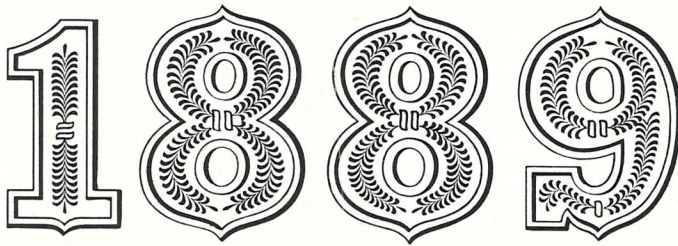


# THE STORY OF MILLS

*by Grant Shay*

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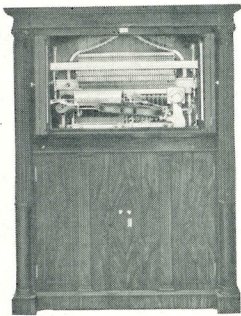


the late Herbert Stephen Mills founded the great coin machine company whose name "Mills" is famous the world over for its Bell and amusement type coin machines.

In a small work shop, 20 x 60 feet, at Jefferson and Lake Streets, Chicago, with only two employees, Mr. Mills started the manufacture of the first counter machine called the "Klondike" and later that same year he conceived the idea and started the manufacture of the famous "Owl Lifter," which was the forerunner of all the arcade type machines which Mr. Mills was to



The Famous Iron Case  
Bell of 1907.



Violano-Virtuoso,  
the greatest invention  
of the decade.

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make in the following years for operators of that era.

Two years later Mr. Mills and his growing staff, five employees in all, moved to larger quarters, 75 x 125 feet, at Clinton and Quincy Streets. Three years later a business setback caused them to return to the Jefferson and Lake Streets factory. There disaster struck again. A night fire destroyed the entire factory, including blueprints and engineering plans of many future machines, plus a great deal of prefabricated work on Klondikes and Owls.

Not to be daunted, Mr. Mills then moved to a small plant at Randolph and Desplaines Streets, the scene of the famous Haymarket Riot. Here many successful arcade machines were manufactured and sold. The growing organization known as Mills Novelty Company then moved to a considerably larger plant at Green Street and Jackson Boulevard. It was a four-story building, and it was in this building that the Mills organization made rapid strides toward world wide notice.

Old time operators will recall the famous coin machines of the past which were built in this plant, machines which in their time were the leaders like the present Mills Bell line of "21", Blue Bell, Black Beauty, etc. Many an operator made his start in the coin machine business operating these famous old machines — Autosteroscope, Wizard Fortune Teller, Dewey, Brownie, Bag Puncher, Perfume Vendor, Magnetic Piano, Cupid Post Office, Owl Lifter, Target Practice, World Horoscope, Doctor Vibrator. Then in later years there were the Official, Cannon Fire, Q.T., War Eagle, Extraordinary and many, many others.

Perhaps the most intricate, complicated and ingenious coin machine ever invented was the Violano-Virtuoso, which was introduced by Mills Novelty Company, Chicago, in the year 1910 and sold during the following decade. So remarkable was this invention that the United



States government declared the Mills Violano-Virtuoso to be one of the *ten greatest American inventions of the decade* between 1910 and 1920. The Smithsonian Institute in Washington has one of these machines in its museum and the Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan, also displays a Violano-Virtuoso.

The Violano-Virtuoso played one or more actual violins by means of a circular bow and contact of electric magnet fingers with the strings of the violin.

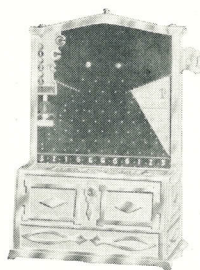
Since this instrument was operated from a paper music roll and no roll had ever been made before to operate a violin, it was necessary for Mills to invent, design and build a set of music roll cutting machines.

The master cutting machine was indeed a remarkable one. The artist doing the recording sat at a console similar to an organ and in touching the keys of the console corresponding to the same note on the violin, he punched a hole directly into the master music roll. Other machines at that time simply made a mark in pencil or graphite on the paper which afterward had to be cut out by hand with a knife. This machine of Mills actually punched the paper with the proper shaped perforation directly from the playing of the artist.

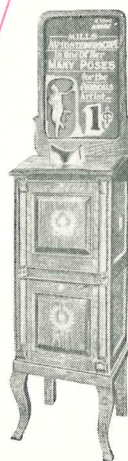
As the company grew, it began to reach out into other fields, and it was again found necessary to find larger quarters, so in 1926 they moved to their present quarters, a beautiful, modern plant, 375,000 square feet, offering the best facilities possible for coin machine manufacture.

The manufacture of an Ice Cream Freezer and Hardening Equipment for the merchant to make his own ice cream in his location was one of the ventures, and today Mills Freezer and Hardener are considered the outstanding products in that line.

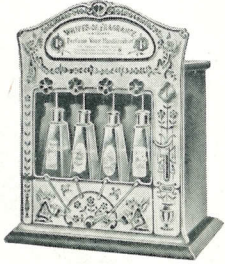
Then came a venture into the beverage vending field,



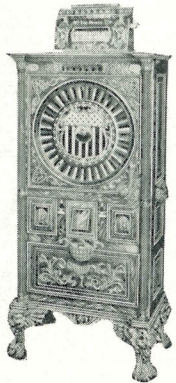
Target Practice, the best counter machine ever built.



Autosteroscope, the movie machine of its day.



Perfume Vendor for the girls of the 90's.



The Mills Dewey, forerunner of the Bell.

and Mills took the lead in the manufacture of coin operated vendors for Coca-Cola in bottles and cups. The ice cream and beverage vending equipment needed condensing units capable of doing a superior refrigeration job under a very strict type of application. Mills was not satisfied with the products on the market and so started to make their own condensing units, primarily to service their own manufactured products, the Freezer and Beverage Dispenser. Soon the word got around of the wonderful performance of the Mills Condensing Unit, and today the Refrigeration Division of Mills is one of the most successful and outstanding in this country.

For several years Mills successfully manufactured some of the finest automatic playing phonographs, and today many Empress and Throne of Music phonographs are operating with great success.

The manufacturing changes in the company made it necessary for the Mills organization to more fully cover the field with a new name. The new title was selected and decided upon, and the famous name, "Mills Novelty Company," was filed away and the now well known Mills Industries, Incorporated brought forth.

During the war years the Mills organization, with equal versatility and spirit, accepted many national defense assignments. To the products of war material they supplied the same inspired execution that characterized their other production. Their engineers contributed many ingenious inventions and shortcuts to production but still held to quality in an allotted time. Over forty-five individual heavy type jobs were produced for the United States Army, Navy and Air Forces during the war years.

On April 1, 1946, the Bell-O-Matic Corporation came into existence. The directors of Mills Industries, using great foresight, saw that the Bell Coin Machine Division