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Edison Int'l

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Introduction

Edison International is more than just one of America's largest public utility holding companies; it is an enduring symbol of innovation, adaptation, and resilience across nearly a century and a half of seismic economic and technological change. From its 19th-century beginnings lighting small Californian streets to its leadership role as a driving force in today's clean energy transition, the story of Edison International is inseparable from the growth of California and the evolution of the broader American power industry.

Founded on July 4, 1886, by the humble enterprise of Holt & Knapps in Visalia, California, the company grew—through mergers, acquisitions, and pioneering spirit—into Southern California Edison, an industry titan serving millions. The association with the legendary inventor Thomas Edison imbued the company with a legacy of ingenuity and transformation—a legacy that endures as it continues to redefine what it means to supply, manage, and innovate in the realm of electric power.

Throughout its history, Edison International has served as a microcosm of the larger energy challenges facing the United States. The company's journey through eras of consolidation, regulatory upheaval, technological revolutions, energy crises, and bold forays into global energy markets reflects the perpetual balancing act of innovation, risk, and stewardship inherent to the American utility sector. Its successes and setbacks alike offer important lessons about resilience, adaptability, and the pursuit of public good amid changing political, social, and environmental landscapes.

Today, Edison International has transformed itself into a national leader in clean energy while continuing to operate at the scale necessary to power much of California's dynamic economy. With approximately 15 million people relying on electricity through its principal subsidiary, Southern California Edison, and a strong commitment to net-zero emissions and a carbon-free future, the company is at the forefront of tackling some of the world's most pressing challenges: climate change, resource sustainability, and the electrification of transportation and industry.

Yet the story is far from simple triumph. The company faces immense headwinds: massive infrastructure investments, stringent state climate mandates, regulatory scrutiny, wildfire risks, and an evolving competitive landscape. Edison International's ongoing efforts to modernize the grid, balance shareholder interests, manage legal challenges, and maintain workforce resilience highlight the complex realities facing all major utilities in the 21st century.

This book chronicles the remarkable evolution of Edison International: from its 19th-century roots to its present aspirations and future challenges. It is a story of ambition and humility, tradition and transformation, crisis and hope. In tracing the company's steps through the past, present, and possible futures, "Edison Int'l: The Story of an American Company" seeks to illuminate not only the company's own journey, but the broader currents of American progress and the enduring spirit of innovation that powers the nation.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Dawn of Electric Power in California

The late 19th century in California was a vibrant tapestry of progress and opportunity, driven by an unyielding spirit of innovation that swept across the burgeoning towns and cities. The Gold Rush, though decades past, had laid a foundation for rapid growth, and new technologies were constantly emerging to transform daily life. Among these, the advent of electric power shimmered with the most transformative potential, promising to banish the dim glow of gaslight and bring a new era of illumination and industry.

Before electricity became commonplace, Californians, like most Americans, relied on gas lamps, kerosene, and candles to light their nights. Imagine the scene: a lamplighter on horseback riding through the streets of Los Angeles in 1867, igniting 43 gas lamps along Main Street, a nightly ritual that underscored the limited reach of artificial light. This era, while charming in retrospect, was inherently inefficient and constrained, leaving vast stretches of the night in shadows.

The earliest whispers of electric light in California emerged in the late 1870s. In San Francisco, a city already known for its forward-thinking approach, a pioneering event took place. In 1878, an electric light exhibition dazzled visitors at the Mechanics' Pavilion. The following year, on June 30, 1879, a group of astute businessmen formed the California Electric Light Company in San Francisco. This marked a pivotal moment, as it became the first company in the United States to establish a central generating station with the express purpose of selling electricity to the public.

Their initial focus was on providing power for "arc lamps," intensely bright lights that used an electric arc between two carbon electrodes. These lamps were far more powerful than their gas counterparts and quickly found use illuminating businesses and hotels in San Francisco. The California Electric Light Company even published a 16-page circular to extol the virtues of their new artificial illumination, highlighting the "Brush Electric Light" system, named after Charles Brush, who developed arc lamps that could be connected in a series.

San Francisco was indeed an early adopter of this revolutionary technology. By September 1879, electric lights were in actual use in the city. The San Jose Electric Light Tower, erected in 1881, was another bold, if somewhat quixotic, attempt to illuminate an entire city center. Standing at 207 feet, this "moonlight tower" used arc lights to bathe downtown San Jose in a glow that its proponents claimed was the "first in the world" to light a city with electricity, although San Francisco had already

claimed that distinction.

Meanwhile, in Southern California, the promise of electric illumination was also beginning to flicker to life. Los Angeles witnessed its first electric light in 1882, cast by powerful arc lamps atop 150-foot masts. These towering structures, aptly named "moonlight towers," aimed to provide a broad, diffused light across large areas of the downtown business district, akin to the glow of a full moon. By 1885, about 30 such towers dotted the downtown area, with an additional 200 appearing in the city's burgeoning suburbs. This grand, albeit somewhat intrusive, approach to street lighting would eventually give way to more conventional, lower-mounted incandescent lamps, starting in 1905.

Amidst this burgeoning interest in electric lighting, smaller, independent enterprises began to spring up, particularly in the more rural, yet growing, communities of California. It was in one such community, Visalia, a town nestled in the heart of California's agricultural Central Valley, that the direct lineage of Edison International truly began.

On July 4, 1886, a partnership known as Holt & Knupps commenced operations in Visalia. Their humble, yet ambitious, endeavor involved using a steam engine, fueled by cord wood, to power arc lights for the town's Independence Day celebrations. This initial foray into electric street lighting, while perhaps not as grand as the municipal projects in larger cities, marked the earliest predecessor of what would eventually become Southern California Edison.

The same year, further south along the coast, the Santa Barbara Electric Light Company was established, quickly installing arc lights to brighten the city's evenings. These nascent companies, along with others like the Pasadena Electric Light and Power Company (formed in 1888) and the Ventura Land and Power Company (established in 1890), were all part of the scattered, yet determined, push to bring electric illumination to California's diverse communities.

While steam-powered generators were the initial workhorses of these early electric companies, the vast natural resources of California, particularly its abundant water, pointed towards a more sustainable and powerful future: hydroelectricity. In 1887, near Riverside, the first commercial hydroelectric plant in the Western United States was constructed at Highgrove. This pioneering plant harnessed a 50-foot drop in an irrigation canal to power three waterwheels, which in turn drove direct current dynamos. The electricity generated was then transmitted a short distance to light 30 arc lamps in the nearby towns of Riverside and Colton.

This early embrace of hydroelectric power was a significant development, setting a precedent for California's energy future. While the transmission distances were initially limited, the potential for clean, powerful electricity from water resources was

immense. The 1880s were a period of intense experimentation and localized growth, as various entrepreneurs and small companies sought to tap into the promising new world of electric power, laying the groundwork for the large-scale utility systems that would emerge in the decades to come.

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