

# DOING THE IMPOSSIBLE

Thomas Lynn, writing in *150 Biographical Illustrations*, tells the story of Marvin Pipkin (1889 – 1977), a legendary engineer at General Electric.

Born near Lakeland, Florida, Pipkin attended Alabama Polytechnic Institute and received a Bachelor of Science degree in chemical engineering in 1913 and a master's degree in 1915. In 1917, Pipkin enlisted in the U.S. Army and was assigned to work on gas masks. His wartime work was at the General Electric Nela Park laboratory in Cleveland, Ohio, where he remained after the war.

When Pipkin first started at GE, some of the other engineers decided to play a joke on him. They gave Pipkin this assignment: Figure out a way to “frost” electric light bulbs from the inside.

To the other engineers, this was an impossible task, and they watched with glee as Pipkin set about trying to accomplish it. Not knowing that the task was supposed to be impossible, Pipkin got right to work.

Sure enough, he not only figured out a way to frost bulbs from the inside, but he also came up with a way to give the bulbs added strength, to boot.

Sometimes, it appears, ignorance can be a wonderful thing – particularly when a person is “ignorant” of the impossible.

– Beecher Hunter