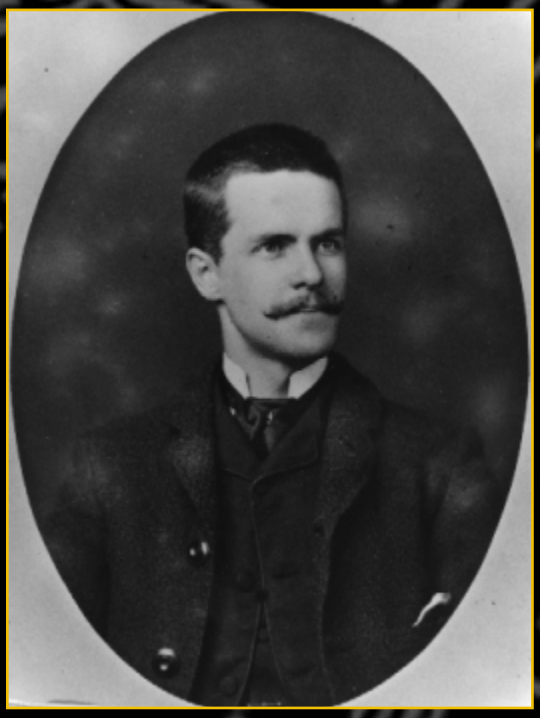
ELECTRICAL DIABLERIE

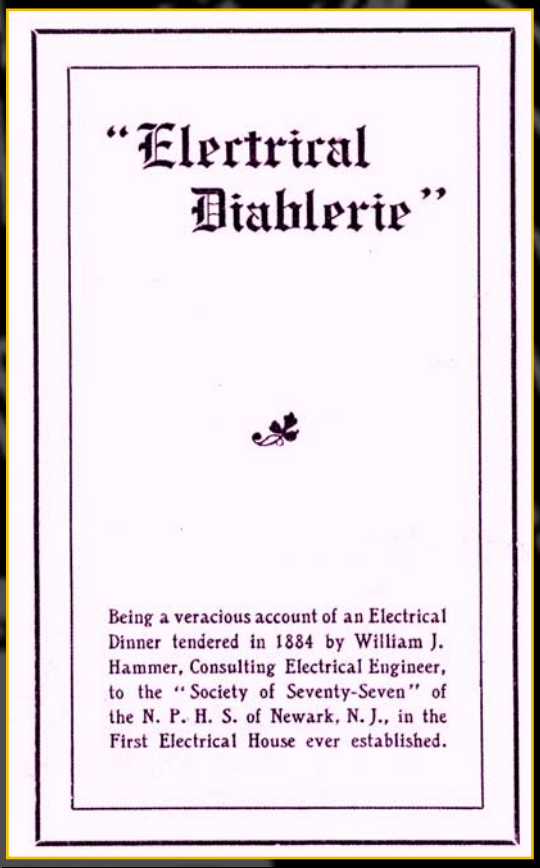
The Lost 'Electrical Dinners' of W. J. Hammer

by Allen Koenigsberg

Back when everything modern and marvelous was electrical, and the sight of an electric light bulb was still something to behold with wonder, Newark's very own "Wizard" dazzled visitors with his spectacular "Electric Dinners."



William J. Hammer at the 1881 Paris Exposition. *National Museum of American History*



"Electrical Diablerie"

Being a veracious account of an Electrical Dinner tendered in 1884 by William J. Hammer, Consulting Electrical Engineer, to the "Society of Seventy-Seven" of the N. P. H. S. of Newark, N. J., in the First Electrical House ever established.

"Electrical Diablerie" booklet. *Koenigsberg*

When William Joseph Hammer of New Jersey (but born in Pennsylvania), departed from Newark High School around 1874—at a time of economic turmoil and two years short of his degree—he went to work for his father, even selling chocolate for a while, and then for a nearby nickel-plating firm run by Edward Weston. But by December of 1879, he obtained employment at a new Menlo Park enterprise, convincing its owner, Thomas Edison, that he was worth a regular weekly wage. He was also in time there for a New Year's Eve celebration of the coming incandescent light and he perhaps absorbed some of the public relations acumen that the "Wizard" pioneered. When Edison's laboratory assistant Francis Jehl later recalled those heady days in his own *Reminiscences of Menlo Park,* he would picture the youthful Hammer (1858–1934) on the front porch of Sarah Jordan's Boarding House, with the rest of Edison's "Insomnia Crew."

Another year passed and Hammer was then dispatched to Europe to represent Edison's electrical interests at various Expositions in Paris, London, and Berlin, where he soon developed automated signs with flashing letters (usually spelling out E-D-I-S-O-N), as well as a dependable expertise in running central power stations.

After an arduous and exciting three years abroad, William would return to the U.S. on August 30, 1884, just in time to get involved with the first Electrical Convention held on U.S. soil from September 2nd to October 11th. Called the International Electrical Exhibition and sponsored by the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, he supervised all eight of Edison's industrial displays. Here, hundreds of thousands of Americans would be introduced to the new wonders of electricity. Another couple of months, however, and Hammer would host a more personal event—at his father's family home at 23 Rowland Street in Newark—which would result in some future scholarly controversy. He would also publicize the midnight festivities of "Dec. 31, 1884" in a small booklet (*shown at left*) entitled *Electrical Diablerie* but because of a lapse of memory, or a typo, this would confuse journalists (and investigators) for years. This remarkable self-published effort (in several editions as late as 1916) would give one of the sources of information on that evening as *The New York World* of January 3, 1885. But upon being checked, the newspaper for that date had nothing at all about it.

And what were some of the memorable events occurring at that house (built in 1872 and still standing), which also provided our intriguing title? When the two dozen visitors arrived in darkness, they were confronted with an array of electrical surprises, and immediately had their shoes shined by automatic brushes, traditional gas fixtures were suddenly

Hammer's home at 23 Rowland Street in Newark still stands. *Koenigsberg*

Mrs. Cornelius (Alice) Vanderbilt's electric light studded dress may have inspired Hammer's own creation for that worn by his sister. *Koenigsberg*

ignited by electricity, and phosphorescent views of the heavens appeared on the interior ceilings (courtesy of calcium sulphide, but not patented by Hammer until 1907). Various electrical devices each took their turn, such as burglar alarms, bells, alarm clocks, fans, cigar lighters, seven musical instruments, and yes, even multiple phonographs! The "electrical dinner table" was set for a grand repast, with a figure of Jupiter at the head, "where by means of a small phonograph inside of his anatomy he shouted: 'Welcome, *Society of Seventy-Seven* and their friends to Jove's festive board.' " The *Society* reference was to his High School Class of 1877, but with whom Hammer himself did *not* graduate. The unusual menu included Menlo Park Fruit, Incandescent Lemonade, and Telegraph Cake. And amazingly ahead of its time, "a tiny Christmas tree lighted with small incandescent lamps" appeared with monogrammed ribbons (some would attribute this Yuletide innovation to Edison associate Edward H. Johnson's estate in Greenwich, Conn. known as Alta Crest or his New York City home in 1882). As midnight struck, various explosive devices flared up, and all the silverware was electrified. A large human silhouette paraded around the darkened room, its eerie bones glowing with luminous paint, thus embodying that old proverb, "A Skeleton at the Feast." Jupiter's green eyes twinkled like stars as he raised "a glass of Jersey Lightning" to his lips and shouted over and over (phonographically), "Happy New Year! Happy New Year!" A bronze figure of the "Statue of Liberty" (not yet completed at Bedloe's Island) held in its torch an Edison lamp no bigger than a bean (called 'pea lamps' in the Harrison, NJ Lamp catalogs). In the adjoining parlor, Hammer's "little sister May" (actually his younger half-sister Mary Lawton, 1874–1972) appeared in white, as the 'Goddess of Electricity,'" with lights in her hair *and* on her wand. Outside, from the veranda, platinum iridium elements ignited a variety of fireworks, and the only failure was a small hot air balloon which took off as planned but then caught fire. "After an exhibition of electrical apparatus (all battery-driven) and experiments with a large phonograph, the guests departed with a bewildered feeling that somehow they had been living half a century ahead of the new year."

Well, there was enough here to keep a gang of researchers busy for a long time. First, the cited *New York World* article on the festivities actually appeared on Jan. 3, 1886 (*not* 1885). But next, when Hammer (in his short unpublished autobiography) claimed that they were also published in the *Newark Advertiser* on January 3, 1886—a Sunday—it was found not to have a Sunday edition! Yet there were other newspapers and magazines (*The Electrician,* January 24,

The Franklin Institute's International Electrical Exhibition of 1884 was the first such event on U.S. soil. *Koenigsberg*

1885) which did report the same events (in real time) as occurring at the close of 1884—but most stuck with the end of 1885. This curious article had a very long life indeed and would be repeated in multiple papers as late as 1889, sometimes being cited as "two years ago," sometimes as a "few years past," etc. Could there have been *two* different New Year's parties with classmates and former teachers "coming from all over the country"? All in all, I think there was just the *one* gathering (1884), which was then endlessly re-cycled.

What of the "robot" Jupiter and his sturdy internal phonograph? Was Hammer familiar with recent (1876) émigré Frank Lambert's more permanent lead-sleeve model intended for use in talking clocks? Jupiter has never been found, although Hammer was something of a packrat and had at one time the world's largest collection of antique light bulbs and bases (donated by IBM to the Smithsonian). So where did Hammer get the idea? When he was at Menlo Park, did he hear of Col. Robert Ingersoll's visit, recounted in the *New York Daily Graphic,* July 13, 1878, that there was such an automaton on the Edison grounds, "an ancient Negress" who was seen to move her limbs and articulate her rhythmic words and songs via a concealed telephone and phonograph?

Did he recall Edison's interview in the *New York Sun* (February 27, 1878) and the brief *Biography* by Frederick Garbit (also 1878) which stated that the *Statue of Liberty* would soon have a giant announcing phonograph placed inside her head ("Welcome to our shores")? Was he familiar with Edison's own prediction for the Paris Fair of 1878 (in the *New York World,* March 22, 1878), "I will have a piece of tin-foil electrotyped so that the impressions upon it will not wear out by constant use"?

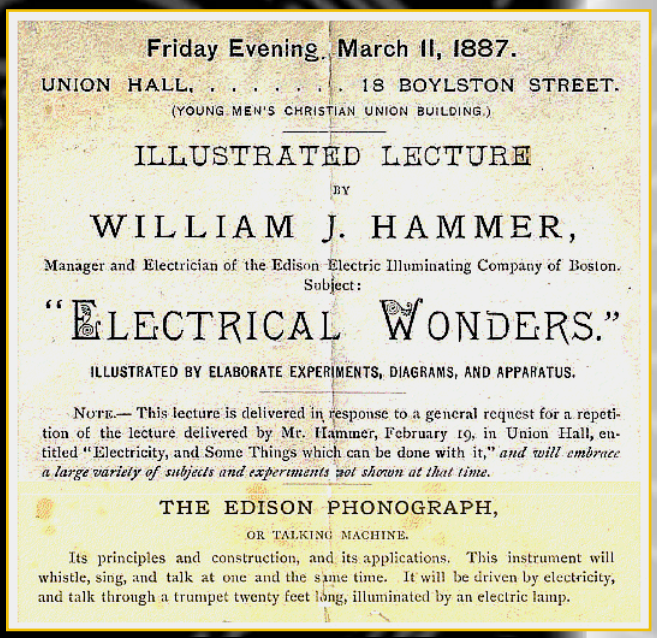
Even a long-ago letter sent by a well-connected local photographer to Edison on September 9, 1884 (during the same Exhibition) is relevant here: "My Dear Mr. Edison, Hearing that darkie at the gate every night repeat his set speech to the people entering, about the direction to take, where to leave their watches, etc., makes me think of your phonograph. I was going to suggest to Mr. Hammer last night, if I had seen him, to have the same fellow impress his speech in a phonograph and then grind it out for the remainder of the exhibition. It would make a great deal of fun, and the instrument afterwards would make a valuable relic for the Franklin Institute. Very truly yrs, W. Curtis Taylor [1825–1905]." That watchman too is lost, or maybe never made.

Surely everyone at the time must have been familiar with

the recent masquerade ball held at 660 Fifth Ave., New York City on March 26, 1883, when Mrs. Cornelius (Alice) Vanderbilt came dressed in satin at her sister-in-law's mansion, but with lots of incandescent illumination (driven by a concealed zinc-carbon battery) and holding her own "torch" (see picture on third page) as the ultimate union of Electricity *and* Liberty. The glamorous gown, designed by C. F. Worth, exists today, well-preserved, at the Museum of the City of New York. Indeed, such "electrical jewelry" was on display at the same Exhibition that Hammer attended in the fall of 1884, by the Parisian firm of L. Aboillard, which had apparently infringed French patent 67,294 of the "French Edison," Gustave Trouvé (*La Nature,* September 13, 1879); such an electrical stick-pin made of gold sold at Bonhams in 2015 for $8,000. A new business, the Electric Girl Illuminating Co., was also formed in downtown Manhattan in 1884 (at 409 Gold St.) and soon had a number of 'electrified' young women on location in the area.

Hammer moved on, involving himself with the Edison Tube Works in Brooklyn, New York and built an 8,000-light hotel installation in St. Augustine, Florida at the Ponce de Leon. He was soon the Manager of the Edison Electric Illuminating Co. in Boston and while there gave several popular lectures [February 19, and March 11, 1887] on "Electrical Wonders" (see part of his flyer at left). Ever the showman, he brought back some of the light-and-sound effects from his earlier party in Newark ("a big white skull bobbed out of a box") but still entranced the crowds at the Young Men's Christian Union Hall in the dying days of tinfoil recording: "An amusing exhibition of the possibilities of the Edison phonograph was given by the lecturer [Hammer], who talked, laughed and spouted poetry into the machine, and afterward imitated various birds and animals. These sounds were afterward reproduced by the machine with remarkable fidelity to the delight of the audience. A perfect roar of continuous laughter was evoked when, after singing into the machine—the original foil being again used—a perfect babel of sound was emitted." [*Boston Herald,* February 20th]. Though somewhat out of season, another Christmas tree was put on display, with its miniature flashing electric lights.

Edison had once again begun to develop the phonograph (now using solid wax cylinders), and after his introduction of the (electric) "Perfected" and "Improved Models," sent Mr. Hammer to Paris in March of 1889 (see bottom left, from the *Scientific American* of October 12th), where he helped to arrange the multiple displays (9,000+ square feet with 45



Friday Evening, March 11, 1887.

UNION HALL, ... 18 BOYLSTON STREET.

(YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN UNION BUILDING.)

ILLUSTRATED LECTURE

BY

WILLIAM J. HAMMER,

Manager and Electrician of the Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Boston.

Subject:

"ELECTRICAL WONDERS."

ILLUSTRATED BY ELABORATE EXPERIMENTS, DIAGRAMS, AND APPARATUS.

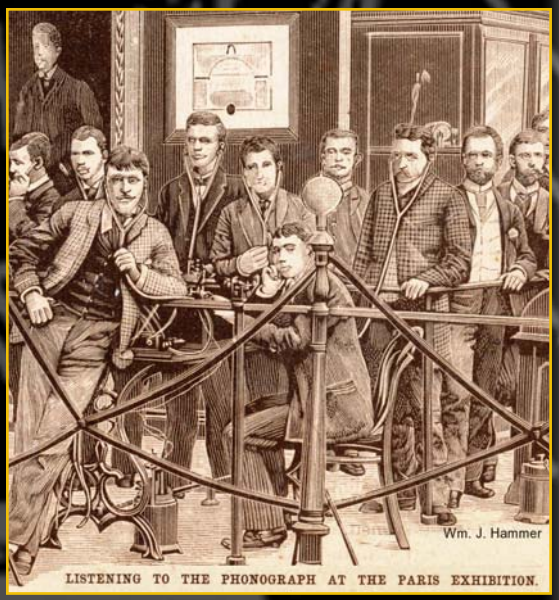
NOTE.— This lecture is delivered in response to a general request for a repetition of the lecture delivered by Mr. Hammer, February 19, in Union Hall, entitled "Electricity, and Some Things which can be done with it," *and will embrace a large variety of subjects and experiments not shown at that time.*

THE EDISON PHONOGRAPH,

OR TALKING MACHINE.

Its principles and construction, and its applications. This instrument will whistle, sing, and talk at one and the same time. It will be driven by electricity, and talk through a trumpet twenty feet long, illuminated by an electric lamp.

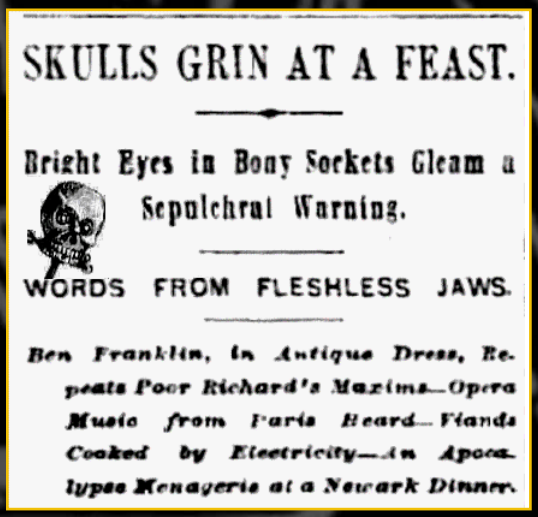
1887 advertisement for William J. Hammer's lecture on "Electrical Wonders." *Koenigsberg*



LISTENING TO THE PHONOGRAPH AT THE PARIS EXHIBITION.

Hammer depicted among those listening to the improved Edison phonograph at the 1889 Paris Exhibition . *Koenigsberg*

William J. Hammer (in gondola with hand raised) with his illuminating gas balloon in Paris. *Koenigsberg*



SKULLS GRIN AT A FEAST.

Bright Eyes in Bony Sockets Gleam a Sepulchral Warning.

WORDS FROM FLESHLESS JAWS.

Ben Franklin, in Antique Dress, Repeats Poor Richard's Maxims—Opera Music from Paris Heard—Viands Cooked by Electricity—An Apocalypse Menagerie at a Newark Dinner.

"Skulls Grin At A Feast." *Koenigsberg*

employees and 25 phonographs); he enjoyed, with Edison, a visit to Eiffel's 300-meter Tower. When the Fair ended, Hammer hired on his own a large 27,000 cubic foot balloon on November 14th, and when he couldn't get permission to generate hydrogen on site (too dangerous), settled for illuminating gas (as *Prince Leo* would do in Victor's advertising balloon of May 1905). Some sources claimed that Hammer, in addition to two experienced aeronauts, A. Lawrence Rotch and a full-bearded R. Gibbon Wells, also took a phonograph with them in the wicker gondola, but he stated afterward that he brought only a number of pre-recorded cylinders which he fitted into special boxes with individual parachutes—the long brass horn was for communication. These were then released over the side during their windy journey through the French landscape. He said that he inserted his personal card in each record, giving his local hotel address, and requested that "finders" send them—two such were re-acquired safely from as far away as 65 miles, though not located today! When their balloon eventually landed at Ercheu in the Somme, it was packed up, basket and all, and everyone went back to Paris by train.

And just when we thought it was safe to go back into the water, Hammer sponsored another "Electrical Dinner." Returning to the U.S. on December 20, 1889, he founded and named an organization to teach youngsters about science and electricity, the Franklin Experimental Club. Alas, there would be only one annual banquet, but this time, the newspapers would at least agree on the *date*—January 31, 1891—if not the *location:* some said it was held at the Edison factory in Orange, others at the parlors of the "First Presbyterian Church," and still more at "Bloomfield Ave. just off Broad St." in Newark, NJ. Hammer would later say that the Club and its equipment were "wiped out" in 1892 when a "next-door saloon" burned down, so you are free to make your choice. This Dinner too featured a variety of 'scientific' marvels ("Skulls Grin at a Feast"), some reflecting technological improvements. Food for the diners (and cigars) were delivered on adjacent table-tracks and trains with magnetized floral bouquets being released from the ceiling when their current was cut off. The attendees included Mayor Joseph Haynes of Newark; a sometime co-patentee Francis R. Upton; and even Richard F. Outcault, the Edison-employed artist (and cartoonist) who would soon create *The Yellow Kid* and *Buster Brown*—he drew the event (see here) for *Electrical World* (February 14, 1891). Shimmering models of a green heron and a pink crocodile graced the table cloth, and according to some reports, tiny glowing lamps were carefully inserted into living goldfish before they were sent swimming (quite transparently) around their glass enclosure.

Richard F. Outcault's sketch of Hammer's 1891 Electrical Diablerie, including the "talking" wax figure of Benjamin Franklin at the head of the table. *Koenigsberg*

The acoustic novelties had improved with time, and Hammer played for his audience a short speech from his trip to France, delivered by none other than Gustave Eiffel, but now on a brown wax cylinder. A bronze model of his Tower can be seen in the sketch and was said to "blush with every color of the rainbow." From the Grand Opera in Paris, came the ethereal voice of Mme. Ada Adini (American-born Adele Chapman). Even one Thomas Edison gave a personalized recorded speech for the occasion—now apparently lost. At the head of the table sat a waxen figure of Benjamin Franklin—the 'Father of Electricity'—and from the phonograph inside his torso, a short speech emerged whose exact contents were generally glossed over, other than some vague homilies from *Poor Richard's Almanac.* Only the March 1891 issue of *The Phonogram* (No. 3) gave the original words, reprinted here for the first time since: "My Dear Friends—Through the genius of Thomas Edison, I come back to you from the past of over a century ago. I am glad to find I am so well remembered, and am well pleased to preside at the first annual banquet and meeting of the Franklin Experimental Club of Newark." At the end of the meeting, a

William J. Hammer in his study. *Koenigsberg*

miniature cannon boomed out, replicating the conclusion of the Paris Exposition in 1889. As they left, everyone was given a special medallion bearing a likeness of Benjamin Franklin. We can only hope that one of them will turn up.

Hammer would return to France (ca. 1902) and learn of the revolutionary discoveries of Marie and Pierre Curie—especially about the new elements of Radium and Polonium. Newly intrigued, he would write the first book in America on these radioactive substances (1903) and bring his own samples into the country. Once again, he extolled their properties in his usual way, at numerous *Radium Dinners* across the U.S.! But, like the Curies, he suffered some occupational injuries from carrying them so often.

He had married his wife, Alice Maude White, in January 1894 in Ohio, but she died young, at 42 on January 12, 1906 in New York City from tuberculosis. Their one child, Mabel, was well educated, graduating from Smith College in Massachusetts, apparently majoring in physics. Her marriage to Thomas Assheton (1925) produced no children, and she

died in April 1989 at the age of 94. Still fascinated with aeronautics, Hammer became friends with the Wright brothers and Glenn Curtiss, and continued to hone his flying skills well into his fifties.

William J. Hammer had acquired the military title of Major in 1918–19 when he was appointed by the War College in Washington, D.C., to their Board of Inventions. On July 13, 1926, his old boss, Thomas Edison, gave him a new Diamond Disc phonograph which survives today in a private collection. Hammer would also play a diplomatic role in the return to the U.S. of the John Kruesi model of the very first phonograph in 1928.

He lived for some years at the Hotel Shelton on Lexington Avenue in New York City and died there at 76 from a heart attack and pneumonia on March 24, 1934 (the same year that the 'electric' Mrs. Vanderbilt expired). He is buried at Arlington National Cemetery and until now, has been missing from most (if not all) accounts on the history and development of the phonograph.

Allen is the author of "Edison Cylinder Records, 1889–1912" and acknowledges the gracious assistance of Paul Israel of the Edison Papers Project; thanks also to Tom Ankner of the Newark Public Library, Kay Peterson at the Smithsonian Archives, and Kevin Desmond. Comments are always welcome to: allenamet@aol.com.