

Mr. Edison's Ghost Machine

by Professor A.D. Conrow

It was a chance that I simply couldn't pass up, given that I had an extra night to spend in New Jersey. I took the short ride over to West Orange, walked through the gates and presented, "Professor A.D. Conrow calling for Mr. Thomas Edison," said I, while flashing my biggest grin to the rather solemn young man. "Do you have an appointment, Professor Conrow," replied the man, rather tersely I might add. "CONROW is the name, and if you tell Mr. Edison that I am here, I am certain that he will want to see me," I declared, in my most convincing voice. "Please wait here," was all I got from him as he turned and vanished through the doorway.



"Okay, Professor Conrow," he said, motioning with a little wave, "Mr. Edison said to join him on the third floor. Do you know how to get up there?" He seemed a little more friendly, and had a little less suspicion. I swear, I took the stairs two at a time, and was more than a little winded upon my arrival at the third floor landing. I could hear a woman singing at the top of her lungs (and what lungs they were) and soon found Edison sitting nearby with his hand cupped behind his right ear. He smiled occasionally and nodded his approval to his two assistants, so I guessed that all was well with his recording process, which I certainly didn't want to interrupt.

I waited patiently for the song to end, which it eventually did with an extra large flourish by the pianist, at which point, Edison leapt to his feet and started clapping. It was at that point, he turned and motioned for me to join him, as he moved toward a small room off to the side.

As usual, Edison was in a good mood; serious, but good natured. "Conrow, did you bring me any of that hard candy from Kansas?" he asked, slapping me on the shoulder in doing so. That question caught me completely off guard, until I remembered what a fuss he made about the

delicious hard candies, made by a certain confectioner who resided in Pittsburg, Kansas. Edison had come through, about two years before the present meeting, looking at potential manufacturing plant sites in SE Kansas (where limestone and natural gas are plentiful). He was always looking for cement manufacturing opportunities, and several other firms like Ash Grove and Monarch had already established large cement works in that area.

"No, Mr. Edison, I am afraid that I have failed you in that regard," I said, "but I will be more than happy to send you a nice box of them upon my return tomorrow." This seemed to please him greatly, and the great inventor said, "Now you do that Conrow, and make it a big one! The red kind... I don't care much for the green ones."

Edison had outfitted this small room with several very interesting apparatuses, most of which I recognized as his standard electric-motor-driven phonograph equipment. What puzzled me, however, was the old telegraph equipment that was connected via several resistances and wires to an electromagnet mounted with a recording needle on the phono cylinder.

"Professor Conrow, you are exactly the man I needed to see today... The Gods must have sent you." I didn't disagree because it was always such a chore to be understood by Edison, when his back was to you. "Sit down right hear and lend me your good ear," Edison said as he flipped a switch and the phonograph sprang into action.

Suddenly, the room was filled with about the worst static, clicking and buzzing sounds that I believe I have ever heard. The sound continued for about 30 seconds, at which time Edison switched the machine off and swung around to look at me in the face. My face, in fact, was quite blank at that point, of that I am quite certain!

"Oh, you didn't hear it did you?" asked Edison. "Here let me play it again. Just the good part." Again, Edison started the machine after carefully moving the reproducer to a particular spot on the cylinder. Again, the static was loud, but I did notice a slight variation in the sound itself. "Okay, now listen again, except this time I will slow it way down," Edison said, playing the recording very slowly by switching a large resistor into the motor circuit.

"HELLO TOM MY OLD FRIEND," said the machine in a moaning fashion, by modulating the background noise. I said to Mr. Edison, "So what is this latest device, some sort of talking machine?" I asked him, having no idea whatsoever to say to the smiling man. "No, no, no, Conrow, this is

the very voice of a dear friend who was killed years ago. This device I call my Spirit Talker Machine." I looked hard into his pale blue eyes, and started to smile broadly, and then suddenly thought better of it. I was dumbfounded... what to say?

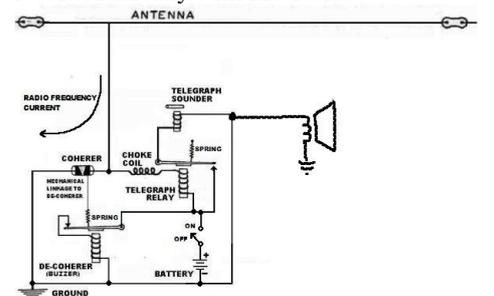
"Speechless, Conrow?" said Edison. "That is not like you!" boomed the man, again slapping me on the shoulder in a youthful way. I stammered and finally said, "How on earth could this possibly work?" "It is very simple," said Edison, "Look here carefully."

At this point Edison began explaining how, as a young telegraph operator out west, he and his fellow telegraphers would often hear "singing" in the receiver, or sounder, as it was called. When the lines became excessively energized (particularly by distant electrical storms), the sounders would sometimes be biased slightly in between states of "on or off", and what sounded like a voice could occasionally be heard.

Please note, Dear Reader, that this is the basis of my Phantom Telegrapher Apparatus that I was to later build and sell as a novelty device to those interested in such things. I shall discuss it completely in a separate article.

Edison further explained that late one evening (about a month prior to my visit), he was trying to go to sleep in the middle of a thunderstorm near his home. Lightning had struck a tree across the way and sent a strand of Saint-Elmo's-Fire down his curtain rod, and over to a nearby electric lamp. As the high-voltage arced, it produced the strange hissing sound that the young Edison had heard all of those years ago, and this had consequently given him the idea for the Spirit Talking Machine.

By taking an old telegraph sounder and replacing the spring with one of a very delicate tension, Edison connected the device, through a novel type of rectifier (called a Coherer) with a carefully selected resistor and condenser, to his phonograph's electromechanical recording stylus. As he further explained, with a long antenna or Aerial as we used to call them, Edison was convinced that spirits surrounding a particular place or person could be recorded directly with his device.



It was Edison himself that first noticed the "spirit voices" could either be very fast and high in frequency, or very slow and low in frequency. It was his theory that his phonograph could be used to advantage, in that, it could slow down or speed up the "spirit messages", so that they could be heard by a human.

"Professor Conrow, I would like for you to take down some notes on this infernal device, and draw up the circuit and whatever you need to build one for yourself back at your own laboratory. You see, I have gone and shot my mouth off about this thing to the boys over at *Scientific American*, and damned if they didn't write me up in the latest edition. I have been getting cards, letters and telegrams from all over regarding the things I said, and I want no further part of it!" said Edison rather indignantly. "And to be completely honest, Conrow, I am spooked by this little contraption. If it is indeed possible to communicate with spirits, what would become of us as a race of people?"

I had no immediate answer, but I mumbled something and pulled my little notebook from my coat pocket. Edison patiently showed me all of the various details and particularly the intricacies of his type of Coherer, which was of an electrochemical nature and had to be "freshened" from time to time with an electrolyte solution, not terribly unlike his famous "battery oil" used in the Edison batteries.

Edison concluded our little meeting by handing me his written notes & drawings, and saying, "You know, Conrow, if this thing ever sticks to me, the public will think that I am as batty as Tesla himself. Did you see that little piece they did on him in the press the other day, where he claims to be receiving messages from Mars? Well THAT is what I am talking about. Now take this little thing and see if you can make something of it, and, if you crack up in the process, don't blame me!" With that, the great inventor again slapped me on the shoulder, lit a cigar and shuffled off down the hall to see about another matter entirely.

I took one last look at Edison's Spirit Talker and made a quick glance around the small room to see if there was anything else that might be helpful. On the back side of the main table were several sheets of note paper with Edison's various notes scrawled across them. I moved to that side of the table and thumbed through the notes nervously, feeling like I might be taking Edison's generosity a little too far. Well, on the next to the last page were several sentences that appeared to be transcriptions of "messages" that Edison had received. I made a quick note of these

entries, and I will not divulge the messages at this time, because they were of a personal nature to Edison himself. However, the sentence that most shook me was circled twice. It said, "Great Panic of Year 1929", and below that, "Might be Put Out of Business." Now, dear reader, this was several years prior to the event that we know as Black Friday, but I made a mental note to be very cautious of said year and will discuss this point more fully at a later time.

At this point, a young man peered in the door and asked what I was doing in this room. I said that Mr. Edison had just left and that I was just leaving myself. Not that he didn't trust me, but I noticed that the young man waited until I was well out of the room, before he stopped following me with his eyes.

Back at my own shop, in the Boston Mountains several days later, I found myself getting excited while telling a dear friend, Mr. Fincher, about the Edison machine and how such a machine could work. "Finch", as he liked to be called, was an excellent blacksmith whose mind was as keen as any man's I had met, but of an extremely practical sort. If anyone could bring me back down to earth, it would be Finch! However, rather than scolding me for my enthusiasm for the project, Finch said something that I shall never forget. "Professor Conrow, now I am a meat and potatoes kind of man, and you know that," said the large man with a determined look on his face. "If old Tom Edison said that this here machine could make spirits talk, then you had better well believe him. He brought us the light bulb, talking machines and moving pictures, so why is this much further fetched?"

At first, I thought of several reasons, but held my tongue and listened instead. "A.D." as he usually called me, "Just build the thing and see what you come up with." After another strong cup of coffee, Finch gathered his large frame and loaded the several castings he had come over for and bid me a farewell, and a, "good luck" with my latest project. By the time the dust had settled from his old buck-board wagon, I was already at work on the strange device.

Because Edison's Spirit Talker was of a "wireless" nature, I decided to start assembling the apparatus in my wireless shop. This small room is about 10 feet by 10 feet and is situated near my battery room and darkroom. At that time I had several wireless radios setup with multiple aerials configured to gather signals from different directions. I started by turning a round instrument base that I could fit with a glass dome to protect the device from

dust and moisture. On top of this base, I mounted a vacuum tube to drive an external electromagnet speaker, often used in conjunction with radio receivers. I decided to make Edison's Coherer a removable device, so that I could make improvements upon its function, whereby I could simply plug a different Coherer into the circuit to evaluate its performance.

To make a very long story short enough to fit into this article, suffice it to say, the device worked! If anything, Edison had not even hinted at how well his device worked, and this point frightened me more than a little. I will detail more about my version of the Edison Spirit Talker in a separate article, devoted to its finer points and the scary results that I obtained.

Here is what I want to say in this article: It was as a direct result of messages received from my Edison Spirit Talker that I was able to further refine and develop the concept for the Edison-Conrow Spirit Predictor Apparatus. Please see my past article titled, "Tesla-Edison Prediction Machine", for more details regarding my earlier work with Tesla at Niagara Falls using the massive Westinghouse generators to create some of the first Quantum Effects.

All of this, however, is to also warn others of the high price I have paid for experimenting with Edison's original Spirit Talker Machine. Years have gone by since my nervous breakdown, and subsequent rehabilitation. Wild messages and voices from beyond slowly drove me crazy, just as Edison himself predicted! So, it is with much caution that I suggest anyone interested in experimenting with anything of the psychic or paranormal nature, BE CAREFUL!

Nowadays, I only ask the questions that I REALLY WANT ANSWERS TO, and leave other, more touchy issues to fate itself. In the final analysis, I think that Edison was right!



