

# EDISON PLANS AN AUTOMATIC CLERKLESS SHOP



Thomas A. Edison in His Workshop.

There Will Be No Waiting for Change, No Impolite Helpers, No Counters, but Customers Will Get What They Want on the Slot Machine Plan.

**A**n automatic store—that is the latest proposition to be worked out in the fertile brain of Thomas A. Edison.

"This is the machine age," said the inventor last night in a talk with a Times reporter at his home in Menlo Park, "wherever man's power or horse power can be eliminated, speed, accuracy, and economy are the result. Much as machinery does for us to-day, I confidently believe that it is going to be called on to do more and more. Eventually, nearly everything in this world will be got down to a mechanical basis. That will mean that we can live easier and cheaper."

"I was talking with a man last week who told me about a visit he made to an up-to-date candy factory. In one room there were three large vats, a machine, and a man. In one vat there was sugar, in another flour, and in the last chocolate. The man turned a lever, the machine moved, and at the end of a spout perfect chocolate drops popped out faster than he could count. The same machine wrapped each chocolate drop in a piece of paper and packed them in layers in boxes."

"There you have an excellent illustration of what machinery is doing to-day—doing what ten years ago it would have taken a roomful of workers to do."

"An automatic store is simply a short and easy step along this same road. An automatic store simply means an extension of the nickel-in-the-slot principle—a few electro-magnets controlling chutes and hoppers and the thing is done."

"In an automatic store one man could do the work which is now done by fifty grocers. The distributing cost on every article handled would be brought down to a minimum, and the poor man who buys his flour by the 5-cent bagful and his coal by the scuttle could buy as cheaply as the man who purchases his flour by the barrel and his coal by the twenty-ton lot."

"Then you don't expect these automatic stores to become general?" asked the reporter. "You expect them only to be poor men's stores?"

"From a mechanical and economic standpoint," said Mr. Edison, "there is

no reason why they should not take the place of all grocery stores. It would mean a great saving to society as a whole."

"But I do not look for any such adoption of the automatic store. Pride would be altogether too powerful a factor. Even a mechanic who makes his \$2.50 a day would be too proud to patronize one of these nickel-in-the-slot stores."

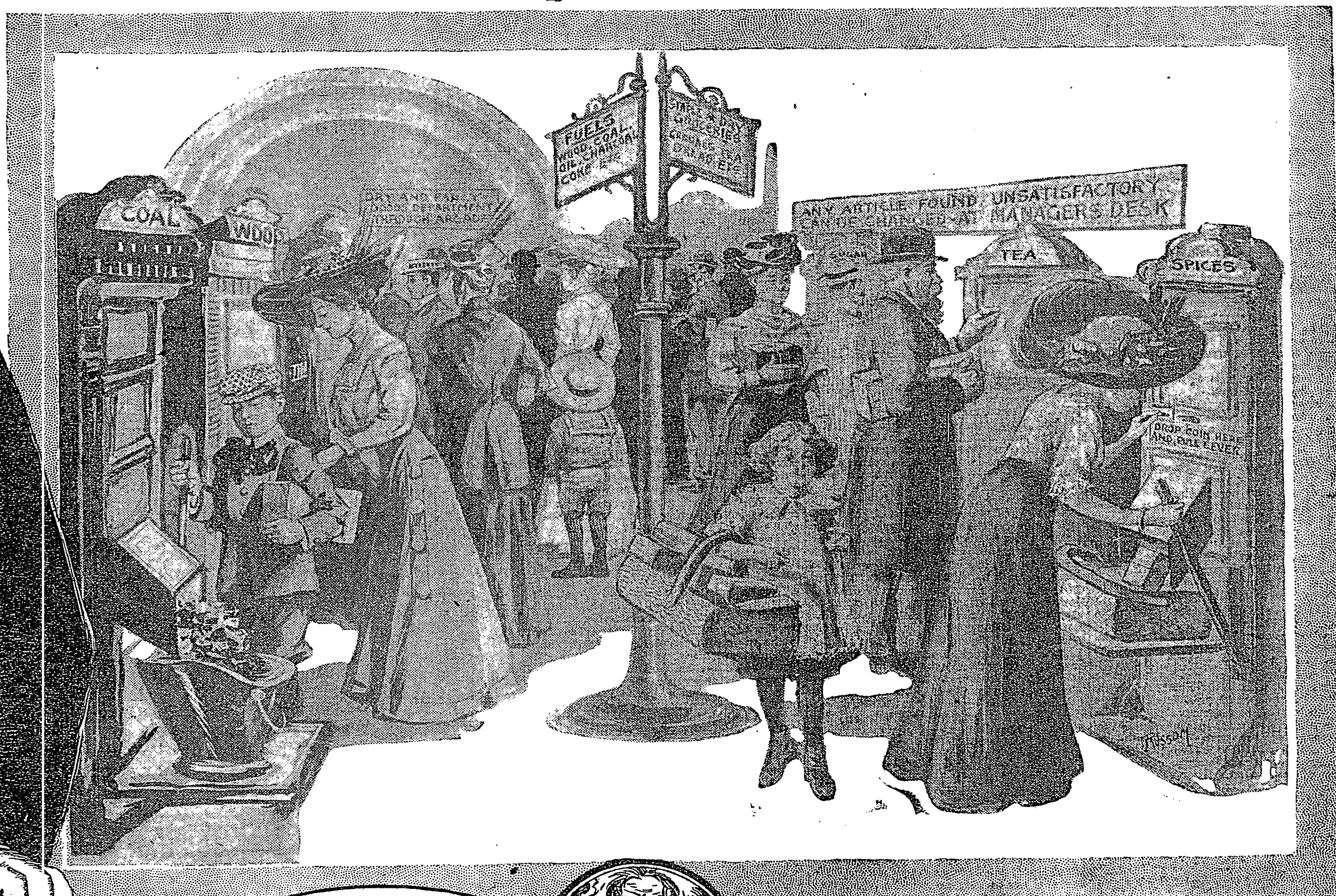
"I have designed this automatic shop to meet the needs of the poor working-man, the man who has to support himself and family on \$1.50 a day."

"The average well-to-do citizen has no idea of how many families there are who have to get along on \$1.50 a day, and how big a nickel is to them. Why, there are men working in my factory who walk all the way from Newark to Orange and back again at night in order to save a dime."

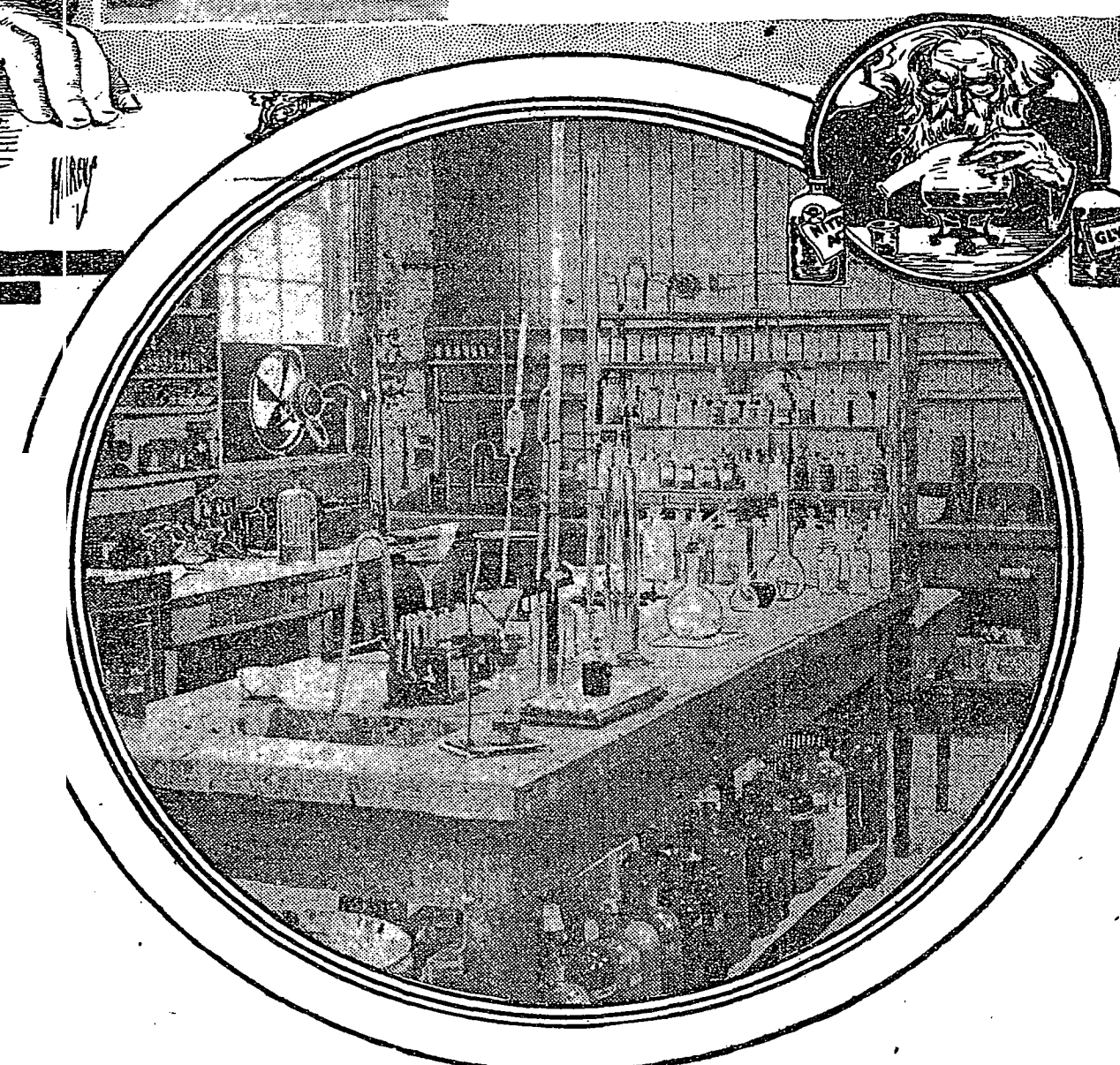
"These people buy their food and coal in five-cent lots. That seems to be their limit. When a family buys its coal by the scuttleful it means that on account of the extra handling and attendance the coal dealer has got to charge at the rate of \$20 a ton. The same ratio holds good in all the necessities of life. It simply means that the poor man must pay for more than the rich man. We hear a good deal these days from people in comfortable circumstances about the increased cost of living, but how do you suppose this rise in prices has hit the poor woman going to market with a nickel in her hand?"

"This is the class that the automatic store will help. It will retail goods only in five-cent lots. Of course, if there should be any demand for an extension of the plan, automatic shops retailing goods in ten-cent, quarter, or half-dollar lots, depending on the financial status of their patronage, could be equipped. If the cost of living keeps on going up it may be that the well-to-do will be willing to lay aside their pride and patronize anything, even an automatic shop, if it will save them money."

"In the automatic shop of the future there will be no shopkeepers, no clerks, no boy to wrap up packages. On entering the shop, the intending purchaser



The Automatic Store Drawn from Mr. Edison's Description of How It Will Look.



At This Bench, in His Laboratory at Menlo Park, Mr. Edison Has Worked Out Most of His Inventions. (Photos Copyright by Underwood & Underwood.)

will see no one, unless it be some other purchaser. There will be no counters, no scales, no shelves lined with goods, no showcases.

"In the walls of the shop there will be dozens and dozens of little openings. Above every opening there will be a

small sign. This sign will tell in a half dozen different languages what particular article that particular opening will deliver.

"Suppose a patron wants beans. He will go to the series of openings that represent the vegetable department.

He will look for the sign bearing the legended "Beans." He drops a nickel in the slot and a neatly tied package containing 5 cents worth of beans will drop through the opening.

"You see that in an automatic shop there will be no wasting of time in

talk, no pricing of articles, nor any sampling. Shopping will be an exact, speedy, and businesslike proposition.

"And here is another great merit in an automatic shop; it will be a strictly cash proposition; the shopkeeper's credit book will be automatically closed every night when he goes around and collects the nickels from the various slots.

"A storekeeper selling goods over a counter may have a dozen big signs tacked up around his shop bearing the warning 'No Credit Given Here,' but he is frequently obliged to break his rule for fear of offending and losing a customer. But in an automatic store the personal element would be lacking; a man can't ask credit from a slot machine. If he wants the goods he's got to have a nickel.

"The upper part of the automatic store will be a simple adaptation of machines that are already in use. There will be rows of bins in which the various articles will be emptied as they are purchased from the farmer or the manufacturer. Chutes will lead from each of these bins down to machines which will automatically weigh out and neatly tie up the various articles in 5-cent packages. From each of the machines a chute will carry the various packages down the store, and only a nickel dropped in the slot is necessary to have one of the packages delivered into the customer's hand.

"Machines that automatically weigh and tie up goods have been in use for some time. Many big grocery concerns use them to make up their five, ten, and fifteen pound packages of flour, sugar, and similar goods. A few electro-magnets controlling chutes and hoppers, and you have the automatic store.

"Only one man will be needed to tend this store. All that he will have to do is to keep the bins filled and the machinery oiled, and all the rest will be done automatically. He and his machines will be doing the work that in a present-day grocery shop it requires fifty men to do."

"Groceries are practically the only things that could be sold in an automatic shop, aren't they?" asked the reporter.

"Coal is an item, an important item, that the automatic shop will retail. Potatoes and similar vegetables will also be dealt in. Neither the coal nor the vegetables will be tied up in packages. The customers will have to bring a basket, box, or scuttle and place it beneath the proper opening before dropping his nickel in the slot. The machine above will simply measure out the proper quantity."

"The automatic shop will retail dried codfish and similarly prepared fish and meats. Of course, it will not be possible for it to do the business of an ordinary butcher shop."

"But do you know I believe a family could live the year round without using anything but good package food."

"I have some hesitancy in being quoted to that effect, because there are so many fake package foods that are being advertised as brain and nerve foods. What I refer to are the food-stuffs that are cooked at the factories and then done up in packages for the retail trade."

"The central kitchen has been tried in many places and found to be a success. It not only saves time, but greatly simplifies the servant problem. It is only necessary to carry this a step further, and substitute the factory for the central kitchen. The service area of the latter is limited, but the factory that cooks and then boxes or cans the food can deliver its product anywhere."

"I believe that these factory-cooked foods are going to come more and more into use. I believe that the day is coming when it will only be necessary to heat a little water in order to prepare a meal. And I should add that that water will be heated by electricity. The old-fashioned cook stove will be a forgotten relic."

"How far have you gone in developing the plans for an automatic store?"

"Why, I've had a draughtsman work out a good part of it. As a mechanical proposition, it's simple. I'd like to have some philanthropist take hold of this scheme and build a number of these automatic stores in the tenement districts of the big cities. He wouldn't need to be so much of a philanthropist, either; I can show him how these stores will net him 6 per cent on his investment."

"If any one wants to take hold of this, I will prepare the plans and make it a mechanical success without any charge. My interest in this matter is simply a desire to help the poor man to give his nickel the same purchasing power that mine has."

"There's so much talk nowadays about helping the poor man. Most of it results in nothing but talk. The rich man wants to help, but he doesn't know how. Now, here's a sure thing. It's the best kind of philanthropy, for it helps a man to help himself. He puts his nickel in the slot and has no one to thank."

"If no one else takes this matter up, I'll build one of these automatic stores myself. There are two things on my mind that I have got to get rid of first. The first and most important of these is the storage battery. I have got that in such shape that I'll be able very soon to dismiss it from my mind. The second thing is my project of making concrete houses in iron molds, the whole house to be completed in six days and to cost not more than \$1,200. This is a scheme to help the poor man. I don't intend to make anything out of it. In a very short time I'll be ready to begin pouring these concrete houses."

"Then I'll take up this automatic store. I'll build one in the tenement district of New York and I'll call it 'The Samaritan Market.' It will be for the poor man, selling goods in five-cent lots. This store will prove the feasibility of the scheme."

"How general these automatic stores will then become, it would be difficult to prophesy. But so far as an Automatic Age is concerned, I have no hesitancy in saying that it's coming. No piece of machinery manufactured is more than 10 per cent perfect. As the years go on this will be improved upon tremendously; more automatic machines will be devised, and articles of comfort and luxury will be produced in enormous numbers at such small cost that all classes will be able to enjoy the benefits of them."