

Ring of truth as Bell deposed by real inventor of telephone

ITALY
The Guardian in Rome

Italians have hailed the redress of an historic injustice after the US Congress recognised an impoverished Florentine immigrant, rather than Alexander Graham Bell, as the inventor of the telephone.

Historians and Italian-Americans won their battle to persuade Washington to recognise little-known mechanical genius Antonio Meucci as a father of modern communications, 113 years after his death.

The vote by the House of Representatives prompted joyous claims in Meucci's homeland on Sunday that Bell finally had been outed as a perfidious Scot who found fortune and fame by taking over another man's work.

Calling the Italian's career extraordinary and tragic, the resolution said his "teletrofono", demonstrated in New York in 1860, made him the inventor of the tele-

phone rather than Bell, who had access to Meucci's materials and took out a patent 16 years later.

"It is the sense of the House of Representatives that the life and achievements of Antonio Meucci should be recognised, and his work in the invention of the telephone should be acknowledged," the resolution stated.

Bell's immortalisation in books and films has rankled generations of Italians with knowledge of Meucci's story. Born in 1808, he studied design and mechanical engineering at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence. As a stage technician he developed a primitive system basically using two cans tied with string to help colleagues communicate.

In the 1830s he moved to Cuba and, while working on methods to treat illnesses with electric shocks, found sounds could travel through copper wire. He moved to Staten Island, near New York, in 1850 to develop the technology.

When Meucci's wife, Ester, be-

came paralysed he rigged a system to link her bedroom with his neighbouring workshop and in 1860 held a public demonstration which was reported in New York's Italian-language press.

His models became more sophisticated, but Meucci could not afford the US\$250 needed for a definitive patent for his "talking telegraph" so in 1871 he filed a one-year renewable notice of an impending patent. Three years later he could not afford the US\$10 to renew it.

He sent a model and technical details to the Western Union telegraph company but failed to win a meeting with executives. When he asked for his materials to be returned in 1874, he was told they had been lost.

Two years later Bell, who shared a laboratory with Meucci, filed a patent for a telephone, became a celebrity and made a deal with Western Union. Meucci sued for fraud and was nearing victory in court when he died in 1889.