

I SAVED THEM WITH SCIENCE!

The evolution of dime novels depended on variation and selection based on the market. When the public grabbed onto an idea the publishers imitated, reprinted, and stole anything resembling that idea until people stopped buying it. We can see evidence of this from the beginning just by looking at the names of title characters, the titles of stories, and the occupations.

When Thomas A. Edison received a new sheaf of publicity for one of his inventions, a dime novel series starring Tom Edison, Jr. was born. In one story Tom Edison, Jr. invents a Sea Spider, with which he destroys a Chinese pirate base, and then engages in a submarine duel with the Sea Serpent, a vessel designed by criminal mastermind, Kiang Ho.

Edward Ellis, the author of *Seth Jones*, wrote some of the earliest science fiction stories while he was writing very popular western fiction. He seemed to have a knack for writing some of the most popular stories of the medium based on easy exposition without too much to say. *The Steam Man of the Prairies* provided the germ for what would become a very popular genre in mass-market fiction. Yet Ellis never followed up on this story, leaving it to later publishers to use his ideas to invent the invention story.

These fantastic plots included inventions that were close to the newest technology of the day. Genetic miracles, flying machines, submarines, newly discovered gases, and engine prototypes took the hero to undiscovered cities, other planets, and record-breaking speeds. Though becoming popular only near the end of the dime novel era, these types of stories were consistently published and came to influence pulp magazines, comic books, movies, and Tom Swift. The dime novels themselves reflected the invention mentality of pre-modern America. Households all over the country before 1900 were dreaming about automobiles and flying machines and the frontiers of tomorrow.