Zénobe Théophile Gramme Biography

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Biography

Zénobe Gramme was a true enigma, and it is remarkable that he was able to accomplish what he did. Born on April 4, 1826, in Jehay-Bedegnée, Belgium, Gramme was the son of an educated family of modest means. With the family's interest and ability to afford an education, one might expect great things from young Zénobe. In fact, he showed no ability as a student and did not do well at school. Preferring to work with his hands, he learned only the four basic operations of simple arithmetic and remained only semi-literate throughout his life.

Gramme did, however, have a talent in tinkering, and he left school at an early age to become a joiner. At the age of 22 he moved to Liège with his family; seven years later, in 1855, he traveled to several cities before settling down in Paris as a banister-maker. Soon after, he accepted work as a model maker at a company that manufactured electrical equipment. It was here that he became interested in technology.

Back in the 1830s two physicists, Joseph Henry in the United States and Michael Faraday in England, had independently laid the foundation for the electric dynamo (generator), a device that produced electric current. In 1867 Gramme became interested in building an improved dynamo, but not for any scientific reasons. It was more a matter of cleanliness--he was appalled by the dirt associated with the electric batteries that were used to produce power. He not only built a dynamo for the production of alternating current (AC), but two years later built one that produced direct current (DC) that produced much higher voltages than previous dynamos.

In 1871 Gramme, who had become associated with Hippolyte Fontaine (1833-1917), opened a factory to advance the development of their machines. The business, called Société des Machines Magnéto-Électriques Gramme, manufactured the Gramme dynamo, Gramme ring, Gramme armature and other devices. In 1873 a Gramme dynamo was exhibited at the Vienna exhibition in Austria, where it was discovered that the device could be reversed and used as an electric motor. Today, Gramme is most remembered for building the first practical dynamos, which established the foundation of the electrical industry.