

Tube of the Month

AUDIOTRON

A California Pirate

With de Forest's success with his new triode, there were a few who tried to capitalize on the new technology. Elmer T. Cunningham of Oakland, California was one of the first. The early hams were always looking for a deal and Cunningham wanted his cut. He produced a triode that was made out of a test tube and called it the AudioTron or Audiotron and always priced it for less than de Forest. It featured an aluminum plate formed in a cylinder and a copper grid wound on a fat pencil like the one they gave you in the first grade. The grid was supported on only one end so it would vibrate wildly if someone tapped the table. As the signals were arcs and sparks, I guess it didn't matter much with the microphonics. Very small lengths of platinum wire were required in each lead as it passed through the presses. This was to make a vacuum seal. No two Audiotrons were exactly the same. Manufacture started in 1915.

Californians have always admired their legendary bandits like Black Bart or Zorro. The legend of Cunningham has many stories that may be hard to prove. One popular tale was that when de Forrest's lawyers were hunting them down, they would load all the gear in the Model T and move to another garage. De Forest finally caught up with them and the patent infringement suit was eventually settled out of court. De Forest made their own version of the Audiotron, but the Cunningham was always priced \$.25 less.

After World War I, Cunningham continued production of the Audiotron. In 1919 a new company called the Radio Corporation of America was founded. They were a holding company and had acquired the de Forest and Fleming patents. The next lawsuit was also settled out of court. The agreement between RCA and Cunningham became a legend on its own. If you can't whip 'em, you join 'em.

RCA allowed Cunningham to make 5000 more Audiotrons and then stop production. RCA also agreed to supply tubes to Cunningham at a discount for sale on the West Coast. Cunningham had become an RCA distributor and sold vast numbers of tubes. All of the tubes made for Cunningham were not marked RCA. GE was the actual manufacturer and an RCA UV200 that was to be sold to Cunningham would be marked C300. Same tube in a different box. People swore that the Cunninghams were better than the RCA and everyone raked in the cash. This arrangement lasted into the 1930s. RCA had a monopoly that they disguised by creating competition within their own organization. Who was the real pirate?

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