ELECTRICITY AND THE CONSUMER AGE

The man that made electricity work for us was Thomas Edison. He applied electricity to solve problems and changed people's lives.

Edison did not invent electricity; he harnessed its power. Edison's experiments led to the creation of the first long-burning, incandescent light bulb in 1879. Edison knew that no one would use this new invention unless an infrastructure existed to supply homes and businesses with inexpensive electrical power. By 1900, Edison had created the General Electric Company and cities across the United States were being wired for electricity.

During this same period, Nikola Tesla invented the first alternating current (AC) electric motor. The Westinghouse Company purchased the patent and developed AC motors in a wide range of sizes. By 1910, the electrical industry in the United States had adopted AC power as its standard, possessed the infrastructure to deliver electricity across the nation, and had developed the technologies to provide household appliances in great numbers.

World War I fostered the creation of a consumer society in the United States. Statistics demonstrate that by 1920 the majority of Americans lived in cities where they had more leisure time and enjoyed increased incomes. For the first time, a huge market existed for personal consumer goods and manufacturers responded. The number and availability of consumer goods multiplied geometrically in the 1920s. This "consumer goods revolution" radically changed people's lives. New electrical appliances shortened work times and eased work loads. Of all the new items that became readily available, none is more representative of the changes electricity brought to people's lives than the toaster.

People have been making toast since Roman times. Methods for toasting ranged from placing chunks of bread on sticks and holding them over an open fire, much like making "S'mores" today, to placing loaves or slices of bread on heated stones for extended periods. Regardless, the methods were time-consuming and inefficient. The arrival of the electrical toaster overcame these centuries-old problems. For the first time in history, toast could be made to order quickly, conveniently and uniformly. What had taken hours of labor and effort and often produced less than acceptable results, now became easy and commonplace. Today we toast up to eight slices of bread at one time while we drink coffee from an electric coffee pot, eat eggs cooked on an electric stove and drink orange juice that has been chilled in an electric refrigerator. All of this is expected, common, and often taken for granted; much like the electricity that makes it all happen.