

The Phonographic Record

The Journal of The Vintage Phonograph Society of New Zealand

A Society formed for the preservation of Recorded Sound

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SPEAKING WITH AUTHORITY

As we prepared this issue of The Phonographic Record, we realised again how little we are really sure of, how much we have to learn and how much we are helped by fellow members. It is very difficult to 'speak with authority' about events which happened many years ago. Some collectors will not write at all for fear of being corrected, others, such as the editors share the theory that if, through an attempt to put down on paper what is known they draw out more and even corrected information, they have made some contribution to the preservation of talking machine history. The word 'society' conjures up the idea of working together for a common cause; thus we feel free to ask members' help as we have many times in this issue.

ERNEST HUNT

It is with regret that we report the death on March 10th 1971 of Ernest Hunt of Featherston. Despite age and infirmities, Mr. Hunt retained an active interest in phonographs and the affairs of the Society of which he had been a member for some years. As far as we know he was the only person living in New Zealand who had actually worked for Thomas A. Edison himself. It seems that Mr. Hunt Senior was a friend of William Maxwell and through this connection obtained a position in the moulding room of the Edison works. Hunt's son Ernest, then a boy, also acquired work firstly as a message boy, and later in the recording room.

At the last Gramophone, Phonograph and Record Collectors Convention held in Wellington in 1969 Ernest Hunt gave the following information which, although it has not been verified we offer for your interest.

The Recording Room: This, he described as a room in the shape of a bell about 20 feet high and 20 feet across; inside this was another bell shaped room in which the singer stood. The band was arranged around the edge of the inner room, the singer in the centre and the recorder at the top (or neck) of the bell. The reason for all this, Mr. Hunt claimed, was that sound rises. (Many could not agree with this theory.) On being asked why we see pictures of artists in front of a recording horn, he stated that these were portable recorders and were in the tower room.

Moulding: The wax used in making cylinders came from South Africa in barrels and was mixed at the factory. This was called 'Nonorma' wax, coming from a tree of the same name. Many men, we were told, were employed trimming ends, polishing and packing into boxes the 2 minute wax cylinders. All this was in about 1907.

Masters: Several masters were made at one time; some were made on discs which were, he said, the same thickness as the later Diamond Discs. These discs were preserved with shellac. A pantagraph

was used to transfer to a wax master for gold moulding.

AN ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF EDISON PHONOGRAPHS

The First Model Gem

Early in 1899 a moderately priced machine known as the Gem was put on the market. This proved to be not only a cheap model but also a sturdy well constructed machine capable of a good performance. It is wound with a long-shanked key more like a clock key than the later flat type. The works are enclosed in a cast iron base and are of simple design with straight cut gears; it cannot be wound while it is playing.

This model has, as yet not been found in New Zealand so we feel, therefore, that it is a rare model in the south. The major differences from the later more common key wind model are a larger mandrel drive pulley and the speed control is on the front right instead of on the left side. The cast base has a metal plate in the front instead of at the rear, is without the wooden base and has no gate. The reproducer is fixed in with two screws and cannot be removed from the carrier. Claimed to be the best cheap talking machine available at the time, the first Gem was supplied with a small ten inch black japanned horn, a camel hair chip brush and an oil can. The size of the machine is $7\frac{1}{4}$ " x $5\frac{3}{4}$ " and the weight, $7\frac{1}{2}$ lbs.

We know there are differences in the motor compared with the later model but as we do not have one to examine we cannot state all of these, but we understand that the early Gem had a narrower spring and that the speed control was designed to allow the speed to be adjusted from the front, hence the screw and lock screw.

We would be grateful if any member who has such a machine could give us more information.

GOLDEN PYRAMID NEEDLES

We show on our illustrations page an advertisement for this very famous make of steel needle. Early issues of The Gramophone Magazine featured similar publicity material for a brand of needle which was made for many years, being one of the last makes sold in New Zealand. We have noticed a growing interest in the collecting of needle containers; it seems that the advantages are being appreciated, easy to display, easy to store, easy to post and exchange. With this interest in mind we hope to feature a "tin an issue" series and any photographs and information of unusual tins would be most welcome.

TINFOIL TO STEREO: We have secured some additional copies that we are selling for \$15.00 U.S. or \$16.50 to any foreign country, prepaid and insured. Will exchange for any of my many wants especially wooden or metal horns, Edison Opera, Concert or Columbia Grand Phonographs, any of the large Concert Records, Personality Cylinder Records or any other items on my large double page want list which will be sent for only one quarter. Have many items for sale in my large March Sales List at \$1.50. Write me your wants or anything you have for sale in my line. Edison, Columbia Cylinder or Disc Machines, Standard and Victor Disc Machines, Parts etc. A. Nugent Jr. 3804 Charles City Road, Richmond, Va. 23231 U.S.A.

THE EDITORS' HIGH NOTES

As editors of this magazine we receive many letters - some telling us of collecting generally, some pointing out errors in the magazine and some enclosing photographs of equipment we have never seen before. In this issue we are happy to use photographs which have been sent to us by Mr. E. Radke of New South Wales, Australia. He has sent excellent clear pictures of his three Bi-Chromate cells, his Neophone machine which is complete except for a reproducer, his Klingsor gramophone and his automatic zither (triola). We thank him for his help and we have added to the information which he sent to produce several small articles to accompany the illustrations.

THE BI-CHROMATE CELL

This is an early glass cell used by Edison to drive his M Electric Phonograph; it is shown in the well known picture of T.A. Edison, 'As he appeared after five days without sleep'. The book, 'The Phonograph and How to Use It' states that the M Electric was first supplied with Grenet type of primary battery and these use bi-chromate of potash. There were many objections to the bi-chromate cell, the main ones being a short life which meant they were expensive and they were dirty to maintain. They were soon dropped in favour of the Edison Lalande battery which was claimed to be far superior to all other batteries. Mr. Radke says the potassium bi-chromate in the electrolyte is for the purpose of reducing polarizing to a minimum.

Our first illustration shows the bi-chromate with zinc rods raised; this placed the cell in a non operative position. The cells are connected in series. The second picture shows the rods down and also the carrying case. Electrolyte for the bi-chromate cell is as follows:- 2 ozs. weight sulphuric acid, 2 ozs. weight potassium bi-chromate, 1 pint water. This gives a theoretical voltage per cell of 1.95 volts but Mr. Radke says the actual was approximately 1.25 volts. He says the electrolyte is of a reddish orange colour. We note that the Grenet cell illustrated on page 47 of the book, 'From Tinfoil to Stereo' is quite different in appearance from the ones we have shown. We would be grateful for further information with pictures if possible relating to all Edison cells.

THE NEOPHONE DISC MACHINE

The photograph of Mr. Radke's Neophone machine particularly interested us as this is the first such machine we have seen. In Volume 1, Issue 8 (photograph on page 6) of 'The Phonographic Record' we stated the little we then knew about Neophone. The early white discs made by the Neophone Company have been found in New Zealand; these were made of cardboard and therefore were unbreakable. The later ones were made of a black material similar to that used for normal 78's but were thinner and more easily broken. They were double sided and had labels in two separate colours, red and mauve, the title was also hand written on the surface between the label and where the grooves ended. Further information welcomed.

THE MECHANICAL ZITHER (TRIOLA)

We know little about this as we have so far not seen one in New Zealand. The machine takes a paper roll like that of an Organette and by an ingenious means of linkage levers, plucks the strings to give a rather pleasant sound somewhat like a balalaika. It is thought that the Triola was invented by a German somewhere about 1900.

The machine is hand turned in the same way as an Organette or a Gem Roller organ, and although it appears to have forty-nine strings, only about twenty-five of these are plucked mechanically. We take it that this is among the few automatic machines which can also be played by hand.

HARRY F. RESER - THE BANJO KING by Adair Otlej

Not since the days of Fred van Eps, who recorded on Edison cylinders nearly seventy years ago has the limelight focussed upon such a celebrated banjo player as Harry F. Reser. There is no disputing the fact that this artist was the greatest tenor-banjoist of them all; even after his death in 1965 at the age of 69, modern long playing records of today still preserve his artistry for future generations to marvel.

To trace the history of Harry F. Reser we must go back to the end of the nineteenth century - to the date of his birth on the 17th of January 1896 in Piqua, Ohio, U.S.A. His father was William G. Reser and his mother was a cousin of the famous flying pioneers, Orville and Wilbur Wright. The masters of the 5-string banjo, Fred van Eps and Vess Ossman inspired Harry Reser at the age of 16 when he first played the 5-string, then the plectrum, and finally the tenor-banjo, the latter instrument providing him the ultimate success of his career. His

first full-time engagements were with the Original Dixieland Jazz Band when this ensemble was little known at the beginning of the 20's. Soon he became in demand to make many gramophone records for the American and English Columbia, English Imperial, Panacord, Zonophone, Brunswick and American Decca record labels.

Things really began to happen in 1923 when the great dance band leader, Paul Whiteman, recognising the unusual talent of Reser gave him the honour of being made 'Soloist of the Year'. This indeed was the highest award for any dance band musician in those days; particularly as banjoists were usually engaged as rhythm players. He soon developed a style of playing which no others could imitate. It often gave his listeners the impression that he was playing two banjos at the same time - melody on one and rhythm on the other. He recorded many of his own compositions which showed the ragtime influence of earlier years and in spite of all jazz improvisations however, he found it difficult to free himself from this form of syncopation.

After touring with Paul Whiteman in 1923, Reser later formed his first band which was known as 'The Okeh Syncopators'. The Okeh record label which featured these artists was a subsidiary of American Columbia. He engaged most of his personnel from the famous Ben Selvin Orchestra whose recordings pressed in England appeared on English Columbia and Regal-Zonophone labels as the Denza Dance Band, and even today records by the latter may be found in many second-hand shops. Originally from the years 1923 to 1931 literally hundreds of records by Harry Reser were issued and he used many an alias for different record labels. The best known of these were entitled, 'The Six Jumping Jacks' on Brunswick and 'Harry Reser's Orchestra' on Columbia, also the 'Cliquot Club Eskimos'. Probably his best known composition was The Cliquot Club March, with its jingle of sleigh bells and dogs barking to illustrate the Eskimo theme.

From 1933 to 1937 he made more recordings for the American Decca and Arc labels, and from 1935 to 1938 he went on tour throughout the United States. During the years 1943 to 1948 he was engaged with various dance ensembles in hotels, night clubs and dance halls and recorded as soloist with many recording groups. In the 1950's he made his first long playing album entitled 'Happy Days' for the Grand Award label. His television debut in 1959 found him once again in the limelight, on Sammy Kaye's 'Music from Manhattan' show over the A.B.C. network. Also in the same year he made several L.P.'s for American Columbia which included a 'Charleston' L.P. album entitled 'Vamp' and both in 1962 and 1965 his last two L.P.'s called 'Banjos - Back to Back' for R.C.A. Victor and one with the Six Jumping Jacks. He also wrote ten instruction books for the tenor-banjo, guitar and ukelele, published by Holding Inc. (Warner Bros.)

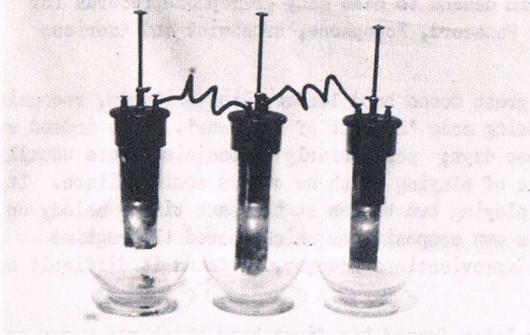
And so even today we can look back with gratitude to the two famous inventors Thomas Alva Edison and Emile Berliner and because of the survival of their inventions we are able to still place the needle on the platter, sit back and relive again and again the magical strains of yet another famous maestro from the world of entertainment.

PERSISTENCE REWARDED or NEVER GIVE UP

by Bill Flecknoe

At Palmerston North I visited an Auction Mart and finding nothing around, I asked the auctioneer if he thought there would be anything in the phonograph line coming along. He said no but commented that he knew a man who had a phonograph but he was sure he would not sell. However, after a little more conversation I managed to elicit the man's name and the street where he lived.

I found the street and knocked on about twenty doors before getting any answer at all but the occupier had never heard of 'Bill Reece'. I eventually met an old man and asked him if he knew Mr. Reece. "Yes", he said, "I do know old Bill, but he doesn't live in this street. If you come to the corner I will show you where he lives!" The street corner was about a quarter of a mile away and it was 2 o'clock in the afternoon of a very hot day. The old man pointed out a street about two blocks away and told me that 'old Bill' lived on the left assuring me I would be able to identify the section as there was a big tree in front of the house; he didn't know the number. Having arrived at the street I immediately saw that nearly all the sections had a tree in front of the house. I

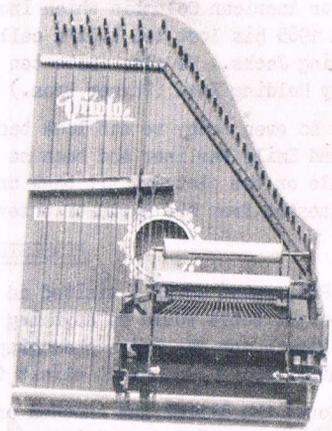


LEFT:- THE BI-CHROMATE CELLS
WITH ZINC RODS RAISED

LEFT CENTRE:- THE BI-CHROMATE
CELLS WITH RODS DOWN
ALSO CARRYING CASE

LEFT LOWER:- THE NEOPHONE
GRAMOPHONE

BELOW:- THE TRIOLA



knocked at about twelve doors but received no answer thus concluding that the occupants had gone to rest for the afternoon. I crossed over the road and knocked on about six more doors again without result. I was getting hotter and was at that stage of wondering whether or not I was on a wild goose chase - I had no idea what I was going to see even if I located the man. However, I crossed back again to the left side and knocked on another half dozen doors. At the sixth house I was just turning away when a lady opened the door about six inches and asked who I was looking for. "Next door up", she said and as I went up the path I was speculating as to what 'old Bill' would be like.

I knocked on the front door four times and was just about to go round the back of the house when a man opened the door. I introduced myself and told him what I wanted. Yes, he had a phonograph and would I like to see it. He was a charming gentleman and I must admit not at all as I had expected. It appeared I was fortunate to be inside the house as Mrs. Reece was resting and had vowed not to open the door to anyone.

When I told Mr. and Mrs. Reece the story of my search I think they thought I was exaggerating. However, my virtue or perhaps it was my persistence was rewarded for I came away with a rare pint stone ginger beer bottle with patent fastener, one hundred Blue Amberol cylinders and a beautiful mahogany Edison Concert Phonograph which I understand, the auctioneer had tried unsuccessfully to purchase on a number of occasions.

HOME RECORDING 'The Kodisk' - by A.J.R.

In the last two editions of The Phonographic Record, we have mentioned the Oro-tone and Speak-0-Phone home recording outfits. Another make which was available in Christchurch was the Kodisk. It was reported in the 'Gramophone Gossip' column of the Sun newspaper on July 19th 1923 as follows:-

"The Kodisk, a new gramophone invention which has been largely taken up by the public and which should be on the New Zealand markets soon is a home-recording disc which, they say, far eclipses anything else of the kind. Previous home recording devices have consisted of a special machine or attachments but in the case of the Kodisk nothing of this sort is necessary. There is no paraphernalia whatever. If anyone wishes to make a record of his voice, he simply puts the Kodisk on the turntable of his gramophone, whatever make it is, as he would with any other record and with the Kodisk needle in the sound-box and using one of the Kodisk megaphones, he sings, speaks, laughs or whistles, plays any instrument into the horn and lo! it reproduces immediately and exactly. And there is even more than that in it. At a recent demonstration, a gentleman sang a verse of a song and it was immediately reproduced. After having played it again during a second playing he sang again, this time taking a bass part and the song was reproduced clearly and distinctly as a duet. After having heard this duet he went over the same recorded piece and whistled into the horn and the duet and the whistle were heard with equally satisfactory results. The possibilities therefore are very great and it will be a wonderful acquisition as well as a source of endless amusement in the home." The name suggests that there may have been some association with the Kodak organization but the local manager knew nothing of this recording apparatus. He did say, however, that the word 'Kodisk' is a registered trade mark for a type of photographic filter marketed by his Company.

No samples of the Kodisk have been seen by the writer but if any member has one or knows anything of their history it would be appreciated if he would share his knowledge.

Recent articles in The Phonographic Record have brought forth some interesting comments from George Frow, England:-

October 1970, Page 4. In the notes on the Spring Motor Phonograph it was questioned about this machine becoming the Triumph Model A, and Chew's book Photograph 36 (not page 36), which is the Edison (Orange) handout sheet to enquirers there was quoted. This has been simplified, and it is in some ways misleading, particularly with regard to the horns supplied. So in order to keep things simple for people wanting to know more about the family phonograph they have inherited, the Spring Motor is called Triumph Model A. The case changed in 1900, but the basic works remained the same for several more years.

October 1970, Page 8. Since the article on World Records in Hillandale News 54/56, in which it was established that these records were pressed by Vocalion, I have seen a catalogue for the World Records and Controllor, printed by Vocalion, and all under Vocalion labels. This came into the hands of an English collector recently. I should think that after World Records were wound up, Vocalion tried their arm, but soon closed up that section. It is possible that little more was done than to issue a catalogue because none of the label collectors has found an equivalent to World Records under the Vocalion label. They must be very rare.

Vocalion Company also pressed a large number of the sound discs that went with early talking films, 1928 to c.1932, and I have some of these. They are 16" diameter normally, though smaller ones were made for very short films and all play at 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ and have a centre-start. I think this solves N.R. Walker's query. This was of course usually called the 'Vitaphone' system though these large records were pressed by Victor, H.M.V., Columbia, Edison Bell etc.

Ernest Allen of the U.S.A. has added a little to the information we have on the Edison Spring Phonograph. He has such a machine which has a cork and rubber mandrel instead of the usual brass one. To quote from the Catalogue of the Edison Phonograph Co. 427 Vine Street, Cincinnati, Ohio:- 'Sold as an extra only. This is made of a hard rubber base, with a cork surface and absolutely prevents the slipping of the cylinder on the mandrel or the cracking of the cylinder from changes of temperature. \$5.00.'

J. Whitley Stokes of Auckland, New Zealand comments as follows:-

'The Phonographic Record', Page 25, Volume 6, No. 3. I believe the Speak-O-Phone aluminium blanks (of which I have a 7" specimen) were made only for electrical recording; in fact the words 'microphonic electrical recording' appear on the blank disc. This is acknowledged by the writer of the article but there appears to be some confusion of thought regarding the very unusual method of electrically reproducing by means of the ORO-TONE microphone attachment. The Speak-O-Phone blanks were intended to be recorded by means of the standard commercial type 'home recorder' using the conventional microphone, amplifier, cutting head driven by a lead-screw. These recorders were available either as separate self-contained units or as built-in units used in conjunction with record player/changers in domestic radiograms. The Wilcox-Gay 'RECORDIO' is an example of the latter. You may be interested to know there was something of a minor boom in home recording in the U.S.A. just before World War II. I have a listing of American manufacturers, correct to 1941, which lists 33 manufacturers of cutting and reproducing needles and 29 manufacturers of recorders. There were also a few in England.

'The Phonographic Record', Page 25, Volume 6, No. 3. Edison Spark Plugs. Edison did purchase rather than amalgamate with the Splitdorf Magneto Co. The reason was that in 1929 when the phonograph business had 'had it' Edison was very half-heartedly thinking of turning to the manufacture of radio receivers (if you can't lick 'em, join 'em.) However, he found, as did many other would-be manufacturers, that the 'big boys' had the patent position well sewn up; it was necessary to get a manufacturing license from R.C.A. and at that time no further licenses were being issued. So what did Mr. Edison do? He did what other aspirants were doing, he bought out an existing licence holder. This is how Edison got into the Splitdorf sparkplug business and the radio business in one go as Splitdorf had been making radios as a sideline to their automotive electrical business. The author of this article is in error in assuming that the word ALBANITE appearing on the sparkplug refers to another company, it is the trade-name for the particular type of insulating material used by the Splitdorf Co.