

Phonography

by George F. Paul

The Edison Amberola 1 (Part 3) *Cabinets: Confusion and Calamity*

This final installment of a century's retrospective of the Amberola 1A and 1B will focus on the difficulties faced by the Edison companies in securing quality cabinets in sufficient quantities. For background on the introduction and development of the Amberola 1A, please refer to my earlier articles in the March and June 2009 issues of *The Sound Box*.

When the National Phonograph Company issued its *Sales Department Bulletin No.36* on October 18, 1909 announcing its new concealed horn Phonograph to be known as the "Amberola," the machine's availability was projected to be on or about December 1st. An order for 1000 cabinets (built to Peter Weber's U.S. Design Patent No.40,347) had been accepted by the Herzog Art Furniture Company of Saginaw, Michigan in early

September¹, and evidently 90 days had been thought ample time for Herzog to deliver enough of them to supply jobbers and some dealers with samples to show in time for Christmas orders. Meanwhile a half-million dollar advertising campaign had begun, and by October 26, orders had been received for 1242 Amberolas.

Herzog, however, was failing to make cabinet deliveries, and there was consternation among the Edison force. New Amberola mechanisms began to pile up, waiting for cabinets. Workmen in the Edison's cabinet factory began manufacture of Amberola cabinets as an emergency measure to supply the Christmas orders. By the end of November, only 30 cabinets had been received from Herzog. A week later, an additional 125 cabinets had been received, but all of these Herzog cabinets were found to be either damaged through use of inferior packing cases, and/or of inferior workmanship/finish. These were held back for re-working by the Edison staff, and expenses were charged back to Herzog².



The Amberola



A New Edison Phonograph

—improved, enlarged—an Edison Phonograph converted into a most attractive piece of furniture, charmingly simple in design, with the horn removed from sight—built in as a part of the cabinet.

The new style reproducer, together with the aging of the wood, gives a full mellow tone far beyond anything heretofore possible in sound-reproducing instruments. Its life-like reproduction of all Edison Records, both Standard (two minute) and Amberol (four minute) carries the listener entirely away from the fact that it is a mechanical instrument. It has drawers in the lower part for 120 Records.

It comes in several finishes of Mahogany and Oak. Price \$200. (\$240 in Canada) You can hear and see the Amberola at all Edison Stores.

National Phonograph Company 71 Lakeside Avenue, Orange, N. J.

The Publisher of Good Housekeeping guarantees the advertisements

livered in February. However, the Christmas situation couldn't be saved. The company ruefully admitted to its dealers, "*The remedy is in sight but we regret to say that it will not materialize in time to supply the entire requirements of the holiday trade.*"³

After Christmas, the National Phonograph Company told its dealers what everyone knew by then, "*The very best we were able to do was to supply each of our Jobbers with a sample [Amberola] outfit before the holidays... Try as hard as we might it was simply impossible to do better than that. The cabinet manufacturers failed utterly to come to our relief, despite all the pressure we brought to bear on them.*"⁴ There were 138 Edison Jobbers listed on the rear cover of the *Edison Phonograph Monthly* in December 1909, so one can infer the num-

ber of Amberolas in circulation as the new year dawned.

Christmas season was always a busy time for talking machine manufacturers, but 1909 must have been a nightmare for the Edison Works. Falling seriously behind in orders for new Amberolas, in December Edison approached the Pooley Furniture Company of Philadelphia to supply 500 Weber-style mahogany Amberola cabinets to be de-

livered in February.

The principals of the Pooley Furniture Company saw opportunity in Herzog's failure to deliver on its promises. It submitted a sample of a newly-designed cabinet (later patented by Edward F. Pooley

as U.S. Design Patent No.41,732) featuring a square grille incorporating an urn or fountain in a rococo design. The front corner posts were carved at the tops, and stood on cloven hoof feet. The Edison brass were impressed with the new design, and sent the firm Requisition No.1586 on December 22, 1909, for the purchase of lumber necessary to build 2500 of these cabinets, 100 of which were to be made of Circassian Walnut.⁵ (This cabinet design would later be pressed into service for the Amberola 1B and the Disc Phonograph A/B-250.) Additionally, the National Phonograph Company came to an understanding with Herzog that all Weber-type cabinets shipped from the Art Furniture Company, as well as Herzog's Saginaw Table and

Cabinet Company after February 15th would be supplied with carved upper corner posts and square grilles. This would add 80 cents per cabinet for the carved posts and \$2.00 per cabinet for the square grille.⁶ This modified Weber cabinet was illustrated in magazine ads in late January 1910.

By February 2, 1910, the cabinet situation had improved somewhat. The Pooley Furniture Com-

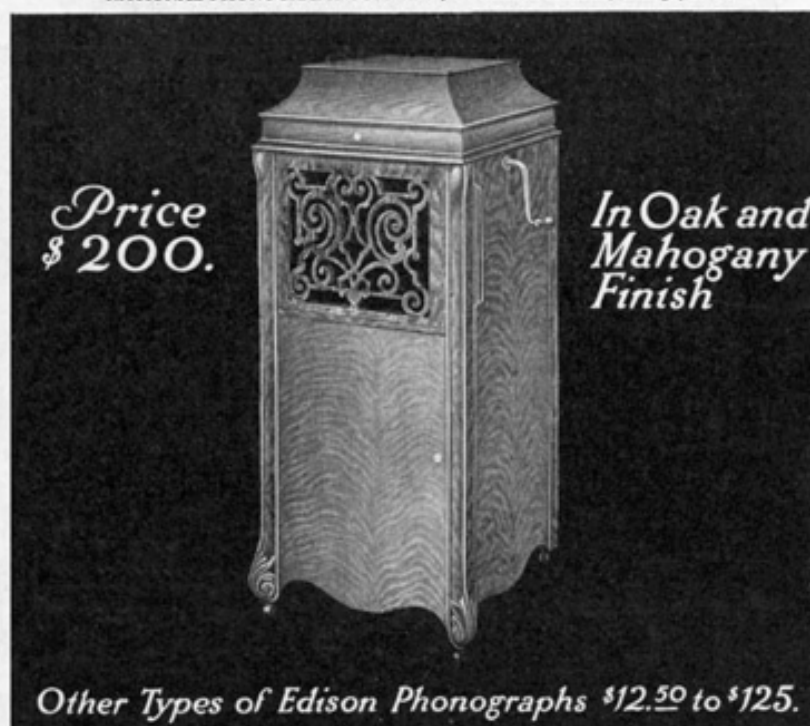
The Amberola

A new Edison Phonograph

combines all the tonal beauty of the other types of the Edison Phonograph, with the added richness, simplicity and charm of a masterpiece of cabinet work. The Amberola plays both Edison Standard and Edison Amberol Records. It is made in several finishes of Mahogany and Oak to harmonize with its surroundings in your home. Has drawers for holding 100 Records.

Edison Standard Records, 35c. Edison Amberol Records (play twice as long), 50c.
Edison Grand Opera Records, 75c, and \$1.00.

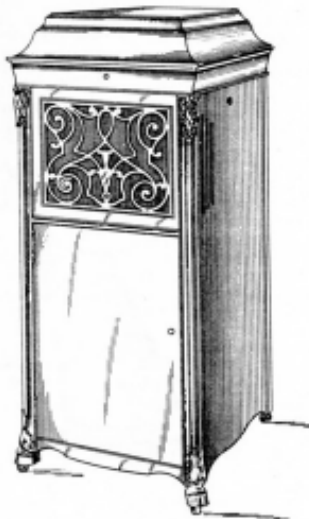
There are Edison dealers everywhere. Go to the nearest and hear the Edison Phonograph play both Edison Standard and Amberol Records and get complete catalogs from your dealer or from us.
NATIONAL PHONOGRAPH COMPANY, 4 Lakeside Avenue, Orange, N. J.



pany was advised that, "The first order for 500 mahogany [cabinets] was placed with the understanding that delivery should be made as quickly as possible...although due to orders originally placed with another concern [Herzog], who are now making deliveries fast enough to meet our requirements, we are not in as great a hurry for these 500 from you as we thought we would be, therefore, if you can in any way slow up the work

41,732.

DESIGN.
E. F. POOLEY.
CABINET.
APPLICATION FILED JUNE 3, 1911. Patented Aug. 29, 1911.



on them and not make deliveries until later, or can stretch out the delivery for a longer period of time, we would very much appreciate it.”⁷ Edison factory shipping records indicate 67 Amberolas shipped during the week ending February 5, but with still over 1000 unfilled orders.⁸ These 500 mahogany cabinets from Pooley would be Weber-type cabinets, but Edison had immediate need of cabinets made from Circassian Walnut, and instructed Pooley accordingly: “As we propose advertising the Circassian Walnut cabinet very shortly, we will probably require the 100 of the style [as specified in the 12/22/09 requisition to Pooley]. You may, therefore, proceed with the manufacture of them as rapidly as possible...”⁹ These 100 Circassian Walnut cabinets would be the first of the Pooley-type cabinets available to the public, and were announced to the trade in *Sales Department Bulletin No. 51* of May 10, 1910.¹⁰

But the improvement in the cabinet situation was only temporary. In a letter to the Herzog Art Furniture Company dated May 6, 1910, Frank L. Dyer, President of the National Phonograph Company, took a stern stance in enumerating the failure of Herzog to fulfill its contract. On the second page of the letter, Dyer stated, “*You must admit that we have been most patient in the matter of these cabinets. In the first place, we have voluntarily consented to a substantial increase in the price above that originally set by Mr. Carpel. Your promises as to shipments have not been kept, and we have been very much embarrassed as a result of your failure to make deliveries when promised; and in the matter of finish we have been absolutely compelled to do a great deal of work on the cabinets to put them in saleable condition. We have not expected anything unusual from you, but have only required that the cabinets furnished by you shall be as perfect as*

those we can make ourselves... [N]ow that we have caught up on our orders to a satisfactory extent, when the last carload was received and found to be in such an unsatisfactory condition, we rejected the same, giving you the opportunity to make them right if you wished to do so. If you do not, we will have to finish them ourselves...and bill you for the cost of the same.”

It is not known when Edison received the final shipment of cabinets from Herzog, but it’s not surprising that the company washed its hands of the Saginaw firms once their 1000 cabinets had been delivered. By October 1910, the Pooley-type cabinet was illustrated in *The Edison Phonograph Monthly*, and this cabinet was supplied to Edison in substantial numbers for the Amberola 1A/1B, and the Disc Phonograph A-250 and B-250.

Approximately 3500 Amberola 1As were built.

The Birth of the Amberola 1B

An internal memo from National Phonograph Company General Manager Charles H. Wilson, dated August 3, 1911, stated,

It has been decided that beginning October 1st, we will adopt as standard the Model B (4 minute only) Amberola cylinder machine, which has been approved of by Mr. Edison.

In order, however, to prevent the trade from demanding that we take off their hands on Oct. 1st, such of the model A (combination type) Amberolas as they may have in stock, we will, until further decided, continue to supply this model when ordered...

We have approximately 2200 Amberola machines still due on manufacturing order, and to bring about the change above mentioned, 2000 of these machines should now be brought through as model B type (four minute only), the remainder to be brought through as required 200 of model A (combination type), or if not required, to be, later on, brought through as model B's.

Thus the first Amberola 1Bs were offered alongside the 1As, and it is expected that serial numbers may intermingle between the two models around No.3500. Indeed, Amberola No.3519 consists of a 1A mechanism capable of playing only 4-minute cylinders. There are also stock 1A mechanisms featuring brass oiler caps on their bedplates, which possibly date from this transitional period.

Most all Amberola 1Bs were equipped with the same general mechanism as that found on the "Opera," and the model underwent no major changes in cabinetry or mechanism. The 1B continued to be available through 1914 for the few who were interested in them by that time. In Australia, the venerable 1A and 1B were still being offered as late as 1919, which must have made any new Amberola "75" standing nearby look rather shoddy by comparison!¹¹

Approximately 1500 Amberola 1Bs were built.

The Amberola began life as the ultimate cylinder talking machine, and the Edison organization, climbing out of a worldwide recession, pinned much hope on its success. Over the years, the Amberola lost its cutting-edge luster, and eventually became the only cylinder talking machine, playing Blue Amberol Records late into the night of the Edison Story. It may have devolved from an interpreter of Slezak to a player of Stoneman, but its early years of Grand Opera, Royal Purples, and Circassian Walnut remain a testament to the heights once attained by Edison's Cylinder Phonograph.

George Paul welcomes comments and suggestions at gpaul2000@aol.com or at 126 South Main Street, Mount Morris, NY 14510.

Notes:

- (1) Frow, George, *The Edison Cylinder Phonograph Companion*, 1994, p.155.
- (2) Ibid, p.155. See also letter from National Phonograph Company to Herzog Art Furniture Company, dated January 25, 1910.
- (3) *The Edison Phonograph Monthly*, December 1909, p.3.
- (4) *The Edison Phonograph Monthly*, January 1910, p. 4.
- (5) Letter from National Phonograph Company to Pooley Furniture Company dated February 2, 1910.
- (6) Letter from National Phonograph Company to Herzog Art Furniture Company, dated January 25, 1910. See also Putz, Ronald J., John Herzog: "A Tribute to a Phonograph Manufacturer," *Victrola and 78 Journal*, Issue 7, Winter 1996, p.19.
- (7) Letter from National Phonograph Company to Pooley Furniture Company dated February 2, 1910.
- (8) Frow, *The Edison Cylinder Phonograph Companion*, 1994, p.156.
- (9) Letter from National Phonograph Company to Pooley Furniture Company dated February 2, 1910.
- (10) *The Edison Phonograph Monthly*, June 1910, p.4.
- (11) Thomas A. Edison, Ltd. Sydney, Australia, Form A. 562, dated May 29th, 1919. The Amberolas 1A and 1B were listed at 45 pounds each. The Amberola 1A was supplied with both the Model M and Diamond A reproducers and the machine could be ordered in Mission or Golden oak or Mahogany piano finish. The Amberola 1B could be ordered only in Mahogany, piano finish.



One Collector's Perspective

by George Paul

My affection for the early Amberola need not be dwelled upon, but my gratitude toward those who assisted me in trying to decipher the “Cabinet Story, 1909-1910” must be acknowledged. These people include, in alphabetical order: Steve Anderson, Mike Appleton, Bob Barnett, Jerry Biasella, Jerry Blais, Jim Brewer, Dan Brown, Martin Bryan, Jim Cartwright, Scott Colgrove, Dominic Combe, Larry Crandell, Father Del Lape, Dennis Devine, Jerry Donnell, Tim Fabrizio, Bill Floyd, Patrick Gunn, Ron Haring, Jim Hedges, Jan Horne, John Iverson, Bob Johnson, Bruce Johnson, Ron Keuler, Mike Khanchalian, Mark Lynch, John Maeder, Don Mayer, Al Menashe, Bill Meyer, Craig Nugent, Steve & Jeff Oliphant, John Osborne, Marty Persky, Pete Petersen, Joan & Robin Rolfs, René Rondeau, Jasper Sanfilippo, Al Seftl, Peter Sinacori, Norm & Janyne Smith, Stan Stanford, Stephen Steenhuizen, Mike Tucker, Carol Veome, Jon Walker, Herman Wedemire, Dave White, Harold White, Burdette Walters, and John Woodward.

Very special thanks to Bob Baumbach, Ron Dethlefson, and George Glastris, whose enthusiasm for this project far surpassed my expectations, and whose ongoing assistance was invaluable.

“The Cabinet Story”

It was my hope to be able to identify the manufacturer of any Amberola 1 cabinet through a combination of characteristics. The kind people above provided me with data for 79 different Amberola 1As and 29 Amberola 1Bs. By analyzing this data, I was able to form some substantive conclusions, but alas, I failed to develop the definitive guide I sought. There were, however, several points of fact discovered in the course of this research.

There were four known manufacturers of Amberola 1A cabinets: the Herzog Art Furniture Company, the Saginaw Table and Cabinet Company, The Edison Phonograph Works, and the Pooley Furniture Company.

The earliest manufactured cabinets feature only two louvers on each side. These cabinets were produced by Herzog and by the Edison Works. All known 2-louver cabinets employed lyre grilles, plain posts, flat-key locks, and wooden separators in the record drawers rather than metal clips. A few cabinets with wooden separators feature 3 louvers, but still retain lyre grilles and plain posts. Because of the extensive repairs necessary for the Herzog cabinets, some early cabinets were not shipped as complete machines until much later (such as 2-louver 2876). 2-louver cabinets were manufactured by Edison and Herzog, (and possibly Saginaw Table). Cabinets with non-veneered lid tops are thought to be of Edison manufacture.

As noted above, Amberola 1A serial numbers indicate only the order in which the machines left the Edison factory. They do not indicate manufacturing chronology.

Some 3-louver Weber-type cabinets have their longest louver measuring approximately 11", and others measure approximately 9". It is believed that the cabinets with 9" louvers were produced by the Saginaw Table and Cabinet Company. More data is needed on these cabinets.

The Edison Works, Herzog, and Saginaw Table manufactured Weber-type cabinets only, first with lyre grilles, then beginning in February 1910 with square "1st Rococo" or "transitional" grilles. There is evidence to suggest that some "2nd Rococo" grilles were supplied by these companies for their cabinets, but perhaps only for a short time. Plain-post Weber cabinets with square grilles most likely originated from one of these three companies. 1-piece interior grilles are an early feature that was soon dropped, and are thought to have originated with Herzog and Saginaw Table. However, interior grilles may have been switched at the Edison factory during the course of repairs made to Herzog and Saginaw Table cabinets.

The 500 mahogany Weber-type cabinets produced by the Pooley Furniture Company featured the familiar "2nd Rococo" grille as used on later 1B Pooley-type cabinets. These cabinets also featured carved upper posts.

All cabinets with stepped lids, flat door bottoms, and 2nd Rococo grilles were manufactured by Pooley, and continued to be supplied by the firm until 1914.

General Cabinet Manufacturer Characteristics:

Herzog: Weber-type cabinets in mahogany and oak, plain and carved posts, lyre and square grilles, 2 and 3 louvers of 11" length, 1-piece and 2-piece interior grilles, flat-key and round-key locks. 1A mechanisms only.

Edison: Weber-type cabinets probably in mahogany only, plain and carved posts, lyre and square grilles, 2 and 3 louvers of 11" length, 2-piece interior grilles, flat-key and round-key locks. 1A mechanisms only.

Saginaw Table and Cabinet: Weber-type cabinets in mahogany and oak, plain and carved posts, lyre and square grilles, 3 louvers of 9" and 11" length, 1-piece and 2-piece interior grilles, round-key locks. 1A mechanisms only.

Pooley: 500 Weber-type cabinets in mahogany only, carved posts and square 2nd Rococo grilles, 3 louvers of 11" length, 2-piece interior grilles, round-key locks. Also Pooley-type cabinets in mahogany, oak, and Circassian Walnut, with 1A and 1B mechanisms.

