

“The Edison Wax Records are a Thing of the Past”

J.W. Van Meter’s Lateral-Cut Cylinder

by Allen Koenigsberg

The nameless black celluloid cylinder with a cardboard core was casually tossed in a box over forty years ago when it would not play on an Edison phonograph, and a Massachusetts collector eventually passed it on to another, and finally to the author of this article.

Along the way, it was discovered that it contained the voice of an inventor, eagerly planning to revolutionize his industry, perhaps around 1904. But the recording could only be heard with a reproducer that would respond to lateral vibrations! Why was there no mention of this remarkable artifact, or speaker, or recording method, anywhere?

Luckily, the ribald storyteller briefly identified himself at the end: ‘J. W. Van Meter.’ Armed with this clue, I was able to find a short 1938 obituary in *The New York Times*, stating that such a man had died on January 18th (in California) from a sudden heart attack, and he had been a “noted chemist and inventor.” The emphasis seemed to be on his oil flotation techniques, silver mines, and chlorine gas, but at the very end, an important observation: “The Van Meter inventions ranged from a process which made possible the hard-molded phonograph record to an insulation material used by the Russians in the laying of a Baltic Sea cable.”

The Los Angeles Times (Jan. 23, 1938) provided more tantalizing details, claiming that Van Meter was an “intimate of Edison, Burbank, Marconi, Steinmetz, Tesla, and other notables.” For a man who was born in West Virginia in 1870, he had

certainly come a long way. Some old census reports even suggest that he was related (by marriage) to Leon Douglass, of the Victor Talking Machine Co., whose own wife was descended from Pres. John Adams. Both Victoria Adams Bacigalupi (Douglass’ wife), and Esther Adams (Van Meter’s), were born in Peru, and related to Daniel Elias Adams, an American. When Van Meter died in Los Angeles, he left behind not only his wife who was a talented photographer, but six children: Lord, William, James, Daniel, Baron, and Esther Victoria.

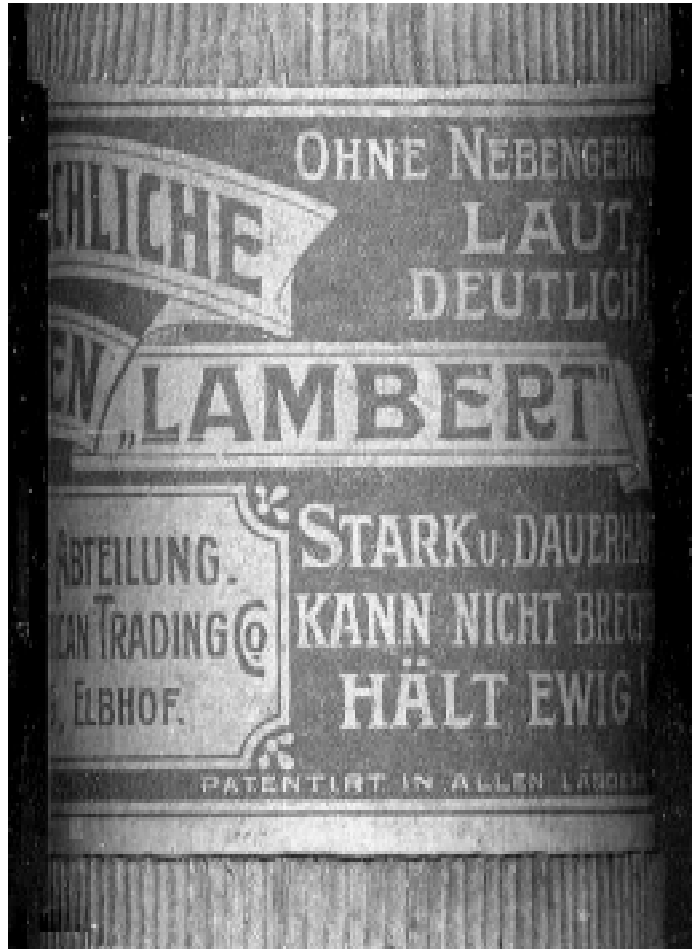
My search through the files of the Patent Office revealed that James Wright Van Meter had ob-

tained 27 US patents between 1904 and 1939, even allowing for one that was granted posthumously. He was living in San Francisco when he first teamed up with a petroleum entrepreneur named



Martin Boss, and they developed processes of using oil to concentrate various minerals. But then Van Meter abruptly disappeared, to resurface in Bad Sulza, Germany, where he founded a factory to make chlorine gas. This part of his work, mainly used in rodenticides and in citrus agriculture, garnered him some unwanted fame, as it was sometimes claimed that he had developed the use of chlorine gas in World War One – alas, that dubious honor belonged to Fritz Haber.

Continued browsing in old issues of the *Talking Machine World* turned up the intriguing ad shown here, when he was recently described as selling his business to E. Sauerlandt, an expert in recording materials in Flurstedt, Germany. After the sale, it was said that Van Meter was departing to Russia to supply special cable wax for their new government (undersea) cables. More to the point, the Feb 1, 1908 account went on: “The phonograph and gramophone industry owe a great deal to Mr. Van Meter for it was while he was consulting engineer of Messrs. Schliemann & Co. of Hamburg, that he succeeded in separating asphaltum from monton pitch, whereby the product could



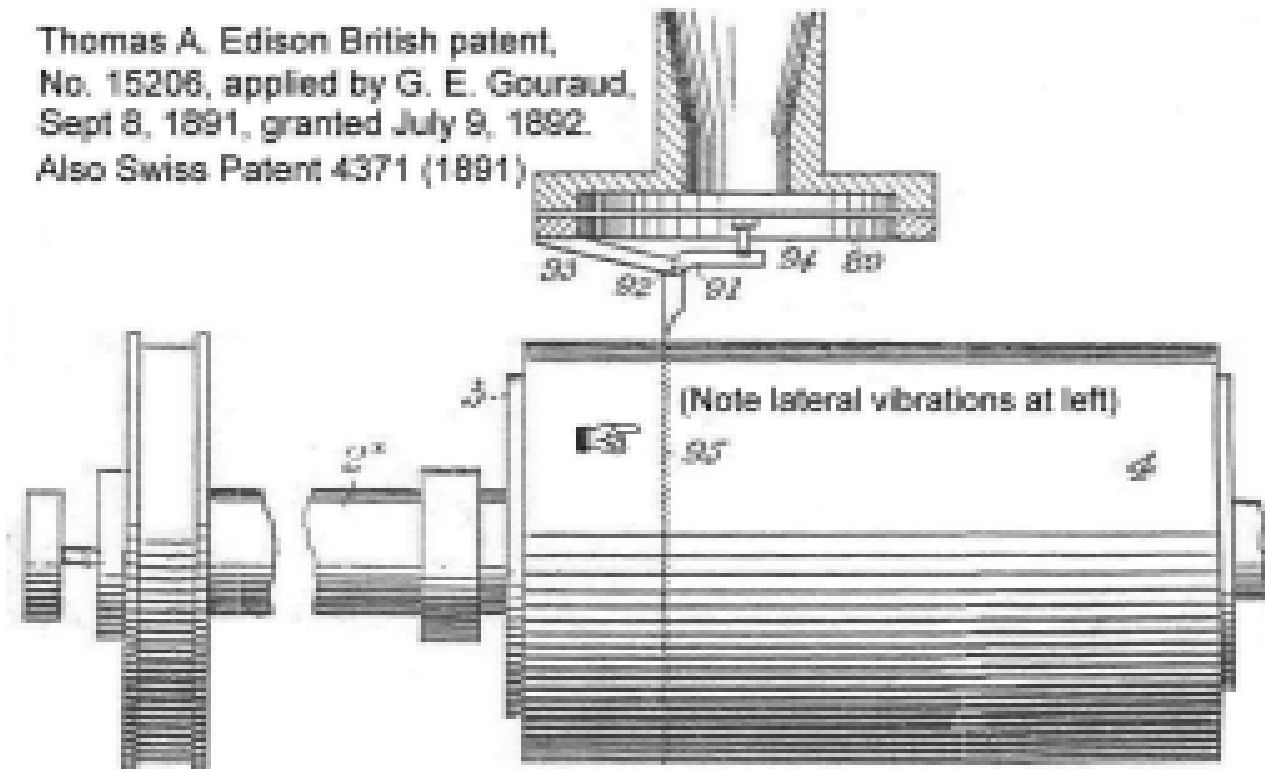
Who invented this unbreakable ‘Lambert’ cylinder and what kind of grooves did it have?

FLURSTEDT bei Apolda i. Th. Germany	E. SAUERLANDT	CHEMISCHE FABRIK
<p>The largest manufacturing plant in the world devoted exclusively to the manufacture of Master Waxes for</p> <p><i>Gramophone and Phonograph Recording</i></p> <p>Sole Manufacturer of</p> <p>Sauerlandt's Material for Hard Moulded Records</p>		
Attention paid to the Manufacture of any Special Material	ALL MATERIALS PROTECTED BY PATENTS	

Feb. 1, 1908: J. W. Van Meter sells out his Sulza plant to E. Sauerlandt (TMW).

Fig. 20

Thomas A. Edison British patent,
No. 15206, applied by G. E. Gouraud,
Sept 8, 1891, granted July 9, 1892.
Also Swiss Patent 4371 (1891)



be used in connection with stearine for the manufacture of the hard molded phonograph record, which has brought the present cylinder up to the standard of perfection. He has also perfected a paraffin product for gramophone recording which has been adopted by the principal Gramophone companies of Europe.”

What was going on here? What had Van Meter really invented or developed in sound recording? He didn't seem to stay long in one place, moving from the U.S. to England and Germany, then to Russia, Argentina, Mexico, Peru, and Bolivia. But another journalistic trace was found by Stephan Puille in the *Phonographische Zeitschrift* for Dec 20, 1905: The unnamed writer mentioned the possibility of a “Walze mit Berlinerschrift, aus Celluloidmasse,” i.e. an unbreakable cylinder with zig-zag grooves! This was exactly what we had before us, but Van Meter was not yet cited. Nonetheless, around the same time, as a new enterprise

called *The American Trading Co.* was being formed in Hamburg, it was the first such cylinder to be advertised “ohne Nebengeräusch” (“without background noise” – see accompanying illustration). Although it was also touted as “unzerbrechliche” (unbreakable), it seems to have been offered as a “Lambert” cylinder, but not the first hollow ones used by Edison-Bell or British Lambert. These new ones would have a distinctive (slit) cardboard core, slightly purple in color, but always vertically recorded as usual. The cylinder box shown here (original in red and black) was found empty, and we cannot say if the lateral versions were placed on the market – the boxes and their contents are exceedingly rare.

The idea for lateral recording was very old (Thomas Young and Leon Scott), appearing even in Edison's first US tinfoil patent (200,521), and his German Pat. 14308 of Jan. 1878. But there it languished for many years, even tried and rejected by

Bell and Tainter while working in the Volta Labs (1880s). A hitherto unknown resurgence occurred (at least theoretically) in 1892 when George Gouraud was granted a British patent for Edison (15206, applied Sept. 8, 1891), with many recording improvements. That illustration, showing lateral recording on a wax cylinder, is pictured here for the first time in over 100 years, and was also filed at the same time by 'Edison-United' in Switzerland (Pat. No. 4371).

Van Meter's concern was for a kind of celluloid that could be made "sufficient[ly] hard to withstand the needle", implying that he was dissatisfied with other types then on the market (at least in Europe, e.g. *Duval*). But he seems to have liked the basic lateral recording technique, at least when employed on a cylinder – he thought it caused "a grating and hard sound" when used on gramophone discs. Still, he was gracious enough in his salute to "Dr. Berliner" for the "perfection of the phonograph."

It is still a mystery how this unusual lateral recording, summarizing the inventor's work on his own unique product, ended up in the northeastern United States. For those who would like to hear the last 60 words of his long ago (and failed) plan to take over the traditional cylinder techniques, they have been made available on www.phonobooks.com - just scroll down to the lower right and click on the yellow phonograph admission ticket:

"Hi Le, Hi Le, Hi Le, Hi Lo, My oats get zimmer, Hi Le."

And for those in the Los Angeles area, I believe that Van Meter is buried in Inglewood Park Cemetery, with the world mostly oblivious to his unusual role in recording history. Here's to you, J. W. – forgotten no longer!

Allen Koenigsberg continues his research on topics phonographic and welcomes comments by email at: allenamet@aol.com.



**TRANSCRIPT OF 2-MINUTE,
LATERALLY-CUT, BLACK CEL-
LULOID CYLINDER RECORD,
ca. 1904(?)**

*"Well, well, well, well, well. Good morn-
ing —*

Today is the day of assigning (deciding?)

*Whose name is on every tongue,
All of the ladies (natives?) are asking,*

How is the Lehigh hung?

Gentlemen:

I think that a suitable material can be had that can safely be used for recording and will be adopted in the future on all cylinder machines. And in my estimation, celluloid comes very near to it at present. If a suitable material can be made sufficient hard to withstand the needle, then the Edison wax cylinders are a thing of the past. As in [cylinder] reproducing, the needle has a straight path to travel whereas with the gramophone, the circular... circumference causes a grating and hard sound. However, I think it advisable for you to experiment on this motion in recording as you will find it has many merits; and too much praise cannot be given Dr. Berliner, the inventor, for what in my submission is the perfection of the phonograph.

J. W. Van Meter [1870-1938]

Hi Le, Hi Le, Hi Le, Hi Lo,

My oats get zimmer, Hi Le."