

The Wizard of Milan, Ohio

BY BARRY GABAY

Through ingenuity, Brian Gray of Edison Pen Co. has invented a new way to be a successful pen manufacturer.



From top—the new Edison Pen Co. Elysian fountain pen in Jonathon Brooks Japanese Autumn resin capped, posted, and uncapped, with a gold-plated stainless steel cap band and No. 6 stainless steel nib.

Well known in the writing instruments community, Edison Pen Co. has legions of followers. Is this company a small maker or a manufacturer? Interestingly, and perhaps unique among recent makers, Edison is both. Less than a decade ago, Edison was a one-man operation, with founder Brian Gray turning out pens on a manual lathe in the family's garage. Today, Edison Pen Co. produces standard and limited editions that are sold to customers around the world. This is entrepreneurship at its most admirable: a successful company with a founder-owner still dirtying his hands every day.

What's in a name? Quite a lot when quality and performance are concerned. Edison Pen Co. is headquartered in Thomas Edison's hometown of Milan, Ohio—a noteworthy connection for a company known for its ingenuity.

Brian's background is in music education and trumpet performance. Although he loves music, his practical side rules. For 13 years following university graduation, he worked in pharmaceutical sales. When not working, he was always building "stuff," as he puts it, primarily marquetry furniture. Detail work is essential in marquetry, and the skills and insights Brian learned in wood have translated into pen making.

Like so many pen makers, he began with kit pens, soon lost interest, and began experimenting. Brian recalls the transition: "I realized that if I wanted to design my own pens, I needed to switch from woodworking to metalworking. That way I could manufacture nearly every component of a pen."

Following being laid off from his sales job, Brian wondered if pens could become a full-time enterprise. He had a lathe for metal work and was selling pens of his own design. By 2007, he was spending eight to ten hours daily making pens. Things were taking off by word of mouth, and Brian was seeing real income.

People began discussing Brian's pens on the early fountain pen chat forums Fountain Pen Network and PenTrace. Then social media exploded, and Brian saw a means of building his following.

He explains, "At this point, it was just me in a garage. My wife, Andrea, was able to help more when Andrew, our son, began pre-school. We were so busy that the manual lathe did not meet demands. We invested in CNC [Computer Numeric Control] machinery, which allowed us to meet orders."

Space was also an issue. Brian found a 10,000 sq. ft. warehouse in a commercial building near his home. He soon installed faster, more accurate equipment. In time, employees were added. There are five today.

Edison's business model is remarkably generous. Brian offers profit sharing with all employees. Additionally, employees set their own work schedules.

Brian says, "We have some employees coming in at 5:30 a.m. and some at 10 a.m. If we all contribute to our common goals, that's all that matters. If everyone here not only enjoys what we do but also cares about what we do and likes coming to work, then profits can't help but follow."

In the early years, Brian sculpted prototypes using his lathe, files, and sandpaper. Eventually he began using CAD [Computer-Aided Design]. His methodology today is the same as in his earlier days: "Playing around to see what sticks." Now, however, that process is much more efficient by sculpting with 3D models on screen.

Edison's Production line pens are standardized and available through various retailers across the globe. The Signature line is Edison's collection of completely customizable pens using a production base design and available through edisonpen.com. Customers choose materials, color, accent elements, and any other items that one might like to discuss.

Elysian is Edison's newest model: slim, tapered, and postable. Brian explains, "It's a unique design, and it's a departure for us. Ergonomics and visual aesthetics were entirely my focus."

Elysian is an elegant design, precision engineered to maximize comfort and beauty in a small size. The cap fits so deeply on the barrel end that Elysian is shorter when posted than when capped. It feels almost like a pocket pen when it's in the hand. Most people at pen shows widen their eyes when first seeing and holding it. I did. It's available with a JoWo No. 6 nib in stainless steel or 18 karat gold in several widths and finishes. Like all Edison models that take a No. 6 size nib, it can be retrofitted to accept a rollerball refill easily. Thus, almost every Edison pen can actually function as two pens: fountain pen and rollerball.

Edison's stainless steel No. 5 and No. 6 nibs are produced by JoWo, and the No. 8 nibs are made by Magna Carta. Edison nibs come in several finishes and standard widths, including stub.

The Collier is one of Edison's most requested models. These reliable and ever-popular fountain pens have been among Edison's standard production for years. Each is fitted with a No. 6 size nib. It's a large pen which does not post. Despite posting nearly all of my pens, I find Collier very comfortable. The Collier and the even larger Collier Grande come as standard cartridge/converter-fillers, but as with most of the company's fountain pens, Edison's Draw Filler system is available for an additional price.

The Draw Filler system has been in production for a long time and was similar, initially, to the Parker Vacumatic: a plunger would depress a latex diaphragm, creating a vacuum which would allow the entire barrel to serve as the ink chamber. Today's improved Draw Filler utilizes an anodized aluminum plunger unit with chemically resistant o-rings replacing the latex diaphragm. These have proven very reliable over the years. To Brian's knowledge, Edison is the only major company manufacturing these fillers across its product line. One very appealing feature of this filling method is that most of Edison's models can be produced as Draw Fillers.



Above—comparison of the Edison Collier Grande in Turnt Pen Co. Opal acrylic with stainless steel nib and chrome-plated clip and the Edison Collier in Turnt Pen Co. Carson 30 acrylic with gold-plated clip and stainless steel nib.



Left and above—the semi-translucent bodies of these Menlo Draw Filler fountain pens in Translucent Cappuccino and Translucent Blue Swirl display the filling system. Below—Jameson cartridge/converter-filling fountain pen in Jonathon Brooks Primary Manipulation 5 acrylic with gold-plated stainless steel accents and No. 8 gold-plated stainless steel nib.



Over the last 18 years, sourcing pen materials has changed considerably. At the beginning, Edison pens were made mostly from poly-methyl methacrylate acrylic, commonly called PMMA. Some PMMA resin is still used at Edison. In 2017, Brian learned about pen material makers Jonathon Brooks (Carolina Pen Company), and then later Tim Crowe (Turnt Pen Company), among others, who use the epoxy-based material Alumilite.

As fans of small makers understand, resin colors and patterns can seem limitless. This is not hyperbole. Some Edison pens produced in unique Brooks or Turnt materials sell out in hours to eager domestic and international customers.

Among the current Edison lineup, the Menlo Draw Filler in Translucent Blue Swirl has soft, lyrical twists and turns that match the pen's tapered, torpedo-shaped body. It looks like water flowing in a cloud, a pastel image of gentility.

Edison's demonstrators combine transparent barrels and caps with color and pattern in one material. The popular Menlo is also available in demonstrator-style Translucent Cappuccino. Another popular demonstrator is the flat-top Brockton Draw Filler in Crimson Water. With pink highlights against a clear background material, this pen is like looking into an aquarium, and as a Draw Filler, its ink is visible in the barrel, making this pen a shifting vision.

The Collier Draw Filler Cumberland is a deep brown with orange hints. It speaks of seriousness and maturity. In complete contrast in the same model is Collier Rock Candy. This one is a carnival, a circus, a fantasy in the writer's hand, an explosion of primary and secondary colors. The Collier Grande in Turnt Pen Co. Opal is proving popular. It's a cream-white with a subtle rainbow underneath, a large pastel pen. The contrast between size and color is understated, subdued, yet universal in its appeal. Each Collier is interesting, but varying materials give them completely different moods. That's the strength of this Edison design: it maintains its integrity no matter the material it is made from.



Above row—Brockton Draw Filler in Crimson Water acrylic with black resin ends and matte black clip; Collier converter-filler in Rock Candy acrylic with gold-plated stainless steel clip.

Above right—Collier Draw Filler in Cumberland acrylic with blind cap detached and plunger-filler displayed toward the back.

Below right—the Edison Pen Co. team at the Milan, Ohio, workshop: Aaron Campbell, Jake Willis, Brian Gray, Andrea Gray, and Shawn Whiley.

The Jameson in Brooks Primary Manipulation 5 glows with gold tints. It has a large, tapered design and a wide central cap band that is not only decorative but protective of the cap lip. Its No. 8 nib in various finishes makes a bold statement. Another Brooks material used effectively is the Elysian in Japanese Autumn. This one reminds me of leaves seen in the golden glow of late afternoon.

These pens are among the best made and most interesting contemporary fountain pens. How popular are they? Some models in production for more than a decade continue to rank among Edison's top sellers. To me, the continued popularity of classic designs says more about this company than can be conveyed in the space of a single story.

Edison's current lineup combines beauty and brains. These pens are attractive when first viewed, but it's in writing with them that their real appeal emerges. What's in a name? For Edison Pen Co., a laboratory's worth of ingenuity.

Visit edisonpen.com or scan the QR code.

Barry Gabay is a PW Contributing Editor.

