

The 1888 London cylinder recordings of Col. George Gouraud (1888)

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Essay by Howard Hope (guest post)*



George Gouraud

George Edward Gouraud was born at Niagara, NY, in 1842 to French parents who had immigrated in 1836. His father, François, came to promote the newly-invented Daguerreotype process and in 1840 sold the first camera in America to Samuel Bemis. Tragedy struck the family when both father and mother died within a month of each other in Brooklyn, New York, leaving George and his sister Clemence orphaned at the ages of five and nine, respectively. George was fostered by a Pennsylvania Quaker family, the Taylors, who gave him the education of a gentleman. When the American Civil War broke out he immediately enlisted in the 3rd New York Volunteer Cavalry, in which he served throughout the war, winning a Congressional Medal of Honor for bravery at the Battle of Honey Hill, South Carolina, in November 1864. In addition to his medal, he received a brevetted rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He was just 22 at the time. After the war, he quietly dropped the "Lieutenant" and styled himself Colonel. From then on he was universally recognised as "Colonel Gouraud." There was a family trait to eccentricity which affected all generations of the Gouraud family. In George's case it emerged around 1890 and affected the rest of his life, including his relationship to the phonograph.

At the war's end, Gouraud is strongly believed to have spent time at the US Treasury mentored by Under Secretary of State George Harrington. In 1873, the recently-married Gouraud was sent to the London Offices of the Western Union Company to promote their interests in the telephone and telegraph, the patents for which they had bought from Thomas Edison. In April 1873, the inventor was despatched to London from New Jersey to demonstrate his latest apparatus to the British Post Office. It was Gouraud who met the 26 year-old Edison off the boat and organised his itinerary. This was their first meeting, and stories about a previous chance encounter during the Civil war are probably untrue.

At this point, Gouraud and Edison were both servants of Western Union, but in time the former became Edison's patent agent and financial arranger in Europe. He also held other posts, most notably in the London branch of the Mercantile Trust Bank of New York. He was also the European agent for George Pullman's Pullman Palace Car Company.

Gouraud was fascinated by the phonograph from its inception, but became increasingly concerned

when, in 1886, Edison's rivals, the Volta Laboratories under Alexander Graham Bell, began experimenting on improvements to Edison's basic invention of 1878. He constantly urged Edison to make time between work on the light bulb and telephone to head Bell off. Things came to a head in 1888 when both approaches to a better design of phonograph appeared in the same few months. Only Gouraud's constant prodding had succeeded in getting Edison to create a rival machine in time. The Colonel was present at the unveiling of the Perfected Phonograph and within days had arranged to have it shipped to his home in Norwood, South London, named "Little Menlo" in honor of Edison's laboratory of that name in New Jersey. He sailed for England first, followed by Edison employee Hugh DeCoursey Hamilton who arrived with the phonograph. The machine arrived on June 26th, together with a collection of "phonograms," as cylinder records were then named, including several featuring the voice of Edison himself that Gouraud had requested for exhibition. He "scripted" them himself, mailing Edison with instructions for their content.

At this point it is important to note that at this time Gouraud was an administrator, not a technician, and so Hamilton was the initial operator of the machine, although Gouraud soon learned to master it. The so-called "perfected" phonograph weighed over 70 pounds (30 kilos) and was driven by an electric motor requiring large acid-filled glass batteries to power it. Being a brand new experimental machine it was decidedly temperamental in operation and the formulation of "soap" wax from which the first "blank" cylinders were moulded was not ideal and required further chemistry to improve.

Just three days after the machine's arrival, the two men took the phonograph to the Handel Festival at the Crystal Palace close to Gouraud's home and recorded a 4000-voice choir accompanied by a 500-piece orchestra in a performance of "Israel in Egypt." The three surviving eerie recordings were thought lost until the 1980's when they miraculously re-surfaced in the archives of the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation). It was an incredibly bold idea to attempt such a recording on an invention scarcely a month old.

Hamilton stayed with the Gourauds in Norwood for some time, operating the machine while Gouraud entertained distinguished guests whom he plied with whisky before inviting them to record their voices--a daunting new prospect. On one 1888 cylinder, "Toasts at Little Menlo," Gouraud thanks Hamilton for his work on the evening. It was therefore technically Hamilton who recorded Sir Arthur Sullivan (amongst others) under Gouraud's roof.

Gouraud was certainly a visionary in promoting the phonograph to the public, but is often wrongly attributed with making all of the records closely associated with him. When in 1889 he opened dedicated phonograph offices at Northumberland (later "Edison") House, Trafalgar Square, London, he assembled a team of seven skilled "phonographers" or "recordists" to demonstrate machines throughout Britain. Notable amongst these were Jonathon Lewis Young, Gouraud's business partner, who recorded Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone in November 1888; C.R. Johnstone, who recorded Crimea nurse Florence Nightingale in July 1890 (announced by recording manager Mary Helen Ferguson), and Charles Steytler who recorded Tennyson at his home on the Isle of Wight in the same month. Many of the men later went on to become leading figures in the phonograph industry. Peter Landfried, the Balaklava bugler, was recorded at Edison House, supposedly by Gouraud, although the cylinder is again "announced" (introduced) by Mary Ferguson. After the 1889 Paris Exposition it was Edison's German employee, Theodore Wangemann, who travelled on to Germany and Austria recording Bismarck, Brahms and Von Moltke in Germany, amongst dozens of other speakers and performers, between 1889 and 1890. These recordings are often wrongly attributed to Gouraud himself.

Gouraud did make several notable recordings of his own, particularly those of the renowned Shakespearian actor Henry Irving at Little Menlo in 1888, the poet Robert Browning in 1889, only

eight months before the poet's death, and Cardinal Manning, Archbishop of Westminster in 1891. (Manning was close to death and knew that he was leaving his voice to posterity). P.T. Barnum recorded his voice at Edison House, London, in 1890, where it is very likely that Gouraud, as a fellow American, would have participated.

Between 1888 and 1899 Gouraud was briefly the toast of London, and used his ownership of the phonograph to penetrate society to its highest levels. He was a naturally hearty and likeable man and it no doubt helped him that--as an American--there was no class barrier to prevent his free movement through the higher echelons of the wealthy and the aristocracy. His team of "recordists" may have made the cylinders, but it was Gouraud himself who brought Gladstone and others to the machine. (Gladstone was a political hero on both sides of the Atlantic and it had been Edison's dearest ambition from the start to have cylinders of the old--age: 79--man sent to New Jersey).

In the phonograph, Gouraud both had his finest hour and met his nemesis. In late 1888 he had paid Edison £30,000 (roughly equivalent to \$7 million in 2020 terms) of his own money for the rights to commercialise the machine, but he was seduced by the fame that he accrued by being its sole owner and set about creating what he termed his "Library of Immortal Voices," making little or no effort to hire out phonographs for businesses as dictation machines as had been the intention. Meanwhile his London staff toured the few machines in Britain (just seven by mid-1889) all over the country for paying audiences to hear "The Wonder of the Age." In truth, the phonograph was strictly not well enough developed for commercial distribution until mid-1889, but when Edison then challenged Gouraud to start importing machines, the Colonel balked and refused, citing fears that it was still not yet ready, despite reported healthy trade in the United States. The situation progressively worsened, and by late 1891, three years after Gouraud had bought the rights, no commercial progress had been made anywhere in his massive territory--basically the whole world beyond the United States. Those who wished to had now all paid to hear a phonograph and its curiosity value was gone to the point where the press even held it in contempt. Even Jonathon Lewis Young, Gouraud's business partner and one fifth owner of the rights, wrote to Edison to bemoan the situation. Gouraud--master financier to Thomas Edison--appears not to have made any attempt to raise capital to exploit the distribution of the machine, which should have been very lucrative. Edison had not foreseen this curious situation, but his hands were commercially tied by the contract he had made with Gouraud, who was eventually ousted in a coup in 1892. He appears not to have been embittered.

Gouraud parted with his phonograph shares in 1892 and was largely separated from the Edison companies by 1896. He continued to be fascinated by invention and set up his own humble workshops in Brighton, England, from 1899 to 1903, after which he withdrew from business. He died in Switzerland in 1912 at aged 70.

Howard Hope lives in Surrey, England. His lifelong interest in the history of recorded sound and the social history surrounding it began when he was a student in the 1970's. He made his living trading in various early technologies, but the phonograph has always been his favourite. He is a past chairman of the British City of London Phonograph and Gramophone Society--the oldest of its kind in the world with Edison himself as its first patron in 1919.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.