio. UJYC@aol.com.