



Episode 701, Story 1: Psychophone

Gwen: Our first story takes us to the edges of scientific discovery at the turn of the 20th century. Thomas Edison was the most prolific inventor in American history – making breakthroughs in telephone technology, motion pictures, electric lighting, and of course, the phonograph, or sound recording machine.

“The phonograph was an international sensation...it brought Edison fame and a nickname...wizard of Menlo Park...”

Gwen: He changed the way we live ... but was Edison also investigating what happened after death? Vicki and Dallas Childress of Cincinnati, Ohio, believe they have a device that may reveal a different side of Thomas Edison.

Vicki: The theory of it is that it was invented to communicate with the other side, or the dead.

Gwen: I'm starting my investigation with a few questions for Vicki and Dallas.

Vicki: Gwen, nice to meet you.

Gwen: So, what do you have to show me?

Vicki: I have a Psychophone.

Gwen: Psychophone? What does that mean?

Vicki: Well, I'm not sure. I did some searches on the internet, but the only thing that came up were these paranormal websites.

Gwen: Dallas and Vicki's time on the internet led them to believe that their Psychophone may have been invented by Edison, for paranormal purposes. Paranormal. What do you mean?



Dallas: They claim Thomas Edison invented this machine to communicate with the dead.

Gwen: So where did you get it?

Vicki: We got it at an auction because of the name. I thought it would be something interesting to put on our family room, just as a conversation piece.

Gwen: The auctioneer called the device a phonograph. It came with these four cylinders, which look as if they are intended to play back audio. But Dallas has had only limited success trying to operate the Psychophone.

Dallas: I was able to get it running, but I wasn't able to get any sound out of it.

Gwen: So tell me exactly what you'd like for me to find out about this Psychophone.

Vicki: I would like to know how it became known as the Psychophone.

Dallas: And did Thomas Edison in fact invent this machine?

Gwen: So it's called the Psycho-*phone*. Now *psycho* means the mind and *phon* means a sound. I can't really tell how it's supposed to work. I wonder what this little clock does, for example. There seems to be no patent number, no manufacturer's mark. I want to find out who made this, why? Born in 1847, Thomas Edison's inventions received more than 1093 U.S. patents: electrical printing machines, motion picture technology, primary and storage batteries ...the list goes on and on. The "Psychophone" isn't listed in official patent records. I printed out some research materials with some startling details, including this one from *Scientific American* in 1920, an interview with the famous inventor, regarding his attempt to communicate with the next world. And this *New York Times* article from the following year. "Thomas Edison has announced his entrance in to a new sphere, that of psychic research." and he says, "I have been thinking for some time of a machine or apparatus which could be operated by personalities which have passed on to another existence or sphere." Well, this is a side of Edison I've never heard of. Is it possible that the Psychophone is the apparatus these articles were referring to? I'm headed to



Menlo Park in New Jersey. Edison moved here in 1876 and set up what may be the world's first industrial research laboratory, where he completed three of his most famous inventions. I'm meeting historian Paul Israel, of the Thomas A. Edison papers project at Rutgers University.

Paul: Well, I've never heard of the Psychophone, but we do know that around 1920 Edison actually speculated about the possibility of building a machine to communicate with the dead. There were a couple of articles and they even talked about this séance that took place in Edison's laboratory with this machine.

Gwen: This is really something, "Edison's own secret," – and here he is trying to lure spirits from beyond the grave. Paul tells me that Edison's fabled "spirit communication machine" has yet to show up, and he doubts these drawings are anything but a media concoction. It seems to me from these articles, that maybe he was thinking you could possibly communicate with the forces that make us human, is that right?

Paul: Yes, well that's exactly what he's speculating about. As early as 1890, he actually gave an interview where he talked about the potential that atoms that make up the universe were animate, and that it was possible at the time of death as these atoms leave the body, that they may retain knowledge of the individual in some sense, and so it might be possible to communicate with these atoms.

Gwen: How did the general public and other scientists respond to these speculations?

Paul: Well, clearly there were many in the public who had a very deep belief in the possibility of spiritualism.

Gwen: Paul explains that spiritualism is a belief in the ability to communicate with the dead. It gained appeal as the negative aspects of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and war generated strong feelings of alienation.

Paul: Especially after World War I there was great interest in the potential of being able to talk with loved ones who lost their lives and so forth.



"Clasp your hand together tightly...hold the key between your palms..."

Gwen: The driving force in this spiritualist movement were "human mediums," who claimed they could contact the dead. Paul explains that as science overturned established presumptions about reality, it seemed possible to believe that a 'magical machine' could connect people with the afterlife. Especially since the machines must have seemed magical to many people at that time.

Paul: Right, especially electrical technology, right? This is the beginning of the black box, where you have a machine that you really don't understand how it works, but it does these wondrous things. Here are these voices coming out of the ether.

Gwen: I'm meeting Jerry Fabris, museum curator and Edison expert to compare our Psychophone with known Edison phonographs. So this is where Edison invented the phonograph.

Jerry: Yeah, 1877, and the invention of the phonograph was very much a discovery.

Gwen: Edison had been investigating how to record telephone messages. He discovered he could use a needle to indent sound vibrations onto a tin-foil wrapped cylinder. Jerry explains how Edison literally left his mark on history.

Jerry: One thing he always did was put his name really prominently on whatever it was he was selling. Like this Amberola phonograph. This one says Psychophone. But I don't see any other identification on it.

Gwen: Edison made many modifications to his original phonograph, right up to his death in 1931. But none resemble the Psychophone.

Jerry: The thing that jumps right out is this clock. That's a big question mark. It's unusual. I've never seen a clock mounted like that on an Edison phonograph. Another thing, this is a really unusual part here. I wonder if it's a repeater device for rewinding and replaying repeatedly the record.



Gwen: Jerry points out that the electric motor, cord, and plug date the Psychophone to the 1920s. But, he adds Edison phonographs from that period didn't use electricity.

Jerry: The Edison machines had a spring powered motor, so you see this crank on the side, you'd wind that up to start, and then you'd release the spring and that's what would turn the record.

Gwen: Although he's curious about the clock and the unusual apparatus on the top of the Psychophone – in most respects it is a basic phonograph from the period.

Jerry: Well, it's clearly for recording sound. This part plugs in here, and it's what touches the record, and if you look closely at it, it says "recorder" right on it. There would be a horn that comes out of this piece and any sound that went in to the horn would record on the record, as long as it was loud enough.

Gwen: You'll be surprised at what the owners think. They've read on the internet that this machine was used to record voices of the dead in the after life. Now what do you think?

Jerry: You literally have to shout to get your voice to cut clearly on to the record, so it would have to be a really loud ghost.

Gwen: Jerry's not sure how the machine was used – but he spots what may be a possible clue.

Jerry: I see grooves and I see ripples which look like clearly sound wave cuttings. You could play this back and that would probably tell you something about the origin of this machine.

Gwen: I've sent the Psychophone ahead to Tim Fabrizio who has 40 years experience rebuilding antique phonographs. He's attempting to see if any audio recordings survive on the Psychophone cylinders. Any luck?

Tim: Well, the good news is the machine itself has been restored and now it's fully functional.

Gwen: Oh that's exciting.

Tim: But, I couldn't get any sound out of the cylinders. They were damaged beyond repair.



Gwen: Tim offers to show me how sound *would* have been recorded on the wax cylinders.

Tim: We'll put the record on like this. Put it on the mandrel. We'll put the recording head on, okay, all right; it's all set; now you should speak directly into this horn and really project.

Gwen: Tim suggests I recite the very words Edison supposedly uttered into his first phonograph. "Mary had a little lamb; its fleece was white as snow, and everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go".

Tim: And what we'll do is replace the recording head with a reproducing head. We'll just rest the mechanism and voilà.

(Phonograph playback of Mary had a little lamb)

Gwen: It sounds a little wobbly but you can certainly hear it. Tim's been able to figure out some of the unusual features of the Psychophone -- including the clock.

Tim: It's a very specialized device. The record is set to play continuously, every hour on the hour. It has a return mechanism that draws the carriage back, and when the clock triggers the mechanism, it plays it again.

Gwen: Tim has seen a Psychophone once before. While working on it, he discovered the original patent . . . filed under a different name – the automatic time controlled suggestion machine.

Tim: It was invented by a guy named A.B. Saliger. And it was very expensive, \$235 in 1929 or '30. It's about \$3,800 in today's money.

Gwen: Automatic time controlled suggestion machine. Well, time control refers to the clock, but suggestion?

Tim: You see; Psychophone doesn't refer to psychic or psychic activity. It refers to psychology.



Let me play something for you, and I think it will explain a lot.

Gwen: Tim has an audio file that I know Vicki and Dallas will be excited to hear.

Your first question was if Thomas Edison invented the Psychophone. And while he did invent the phonograph and all kinds of marvelous machines, the Psychophone was not one of them.

Dallas: I'm a little disappointed, but I'm not surprised.

Gwen: You also wanted to know what the Psychophone did, and I can play something for you. Listen to this.

"This is the great Psychophone talking to you. It will not disturb your sleep...on the other hand, it will induce restful slumber."

Tim: This was a device for self-improvement. It played messages of positive subliminal nature while you were asleep. The claim was it could help you find happiness, find love, find wealth, find health. It was the classic American quick fix.

(Psychophone recording continued) "You are being rejuvenated in perfect health. Your weight is normal. Your hair is growing in luxurious abundance. I am now having a wonderful rest."

Dallas: That is, wow.

Gwen: That is a voice from the afterlife... I tell Dallas and Vicki that the voice is that of A.B. Saliger, the inventor of 'the great Psychophone.' He was part of a self-improvement fad all over America in the 1920's and this was a recording of his mantra of how you could instantaneously transform yourself achieve health, and vigor, and happiness, and beauty, and success in business, with no effort while you slept.

Dallas: I was just thinking, you know, maybe I need to listen to this tonight. Rejuvenate myself, especially about growing the hair back. I thought that was kind of nice. So, it's a pretty neat piece



of history. I'm thrilled.

Vicki: And so am I. Oh my it's exciting.

Dallas: I think this is great, this is great.

Gwen: If you wanted a conversation piece, you sure have one now.

Vicki: I'm so tickled.

Dallas: And we thank you very much.

Gwen: Self-help messages were relatively new when the Psychophone was marketed. In 1922, a French psychotherapist, Émile Coué, published the first popular self-improvement book in America, *Self-mastery through Conscious Autosuggestion*. He recommended chanting 20 times each morning and night: "every day, in every respect, I'm getting better and better." The book was wildly popular and opened the door for countless others, including Dale Carnegie's, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Carnegie's book has now reportedly sold 50 million copies worldwide. Self help books, videos, tapes and seminars now constitute a 2.5 billion dollar industry.