

Phonograph 100 years old

WASHINGTON (UPI) — Thomas A. Edison had an inspiration for the phonograph 100 years ago today and surprised himself when he built a model, shouted "Mary Had a Little Lamb" into it and heard the machine recite the verses back.

"I was never so taken aback in my life," Edison said later. "Everybody was astonished. I was always afraid of things that worked the first time."

To celebrate the anniversary, the Library of Congress opens an exhibition today of Edison's machine and what evolved from it.

Visitors will be able to listen to samples from the library's collection of

several hundred thousand recordings.

They will hear Woodrow Wilson deliver a 1912 campaign speech; Bing Crosby sing "Where the Blue of the Night Meets the Gold of the Day"; comedians Bud Abbott and Lou Costello do their famous "Who's on First" routine; and a Passamaquoddy Indian chant recorded in 1890.

They also will hear Edison's 1927 rendition of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" (he recorded it again on the 50th anniversary of his invention) and opera sung by Enrico Caruso, who was so popular that historians like to say, "Caruso made the phonograph and the phonograph made Caruso."

Edison was partially deaf and had little taste for music, but he saw the phonograph chiefly as a method of dictating letters without stenographers and as spreading the benefits of the telephone to those too poor to afford one.

According to historian Daniel Boorstin, Edison thought people without phones would record their messages and take them to a central station where they would be played for the addressee over a telephone.

On July 18, 1877, Edison sketched his idea for a phonograph in his journals. Four months later, an assistant, Edward H. Johnson, wrote about his boss' idea in "Scientific American" under the headline: "A Wonderful Invention — Speech Capable of Indefinite Repetition From Automatic Records."

This embarrassed Edison, forcing him to produce a machine to match his idea.

He soon did, and a month later Johnson telegraphed a friend: "Phonograph delivered to me today. Complete success. Talks plainer than the telephone."

News briefs

Decline noted

WASHINGTON (UPI) — The Census Bureau says the number of persons working for city governments declined last year for the first time since 1962.

It suggested the trend may be an indication of mounting financial troubles confronting some urban areas.

'Fireworks'

CATANIA, Sicily (UPI) — Mt. Etna, Europe's tallest volcano, is providing a new fireworks display for tourists.

Etna began belching clouds of dense, acrid smoke and spewing flaming lava Sunday in what scientists said was its most violent activity in 18 months.