

# Collecting EDISON

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*“Part of Edison’s genius was his ability to transform a laboratory experiment into a practical device which could be used and enjoyed by a large number of people.”*

*...Charley Hummel*

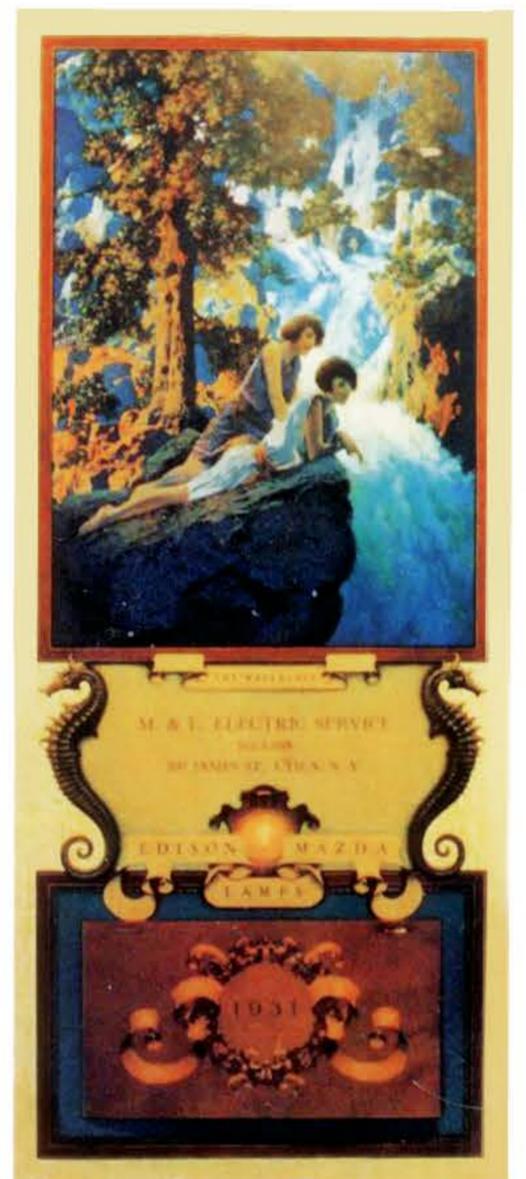
**H**e suffered from deafness yet gave music to the whole world, his technical innovations revolutionized the stock market, but he would have been at a loss understanding junk bonds. Before television existed he brought mass market entertainment to millions. His name was Thomas Edison and his innovative genius defines the twentieth century. From light bulbs to ticker tapes, Edison’s contributions to civilization are fundamental standards of modern life. Though largely taken for granted by the average consumer, this inventor’s legacy is carefully preserved and showcased by “Edisonologist” Charley Hummel.

A Brooklyn born native, Hummel now resides in an attractive ranch-style home in New Jersey. With his wife, Barbara, four children, two dogs and a cat, Hummel and family share their living space with an ever-growing collection of Edison memorabilia. Having the rare good fortune of making a living from his



hobby, he has devoted the past twenty-two years to collecting, trading, selling and enjoying Edison artifacts. With the curiosity-teasing clutter of grandma’s attic, Hummel’s den is stocked floor to ceiling with Edison machines and prototypes. Common cylinder records sit next to one-of-a-kind experimental light bulbs which produced gasps of astonishment when first demonstrated at World Fair exhibitions over a century ago. The walls are lined with an extensive collection of advertising signs, two of which were created for Edison by painter Maxfield Parrish. Like true collectors everywhere, Hummel knows the location and history of every item.

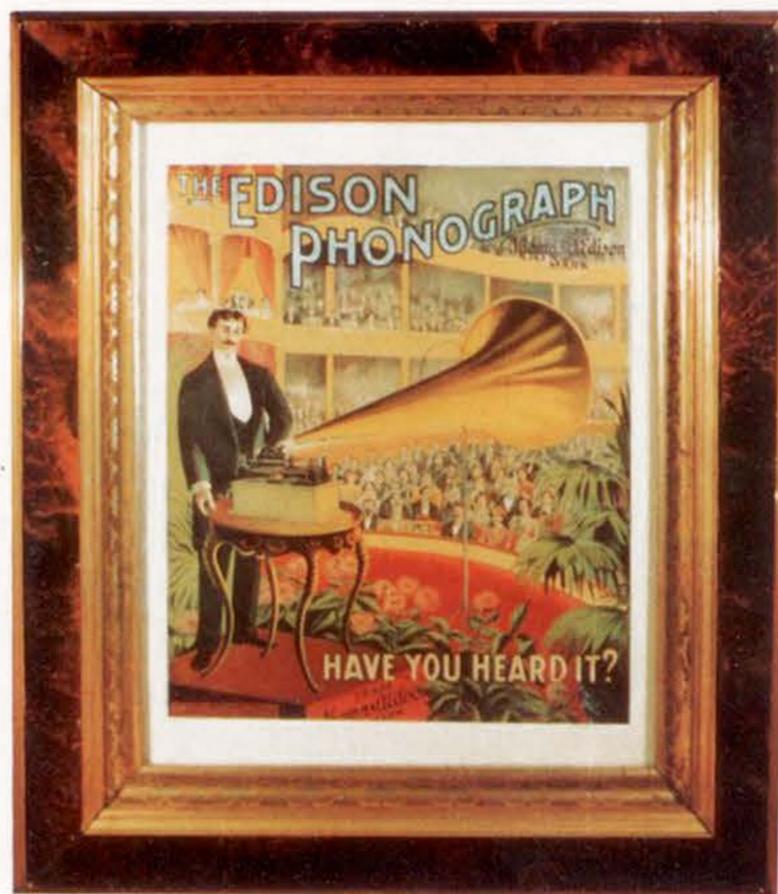
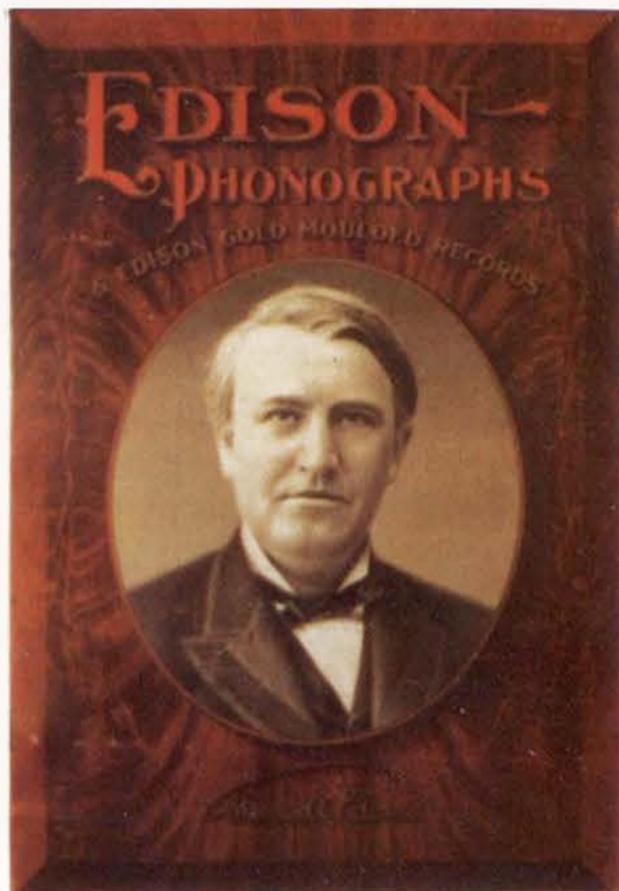
Largely self-taught, Hummel’s in-



All Photos by Joseph Costantino



Previous page: a 1902 Edison home phonograph. It originally sold for about thirty dollars. The 1931 calendar by Maxfield Parrish is titled "The Waterfall." On this page an Edison Gem phonograph, circa 1909, which plays two and four minute records. Below it is a turn of the century advertising poster. The tin lithographed poster (upper right) is very rare. The Edison floor model coin-operated machine, c. 1901, is a forerunner of the modern day jukebox.



terest in Edison began in 1969. "My grandfather gave my father a 1903 cylinder phonograph, which he in turn passed on to me. After it sat in my basement for a year, my wife brought it upstairs. Once I was able to repair it I was hooked," Hummel states. Sixty phonographs later he branched out and began collecting other Edison inventions, original stock market ticker tapes and motion picture projectors. Along the way he enhanced the value and uniqueness of his collection by acquiring rare personal letters and documents penned by Edison. Written in the inventor's calligraphy style script, they are in mint-like condition.

For Charley Hummel "Edisonology" is more than a business or hobby—it's a way of life. "At one time I used to go to as many as twelve major shows a year. Traveling, unpacking, setting up a booth and doing business became more time consuming as my collectibles multiplied." As

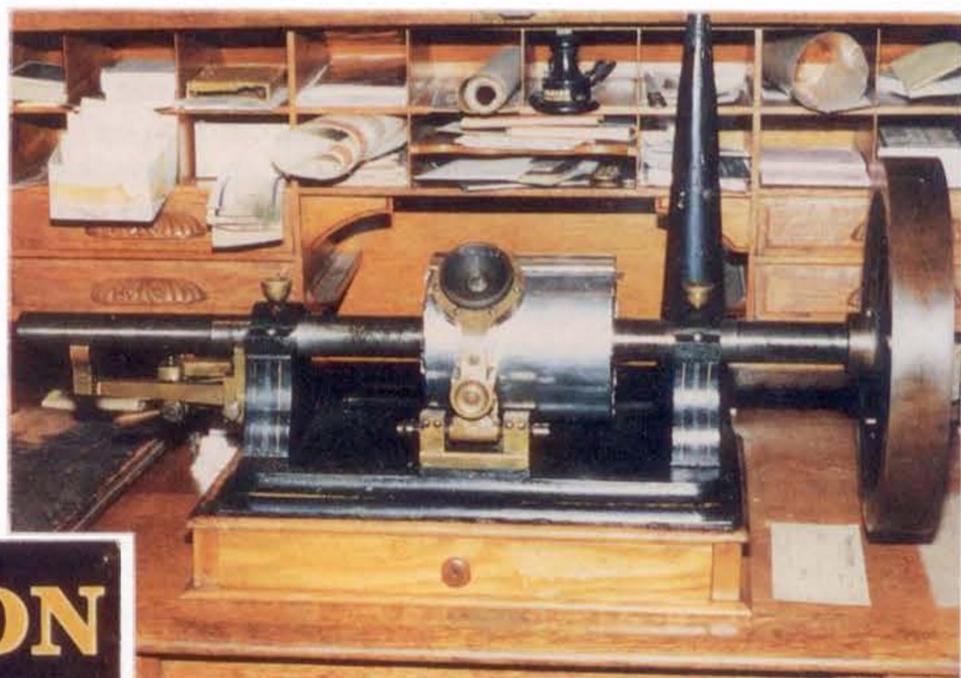
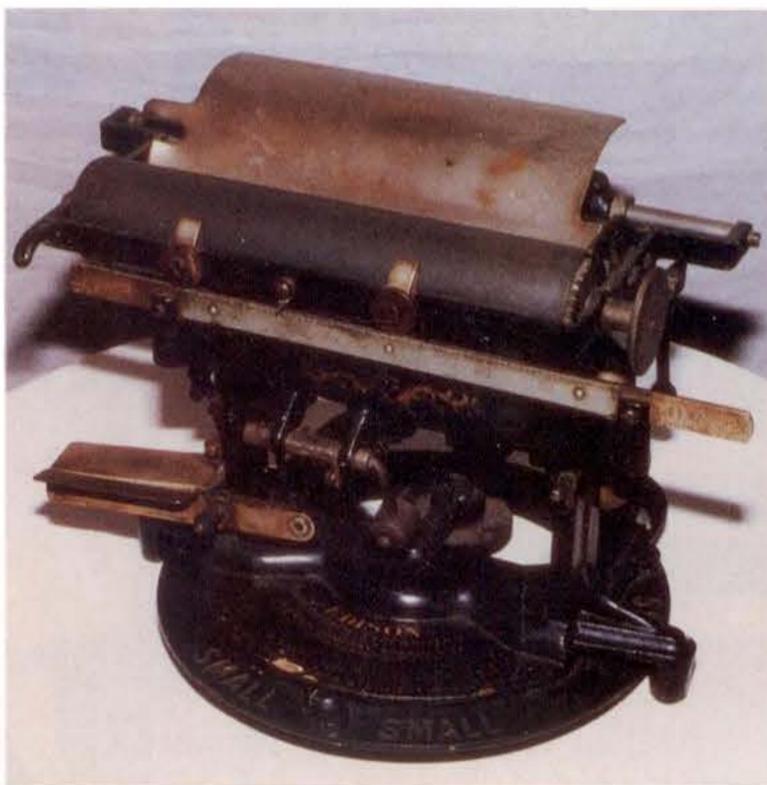
Hummel's collection and expertise grew so did the demands on his time. Maintaining a work schedule that would numb most nine to fivers, he routinely logs fifty thousand air miles a year spreading "The Gospel According to Edison." "I travel to Japan seven or eight times a year. Don't forget Sony and Panasonic are major Japanese electronics firms which specialize in quality sound recording. For them Thomas Edison is something of a founding father."

Hummel's on-going relationship with Japan is reflected in his business cards, which are printed in English and Japanese. Edison's status as an adopted folk hero is easily discernible in the Japanese culture. In Osaka, Japan, for example, a life-size statue of Edison greets the public as they enter the corporate headquarters of Panasonic. Edison's popularity among middle class Japanese and their affinity for department stores has presented Hummel with a

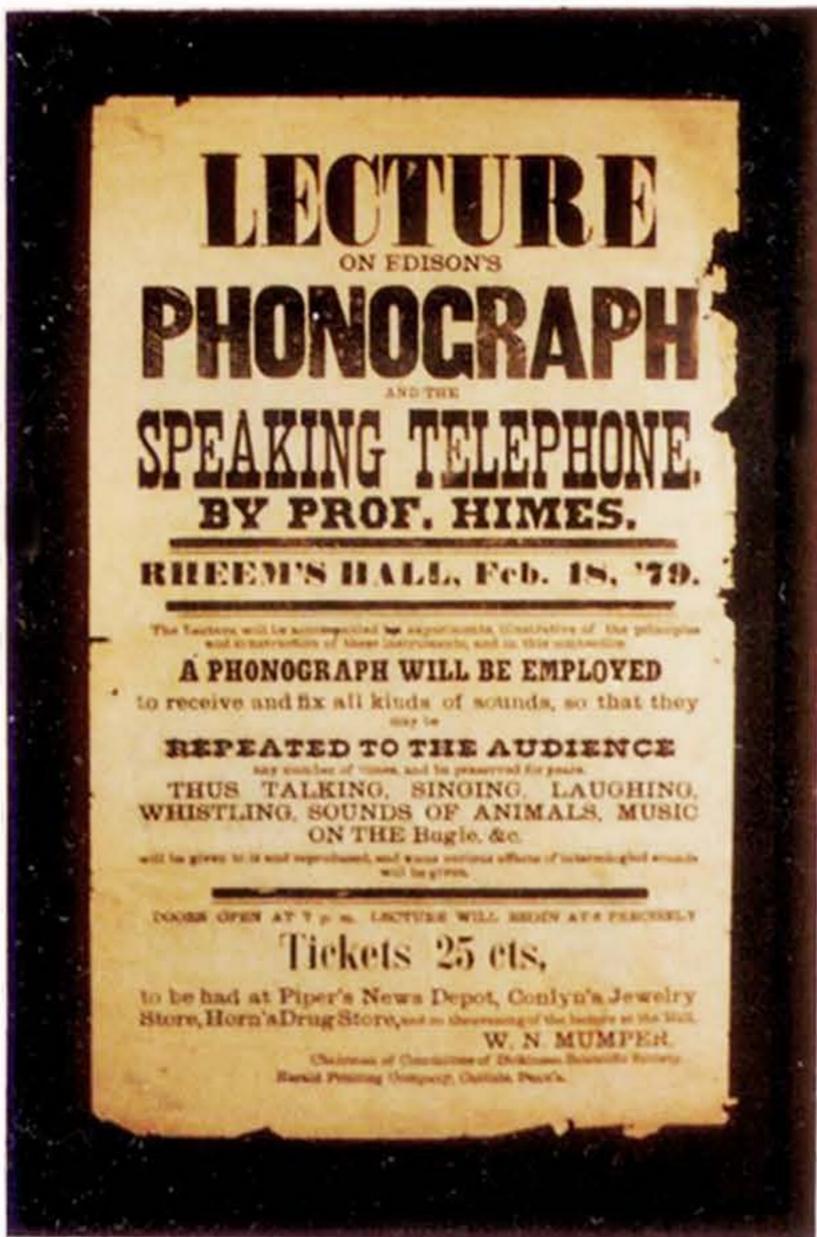




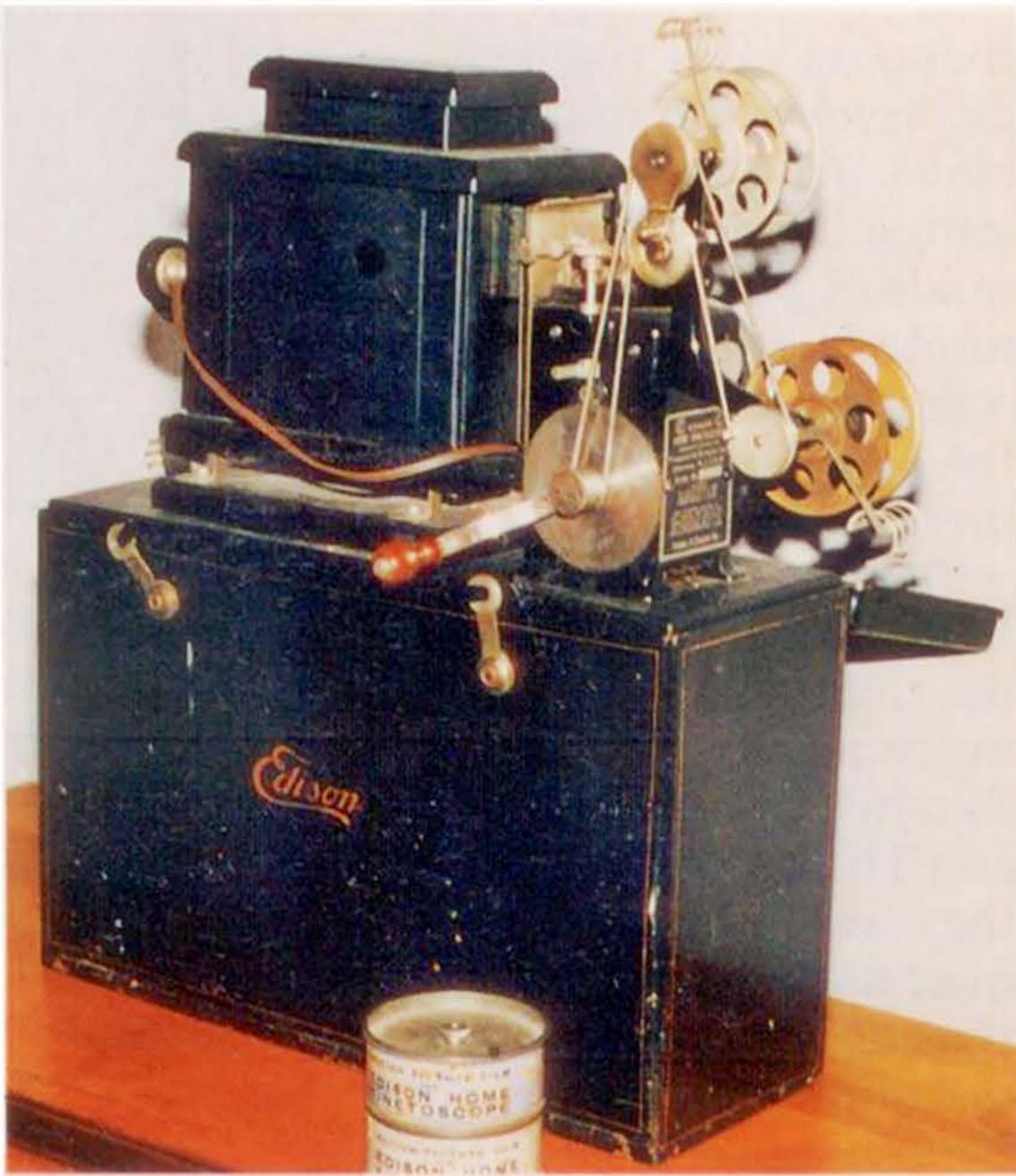
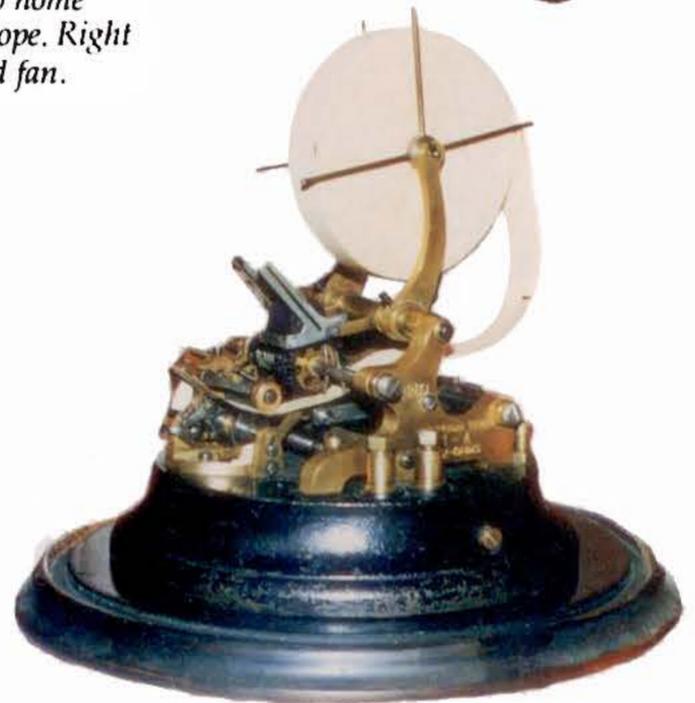
Above, Charley Hummel and his wife Barbara surrounded by Edison memorabilia. Edison experimental light bulbs (top right) surround a bust of Edison. The light bulbs are dated 1880 to 1881, Directly right is an Edison improved typewriter from the late 19th century. On its right is a coin-operated table top phonograph, c. 1895. The early handwriting device (directly below) predated the modern copy machine. It produced multiple written copies.

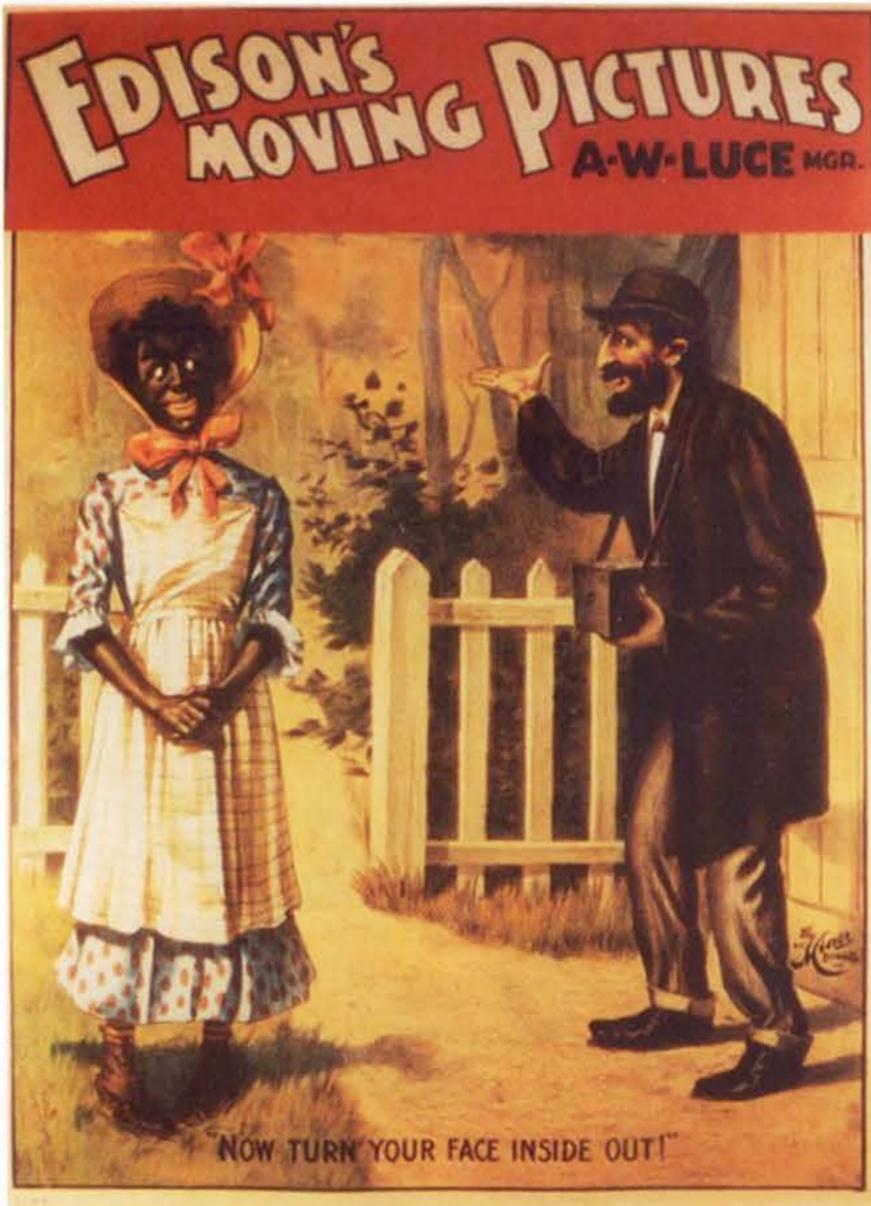


This 1878 exhibition tin foil machine (above) was taken on tour around the United States to introduce America to the talking machine. The 1914 advertisement depicts Albert Spaulding playing the violin.



A lecture describing the merits of the Edison phonograph cost twenty-five cents to attend. The Edison phonograph, c. 1899 (top right) was one of the inventor's least expensive machines, selling for \$10. Below, a stock market ticker tape, c. 1875. On its left, a 1912 forerunner to home movie projector kinetoscope. Right is a DC battery powered fan.





unique opportunity to showcase the inventor. "It takes months of preparation but I like to send anywhere from seven hundred to a thousand items from my collection. For the kids especially, I like to send 'hands on' inventions so they can see how they work." Combining couture and culture, Japanese department stores and shopping malls routinely set aside a display area for international exhibits. With the average exhibition lasting two to three weeks, thousands of people are given the opportunity to see Edison's ingenuity in action. Hummel works closely with the Sony corporation in promoting these events.

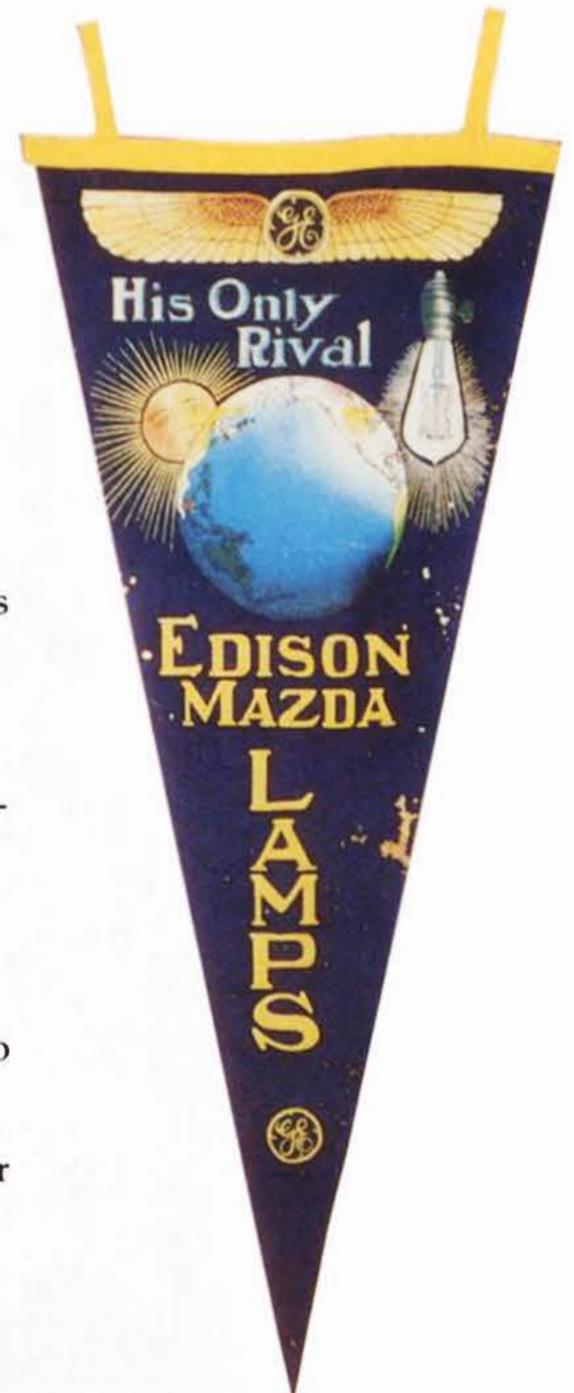
Stateside his commitment to The Inventor has not gone unnoticed by the United States government. Working as an advisor, his expertise is sought by The Smithsonian Institute and The Library of Congress when they search for original prototype machines. In addition to this he also provides the necessary repair work to machines which have succumbed to the passage of time.

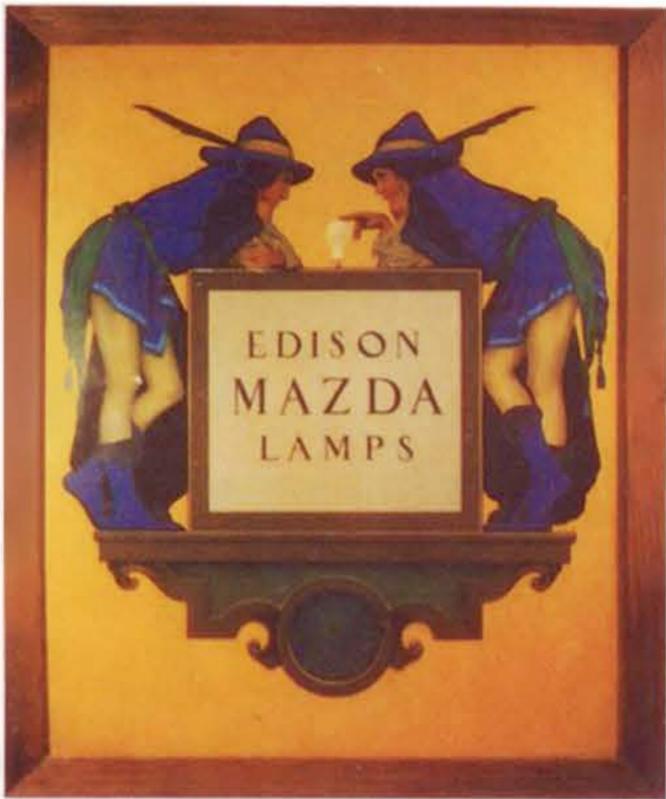
World famous institutions are not the only ones who benefit from Hummel's largess. "One of the things I enjoy most is sharing my interest in

*These movie posters for Edison's Moving Pictures feature the name of A.W. Luce, an early electrician who was instrumental in bringing other electricians into the movie business. The advertising pennant was used to promote the sale of the light bulb.*

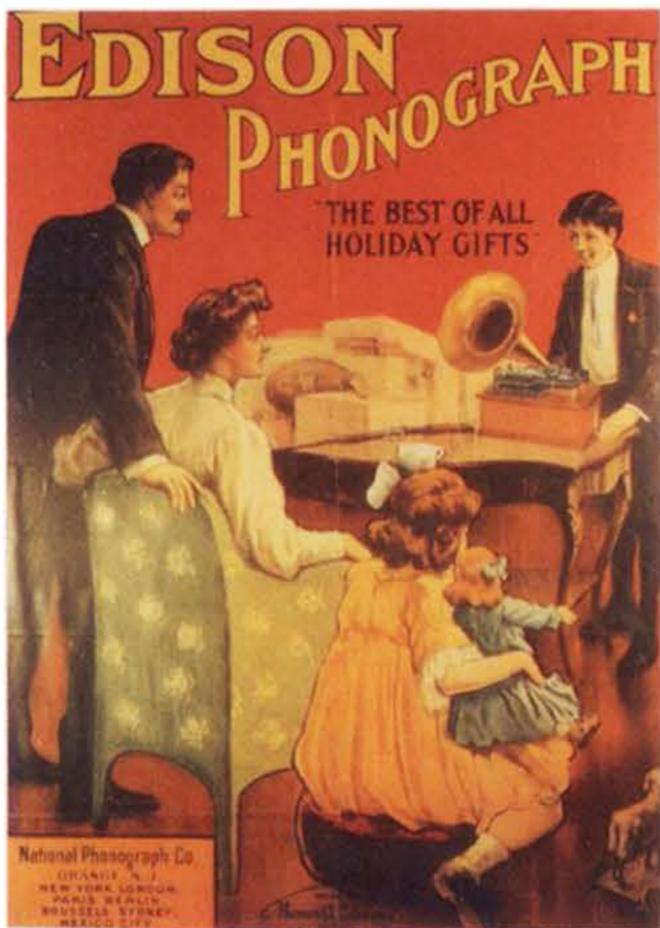
Edison with people who don't always have the opportunity to travel to a big city museum to see some of his machines on display," he says.

Hummel visits as many as seventy small museums a year all across middle America, demonstrating Edison inventions, among which is his own favorite, the cylinder tinfoil phonograph. Traveling around the country in his TV and VCR equipped van (which he usually wears out after two years) he visits Edison's library in Menlo Park, New Jersey, giving lectures and performing volunteer repair work on display items. During the winter months, he heads south and performs the same services at Edison's former winter home (now a museum) in Fort Meyers, Florida.





Left, this tin sign by artist Maxfield Parrish is two-sided. It was displayed in electrical supply stores, circa 1924. The Indian head was used to promote Edison's Portland Cement Co. It was commonly used and displayed in hardware stores and lumber yards.



"Part of Edison's genius was his ability to transform a laboratory experiment into a practical device which could be used and enjoyed by a large number of people. At the turn of the century almost every middle class home had a phonograph, just as today every home has one or more TV sets." The ubiquity and influence of television has allowed Hummel to share Edison's legacy with an audience of millions. Working in cooperation with the Smithsonian, Hummel supplies the DISCOVER cable channel with original Edison machines. Early handwriting devices, forerunners of the modern jukebox and the tin foil cylinder phonograph, are but a few of the devices he shares with a generation of children who grew up in the era of Pac Man and the Mario



The two paper posters are circa 1906.

Brothers. He has also worked with PBS and veteran TV journalist Roger Mudd to bring Edison to the masses. "What I'm really hoping for is to see other collectors share their treasures with the public. Collectibles are a link reminding us of where we've been and possibly giving some hint as to where we're going as a people," Hummel concludes. For Charley Hummel ([edisontae@aol.com](mailto:edisontae@aol.com)), wherever the path to the future may lead it will certainly be illuminated by a light bulb. ■