

Edison Talking Doll cylinder (1888)

Added to the National Registry: 2011

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Thomas A. Edison



The 1888 metal ring and tag



The second doll

For a small warped ring, almost forgotten, it certainly possesses a tremendous amount of recorded sound history.

The Edison Talking Doll--actually the small tin cylinder on which a rudimentary version of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" was recorded and which was once intended to be encased inside of a doll's metal and ceramic body—represents:

- 1) The earliest commercial (i.e. intended for sale on a large scale) recording to have survived to present day;
- 2) Probably the first time anyone was ever paid to make a recording;
- 3) The earliest known recording of a woman's voice; and
- 4) The oldest, extant children's recording.

Thomas Edison was, of course, the inventor of not only the electric light bulb and the motion picture camera, but also the phonograph. Edison's first workable phonograph was developed in Edison's lab in West Orange, New Jersey, in early December, 1877. Its recording media was a thin sheet of tinfoil wrapped around a metal cylinder.

Around November, 1888, Edison and his team made their first attempt to craft and market a talking doll for children. The existing "ring," mentioned above and added to the National Recording Registry, is part of that endeavor. In fact, that's the only part of the doll that still exists today—*no drawings or photos of the complete 1888 doll have ever been found.*

Once the initial 1888 doll project was judged unsuccessful by Edison's company, it was abandoned and the tin ring was (almost literally) buried away, or, at least, tucked away at the back of the desk once used by Edison personal secretary William H. Meadowcraft.

And there it lay...for next 79 years. It would not be until 1967 that archivists at Edison's preserved workshop in New Jersey discovered the two and a half-inch in diameter and one-eighth in thickness metal loop. It was badly warped and cryptically labeled.

Once excavated, identified and cataloged (tagged: EDIS 1279), archivists turned to the task of actually trying to play the vintage recording.

It was no easy undertaking.

Since the ring was so warped, it could not be played safely on any then-existing apparatus. In fact, it would not be until 44 years later that technology arrived to a place where the hoop could be digitally scanned and then reconfigured in digital space. With the aid of computer technology, the original, scratchy sung strains of “*Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are...*” could be heard again for the very first time in over 100 years.

Not surprisingly, the audio quality of this very early, 11-second recording is quite primitive by today’s listening standards. This is not to be unexpected of course due not only to the ring’s age but also the technology (or lack thereof) that rendered it in the first place.

Still, despite the less-than-optimal aural quality, the tin ring’s historical significance remains fully intact.

Interestingly, about two years *after* this first metal recording was made, specifically with the intent of placing it within a doll and marketing it, Edison revisited the talking doll idea.

By this time—June 1889--Edison and his team had “perfected” the playing system. The revised machine replaced the tin used earlier with wax cylinders. Soon after, with the aid of his associate Charles Batchelor, Edison’s firm created a revised talking doll.

Assembled in West Orange, New Jersey, from doll parts imported from a German doll manufacturer, the final doll stood (or stands) 22 inches tall. She had blond hair and was sold in several different versions. In one version, she is dressed in a simple sheath; it sold for \$10. A second version, in a more “dressy” blue dress and coat, sold for between \$20 and \$25. But even the simpler version was still a costly sum; \$10 in the 1880’s is about \$250.00 in modern currency.

Additionally, the Edison Talking Doll (version 2.0) came with one of 12 different recordings, recorded on wax, positioned inside it. Each recording was a short, well-known children’s song or nursery rhyme; they included “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” (again), “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” and “Little Jack Horner,” among others. Once again, who recorded these poems and how much, if anything, they were paid for their work is lost to history.

The latter doll was able to “speak” via a mechanism embedded inside its chest cavity. A crank protruding from the doll’s back, when turned at a steady pace, would make the recording play. The sound emitted from a series of holes drilled into the doll’s metal chest piece.

Due to the doll’s fragility, not many of the dolls were sold after they were first offered for sale to the public in New York on April 7, 1890. In fact, of the 2,500 shipped to stores, it is estimated that no more than 500 were ever purchased. Additionally, of those that were sold, many were returned as the sound mechanism inside was too fragile for a child’s normal play and the doll frequently malfunctioned.

By May of 1890, Edison and his cohorts chalked up the project as a failure and, to regain some of their investment, stripped many of the remaining dolls in their warehouse of their internal mechanisms and sold them, cheaply, as just standard, non-talking dolls.

Still, for those handful of little ones—and their parents—who received a rare and working Edison Talking Doll it was, no doubt, quite miraculous to hear a human voice speaking to them from this pretty plaything.

So, regardless, if the final Edison Talking Doll was a business failure, and its first, now largely unknown first incarnation was an unfinished, in complete idea, nevertheless, its surviving inner workings--and the technology it employed--foretold a monumental start to a spectacular new era.

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