

Tesla:

Bust The Smithsonian

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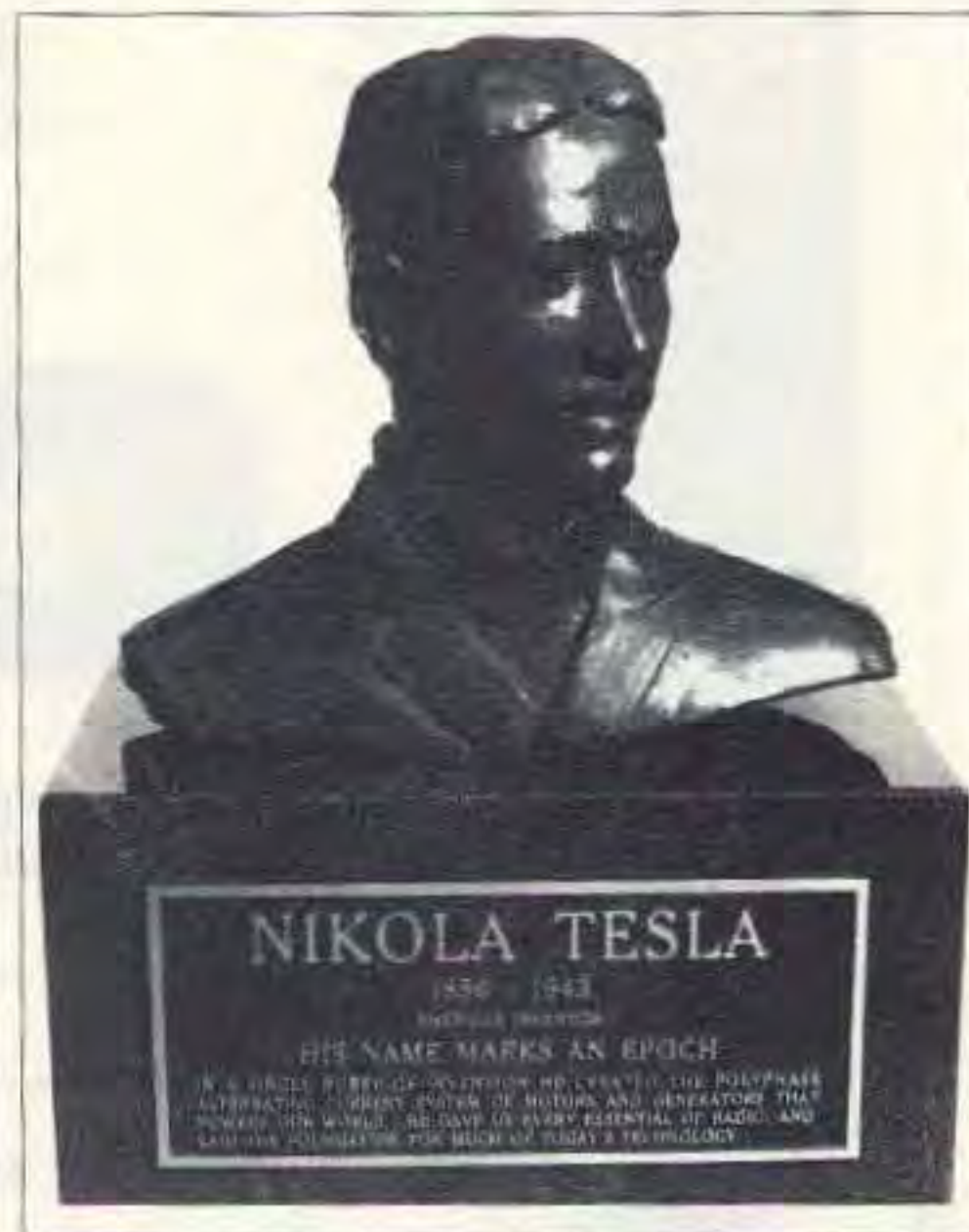
In the spring of 1983 I was browsing through the Allegheny College Library and found a book titled *Prodigal Genius, The Life of Nikola Tesla* by John J. O'Neill (1944). I had known about Tesla and his famous coil from my high school days 40 years earlier, but this was my first opportunity to learn more about the man whose coil made fascinating sparks. Regrettably, his coil was the sorrowful extent of my knowledge of Tesla, and likely it is as much as most people know, if indeed they recognize his name at all.

The first two pages of O'Neill's biography are powerful. After more than 12 years I can't forget his words. In short, I deem it a book of epic proportion. When I looked at the inside of the back cover, I was amazed to find that the book had been taken out only eight times in the past 38 years. How could this be? Was I overestimating the importance of its message? I didn't think so, and I still don't.

The same can be said for the next Tesla biography I discovered, *Tesla, Man Out of Time* by Margaret Cheney (1981). It has a powerful introduction by Leland Anderson, our country's foremost authority on Tesla. It is by far the most completely documented book available today on Tesla.

Class Hero

I had been teaching English Composition and my first thought was, "How interesting it might be for my students to learn the story of Tesla's life—it just might help me breathe some fire into their writing." The more I read, the more I was able to impart to my students, and the more they became inflamed with enthusiasm—not only for writing but for a desire to wave Tesla's banner. It seemed we had discovered a secret, if not an outright flaw in history. Why was it that so few people had



ever heard of Tesla? We decided to write letter stories to people and tell them about our discovery.

At first, and without realizing it, Tesla had become our class hero, and my students now became excited about writing. We developed a mission—to tell as many people as possible about Tesla. I was reveling at the writing successes in my classes, so I continued this activity with succeeding classes for several years.

One school year, 1986-87, was particularly exciting. Someone brought to our attention an interesting situation that existed in Madison, Wisconsin. We learned that several years earlier someone had named streets after famous scientists, including Tesla and Marconi. The city fathers spelled "MARCONI" correctly, but somehow they had misspelled Tesla's name as "TELSA" on their street sign. We also learned that a University of Wisconsin professor and chairman of the History Department had petitioned Madison officials to correct the spelling of Tesla's name, but his pleas to City Council were rejected repeatedly until he finally abandoned his crusade.

This was exactly the sort of challenge my students wanted and needed. We bombarded Madison with letters to City Council, the newspaper, residents on "TELSA" Street, the mayor, and even the mayor's wife, chiding them to correct Tesla's misspelled name. We argued, "After all, Tesla was an honored American citizen who gave much to the world;" and, "How would they like to see Washington's name spelled incorrectly on street signs?" The dispute raged for months and our story made the front page of the *Wisconsin State Journal*. One council member was particularly distraught over the issue. He called one day and begged in so many words that we "get off their backs." We refused to relent because we knew we had truth on our side. Five months later we received a letter from the City Clerk advising us they had corrected the street signs. This was confirmed later by a photograph one of my students took while traveling there.

One Saturday morning two years later my doorbell rang. It was a former student and her father. She told me that for the past three years she had not forgotten our Tesla story. It had made such an impression on her that she had persuaded her father, an accomplished sculptor, to render a Tesla bust for our class... that is, if this was something I really wanted. It took about a microsecond for me to agree to their generous offer. They explained that I would have to pay for the materials, but there would be no charge for the work. I was ecstatic and many thoughts ran through my head. We could put the bust in our classroom, or perhaps donate it to some museum.

When the clay model took better shape and I could see how magnificent it really was, the sculptor asked what preference I had for the final cast. We decided on bronze. We also decided on a granite base and a bronze plaque telling of Tesla's

eminence in the field of electrical science. I worked for weeks at my computer keyboard composing various inscriptions for the plaque and consulting Margaret Cheney and Leland Anderson for guidance. Finally, I decided to use the following inscription:

NIKOLA TESLA
1856 - 1943

HIS NAME MARKS AN EPOCH
IN A SINGLE BURST OF
INVENTION HE CREATED THE
POLYPHASE ALTERNATING CUR-
RENT SYSTEM OF MOTORS AND
GENERATORS THAT POWERS OUR
WORLD. HE GAVE US EVERY
ESSENTIAL OF RADIO, AND LAID
THE FOUNDATION FOR MUCH OF
TODAY'S TECHNOLOGY.

There will probably be several readers who might wish that I had said something else on this plaque. Nevertheless, these were Tesla's greatest achievements.

Placing the Bust

My youngest son told me about a band in California named TESLA that might be interested in contributing to our campaign. I wrote to them. In a few weeks their drummer and a guitar player responded personally with a check for \$1,800. In addition, we wrote to dozens of CEOs of power companies and large corporations. Many responded with checks of \$50 to \$100. It seemed we were making real progress because many people in high positions were sympathetic to our message.

As we struggled deciding where to place our bust, someone suggested the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn. They have an entire section of their museum devoted to the history of electrical science. We believed they would welcome with open arms a bust of this caliber for their display.

When I drove to Dearborn to confer with their head curator, I showed him a large full-color photograph of our bust and told him our story about how it came into being. Then, on behalf of my students, I offered the bust fully expecting that he would accept it. After all, the bust was magnificent and had an appraised value of \$6,000. I was struck dumb when he refused our offer. It was simply beyond my comprehension that such a prestigious museum would refuse to accept and display the bust of America's greatest inventor in electrical science. As I left the building, admittedly dazed, I noticed a huge model of the Statue of Liberty featuring an

Edison display. The theme was a celebration of Edison for making possible the electrical energy needed to illuminate our national monument. It was apparent AC power was celebrated rather than Edison's incandescent lamp.

As I walked out the door I looked back, and there above the entryway I saw an inscription I had apparently missed when I first entered. It read, "The Edison Institute." Now everything suddenly fit into place. Edison and Ford were close friends, and it was reasonable to expect the Ford company would continue to celebrate Edison's name. I thought, "There must certainly be other museums that would not have this kind of bias," so I visited the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry. I concluded it was nothing more than a haven for commercial displays—certainly nothing to compare with, say, the Toronto Science Museum. Canada was out of the question though because we wanted to keep the bust in this country.

Finally someone suggested we go to the top—to the most august institution of them all, the Smithsonian. It is the one place in

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our country where only the greatest have their places in history preserved forever...men such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Joseph Henry. Certainly their officials would understand and appreciate Tesla's stature.

I reasoned they probably had already recognized Tesla's accomplishments and might have a bust, so I decided to travel to Washington in 1988 to visit the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. I had visions of seeing nothing but the grandest of sculptures and extensive displays. Upon arriving I discovered that the electrical section was closed for renovation. When I explained to officials my purpose of coming to Washington, I was treated to a personal tour of their archives by none other than the curator's assistant. He gave me a book describing their displays, but I was also able to see a part of the museum that was not open to the public. There were numerous busts, but none were so great as to make our bust

seem inferior. Therefore, I saw no reason why the museum could possibly refuse it. I returned to Ann Arbor with the book under my arm and feeling as if my trip had been a success. All that remained was to make our formal offer and our project would be finished.

When the bust was finished, one of my students volunteered to write to the museum. In a few days we received a reply from Dr. Bernard S. Finn, curator of the Division of Electricity and Modern Physics. He did not want the bust! My students were devastated, and again I was struck dumb. He explained they 'almost never collect busts in their Division.' Later, a friend who had visited the museum and taken photographs sent me one revealing that Dr. Finn was displaying Edison's bust next to Tesla's first AC motor/generator. Tesla's U.S. patent number appeared on the motor/generator, but the display was arranged in such a way as to give credit to Edison. Needless to say, I was astonished.

Further investigation revealed we were not the first group pressuring Dr. Finn to recognize Tesla. Several years earlier a congressman had chided Finn to create a Tesla display. The display prepared by Dr. Finn consisted of a small glass showcase housing a few insignificant personal artifacts. The showcase was placed in a darkened hallway next to the men's room, while the main gallery was devoted to an elaborate Edison display.

By this time I had thoroughly read Dr. Finn's book, *Lighting a Revolution*, given to me by Finn's assistant when I visited the museum. My first *73 Amateur Radio Today* article (December 1995) describes Finn's section titled, "The Beginning of the Electrical Age," naming 43 contributors to the science of electricity. Tesla's name was omitted! This was particularly disturbing because, in describing the Niagara Falls Power Project, Dr. Finn alluded to Edison's genius that made the Niagara project possible: "When the Niagara Falls power station began operating in 1895, it signaled the final major act in the revolutionary drama that began in Menlo Park in the fall of 1879." In other words, in 1879 Edison invented DC electricity! Then, in 1895, he invented AC and harnessed Niagara Falls! The historical truth of this episode is that Edison fought the rise of AC and played no role whatever in the Niagara Falls power project. An acknowledgment on the inside of the book revealed that its funding was made

possible by the Thomas Alva Edison Foundation. I wondered if Dr. Finn's depiction of electrical history was highly biased toward Edison because funding for the book came from the Edison Foundation?

In *Science*, Vol. 245, July - Sept. 1989, p.768, a book review titled "The Real Edison, The Making of an Inventor," by Reese V. Jenkins et al., Eds. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1989, carries a most revealing observation: "This volume renders untenable the popular view of Edison as a Merlinesque figure who wrestles with mysterious forces and single-handedly conjures up stunning inventions."

My daughter teaches physics and chemistry at a nearby university. I asked her to involve her physics students in my campaign. They wrote numerous letters to the secretary of the Smithsonian besieging him to accept our bust. All responses were negative because the Secretary was determined to back Finn's personal bias toward Edison, amounting to the virtual exclusion of Tesla.

One of my students suggested we make promotional T-shirts and sweatshirts to sell. We decided to put a picture of our bust on the front. My wife, who is usually not vocal, suggested we use the caption, "BUST THE SMITHSONIAN." We engaged an artist to create a seven-color likeness of Tesla including several symbolic figures representing highlights in his life for the back of the shirts. The artwork and silk-screening would be complex and we could find only one firm in Ann Arbor able to do the work. The end product was magnificent! We sold hundreds of shirts in nearly every state, the proceeds going into a charitable account for two additional busts soon to be cast.

My next move was to write to U.S. Senator Carl Levin from Michigan, asking if he could exercise some of his political clout on the Smithsonian. Several letters were exchanged, but they had no apparent effect. Then, in one final effort, Senator Levin, on July 10, 1990, stood on the floor of the U.S. Senate and delivered a scorching account of the Smithsonian's historical debacle regarding Tesla (*Congressional Record*, Vol. 136, No. 86): "...Nikola Tesla has not been granted his proper place in history. In the Smithsonian Institution, for example, Mr. Edison's inventions are justifiably well represented. However, although the museum has included Mr. Tesla's alternating current generators in

their exhibit, no mention is made of Mr. Tesla. In fact, the generator is included as part of the Edison exhibit."

At this time several Michigan newspaper articles telling our story appeared in Detroit and locally. Later, an Associated Press writer put the story in newspapers throughout the country. I even received one report the article was seen in a Hong Kong newspaper. All this publicity had no effect on Smithsonian policy. However, the secretary finally promised to have Dr. Finn create a significant Tesla display in 1993. Their plan was to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. This was the first World's Fair, brilliantly lit by electricity—the same AC that powers the world today, made practical by Tesla's genius.

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I sensed that the secretary was only buying time and that some excuse would be found not to give Tesla his due. It was not long before my apprehension became reality. Dr. Finn was relying on obtaining a few Tesla artifacts held in a Yugoslavian museum. Soon thereafter the war in Yugoslavia erupted. Now Dr. Finn uses the war as an excuse not to create a Tesla display. The Yugoslavian museum items he deems so important for his proposed display are only insignificant artifacts...a suit of clothing, a cane, a pair of shoes, a suitcase, etc. Obviously, the public would not relate these items to Tesla's greatest contributions—his rotating magnetic field principle and his basic four-tuned circuit forming the necessary element of radio. Dr. Finn's plan is to explain Tesla as an eccentric loner who remained outside the arena of mainstream academe and industry. Would not science history be better served if he highlighted and paid tribute to Tesla's greatest contributions? These fundamental discoveries serve as the foundation for our two most important industries—power and communication.

It was Hans Christian Oersted discovering electromagnetism in 1820, followed by Michael Faraday making the first electromagnetic generator in 1831, that really opened the age of electric power. Tesla's

rotating magnetic field principle indeed "signaled the final major act in the revolutionary drama"... but that drama began with Oersted and Faraday, not with Edison at Menlo Park!

How to Protest

The Smithsonian was criticized severely recently, and rightly so, by veterans groups and others for their wrongful depiction of history regarding the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The outcry was so loud that Smithsonian officials had to modify their Enola Gay display. I see little difference in the historical bias the Smithsonian shows against Tesla and the nonsensical bias they preferred regarding the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing. Of course the main difference in these disputes is that Tesla does not have large segments of the general public complaining to Smithsonian officials.

When Wayne Green asked me to write a second article for *73 Amateur Radio Today*, I wondered who in the amateur community really cares anything about Tesla or the Smithsonian's depiction of electrical history. I also wondered what I might expect to accomplish by writing a second article. The logical answer to that question is, "probably nothing," because amateurs comprise a small group...certainly not even close to the size of a national veterans group. Therefore, I cannot expect a large outcry of protest to the Smithsonian. If, on the other hand, a club or perhaps some students read this story and want to become involved, either by radio or on the Internet, they could make their feelings known.

Unfortunately, the Smithsonian is a political organization, much the same as many other groups in Washington—they blow in the direction of the wind. I believe the wind has been blowing for too long in Edison's direction, particularly in regard to his entrepreneurial experiment with DC power. I want to see credit given where credit is due...to Tesla for his polyphase AC system...the system that works.

The History of Technology faction that has emerged in recent years has subverted our national museum and converted it into an advertising medium promoting specific industries that support them financially. Also, the group that has assumed power at the Smithsonian is methodically dismantling and converting our national museum into an instrument for social change. What was once a tribute to America is gradually

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being transformed into an assault on American history. I strongly suspect these issues were not even imagined by Mr. James Smithson, a genteel and erudite Englishman, when he bequeathed his estate to the government of the United States to establish the Smithsonian "for the increase and diffusion of knowledge." Smithson was a

scientist and man of letters, not a social activist. He undoubtedly envisioned a museum that celebrated creativity rather than entrepreneurship, and tasteful displays depicting an accurate account of our society's accomplishments rather than focusing on its problems.

One way of changing the direction that the Smithsonian has been heading is by voicing strong opposition to its head: Mr. Ira Michael Heyman, Secretary,

Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560

Much of the change in focus at the Smithsonian started with its former head, Secretary Robert McCormick Adams who retired in 1994. It appears that Secretary Heyman intends to continue the course started by Mr. Adams. If any readers feel obliged to write to Secretary Heyman, I would be pleased to receive a copy of your letter. 73