
First 'Phone Line in Ottawa Rideau Hall to West Block

On a day in September 1877, William Buckingham, private secretary to the Prime Minister, the Hon. Alexander Mackenzie, was reciting the "Lord's Prayer" into a box-like instrument before a critical audience at the other end which included his own chief, the Prime Minister.

It was an historic occasion, for Buckingham and the Prime Minister were testing Alexander Graham Bell's telephone invention in the first telephone conversation in Ottawa and one of the earliest in Canada. This was a preliminary testing of the instrument before having it installed at Rideau Hall and in the West Block for direct two way conversations between the Governor General, Lord Dufferin, and the Prime Minister.

TRYING EXPERIENCE

For Buckingham, this talking into an impersonal box-like thing was a distracting experience. Before he had

time to adjust himself a voice came out of the box. It was the Prime Minister making contact from his other office in the West Block where he doubled as Minister of Public Works.

Buckingham was thrown off stance by having to talk into a mouth piece before what he knew would be a listening group of Cabinet Ministers. In his braid Scotch burr, the Prime Minister instructed Buckingham to say the Lord's Prayer. Buckingham botched it. The Baptist Prime Minister then told Buckingham to listen while he repeated the Prayer for Buckingham's benefit.

Mackenzie would not let him off the hook insisting that Buckingham try it a second time. The reluctant secretary was better on the second try. Then the whole room full of guests, heard the Prime Minister admonish the hapless secretary: "You have got it all right now, Buckingham, but

don't you ever forget it again."

For this article on the installation of the first telephone and the first commercial lease of a telephone in Ottawa the writer is indebted to the historical division of the Bell Telephone Company and its expert research service, and in particular to Bell's meticulous historians, G. L. Long and Robert Spencer.)

FIRST TELEPHONE TALK

It was an Ottawa civil servant, William S. Pettegrew, in charge of the Law Branch of the Department of Marine and Fisheries, who had the important role of intermediary in bringing the first telephone to Canada's Capital. En route to Ottawa by steamer from Montreal in August 1877, Pettegrew met a fellow Scot also bound for Ottawa. He was Melville Bell, father of Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone. Bell senior was journeying to Ottawa to interest the Canadian government in the new device. The two Scots had much in common, and before Ottawa was reached Pettegrew had become in effect Bell's agent to make the necessary contacts, with a commission for all leases,

Pettegrew also acted as a public relations officer for he took Bell around to the newspaper offices. An inquisitive reporter located Bell at the Russell House on Aug. 21, 1877, and got a startling story about an invention that would carry the human voice on wires.

Two days later he got another story when he was present at the successful experiment of the first two-way conversation over the wires in Ottawa. He must have been told by a space conscious city editor to "cut it down" even though he had one of the big-

gest news breaks of the century. Here is what he wrote:

"One of these remarkable instruments was connected with Mr. Bethune's residence from the Montreal Telegraph office this morning and quite a conversation was carried between Mr. Bethune at one end and Mr. Higman at the other. When the latter gentleman attempted a song Mr. Bethune's appreciative applause could be heard by all in the telegraph office."

(Norman W. Bethune was then manager of the Montreal Telegraph Company and lived at 353 Wilbrod. Ormand Higman was chief operator of the company whose office was at 16 Metcalfe.)

TWO-MILE LINE

Following the successful test of the instrument between Buckingham in the West Block and the Prime Minister in his parliamentary office, Lord Dufferin and Hon. Alexander Mackenzie settled the matter pretty much between them. Though no act was passed to permit it, a telephone line was built to connect their offices two miles apart. That's how they operated in those days to get things done!

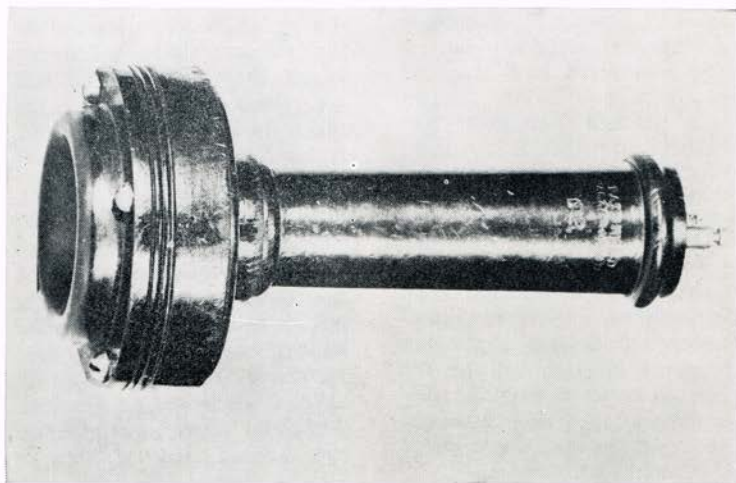
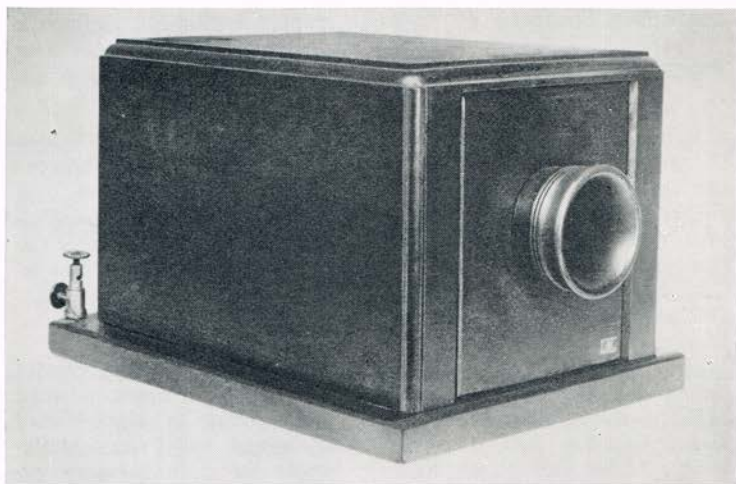
Bell's invention consisted of two types of telephones — a box telephone and a wooden hand phone. Usually only one telephone (box or hand) was used at each end of the line. The other party was signalled by tapping the diaphragm which produced a click and the instrument was moved from the mouth to the ear for both talking and listening. The Prime Minister and the Governor General used the box telephone as a signal, and a transmitter and the wooden hand telephone as the receiver. This was to facili-

tate reciprocal conversation without one closing off to hear the other.

Apparently the experiment was a musical exchange with Lady Dufferin at the piano at Rideau Hall. Pettegrew reported that "the music was heard distinctly at the de-

partment (Public Works) in Ottawa two miles distant."

(There is no record of this historic event in Lady Dufferin's "Canadian Journal" but then there are some long gaps in the entries of her diary.)



THESE PHOTOS, by courtesy of the Bell Telephone Company, show the type of telephones used in the first telephone talk in Ottawa. These were known as the Box Telephone and the Wooden Hand Telephone. Usually one telephone (Box or Hand) was used at each end of the line. Calling was done by tapping the diaphragm which produced a click and the instrument was moved from the mouth to the ear for talking and listening.

FIRST IN CANADA

According to Pettegrew, so successful was the use of this line that it was kept permanently. Not only was it the first telephone line built in Canada but it also was the first telephone enterprise through which telephone income accrued to Melville Bell, whose son assigned 75 per cent of his Canadian telephone rights to his father. The annual rental of the telephone instruments then used and paid by the Canadian government was \$42.50. The lease for this service — the first lease of its kind ever drawn in Canada — dated from Sept. 21, 1877.

To further advertise Bell's invention in the Ottawa district the "Speaking Telephone," as it was placarded, was featured at Ottawa Exhibition that year at Lansdowne Park. But Graham Bell's telephone had to compete with "Professor Grimley's Captive Balloon" ascensions. When the wind was too high the professor did not go up, and the patronage then switched to a talk over Bell's phone.

BREAK-THROUGH TO PEMBROKE

While Bell was making his

tory over a two-mile talk, Ottawa's native son, Thomas Ahearn, had his date with history in a remarkable performance the very next year in 1878. In William Paton's book "Pioneering the Telephone in Canada" the story of Ahearn's break-through into long distance telephoning is given.

At that time Thomas Ahearn was chief operator of the Montreal Telegraph Company and later its Ottawa manager in 1880. With Warren Y. Soper he built Bell's long distance line from Ottawa to Pembroke.

However in his first successful long distance talk to the Montreal Telegraph Company agent in Pembroke Ahearn utilized two cigar boxes. It was in the summer of 1878 and they talked successfully over a distance of 110 miles. That historic talk was about a hotel bill at the Copeland House in Pembroke. Ahearn was "stuck" with the bill. So after making all the arrangements and using his own cigar box telephones, Thomas Ahearn paid \$16 for the first long, long distance telephone call in history.