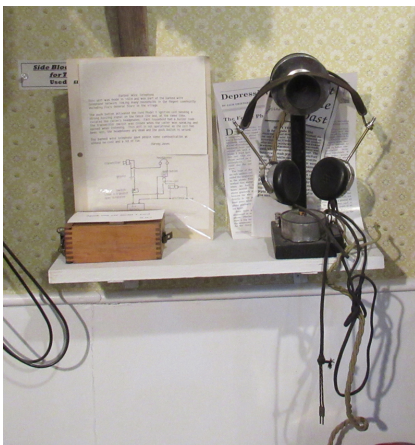


Revolutions happen because people are ready. The world was ready for the telephone revolution when Alexander Graham Bell patented his invention in 1876. Even in far-flung Winnipeg, the first phones were strung together within two years of the patent. No poles. Just wires from roof to roof top. Here, far from the maddening crowd, it took till 1904, 26 years, before the Boissevain office connected this region to the phone grid. Still, that's not shabby, considering work crews depended on horse power.

Folks were eager for the telephone. The Aitkens brothers from Boissevain had experienced the phone in Winnipeg. They returned, convinced they could add this convenience to their home-town. In 1900, they strung clotheslines between their homes, hooked up receivers, speakers, powered them with a battery, and it worked! The same scenario played out in other small towns. Two farm neighbours near Lyleton, the Lyles and Whites, connected their homes with wire strung on fence posts! If the world couldn't serve up phone lines fast enough, we'd take care of it ourselves, thank-you very much.



A barbed wire telephone display in the Elgin Museum.

The first operators in Winnipeg were young boys. But, they were too boisterous; playing pranks on subscribers. So Bell Telephone Co. shifted to hiring women mostly, encouraging

them to be the “voice with a smile”. Every call needed to go through an operator, who manually connected each caller with each person called. It was understood the operator could and would listen in on conversations. Operators knew just about everything happening in their community. She knew when the doctor was in, if young Willie was on his way home, if Grandma's cold was better, and if the train was late.

This coziness was multiplied on the party line. In rural areas, four or five farms were wired together. Each had its distinct ring, one short, or, one long and one short, etc. so they'd know if the call was for them or their neighbour. Problem was, I could quietly pick up my receiver, and listen in on conversations on our party line. This lack of privacy often fueled hard feelings between neighbours. The internet has no corner on privacy issues.

Bell's patent expired in 1883 and mayhem broke loose. Phone lines were profitable. So many companies launched their own. Competition was fierce. Companies didn't necessarily connect to each other. So subscribers would need two or three phones. Rivals would cut lines of competitors. To correct this, Manitoba became the first jurisdiction on the continent to create a publicly owned phone service. By a Conservative government no less. Good old Manitoba Telephone System had a century-long run, but recently fell to the handful of private companies that control most communication in Canada. Big companies get greedy, and everything gets faster.

Certainly not as cozy as it once was.

David Neufeld adapted ‘First Telephone’ from stories in Vantage Points 4 and 5.

See ya' later!