

The Bell connection

in the year 1884

By WALTER LEWIS

The opening of the Bell Telephone exchanges in Georgetown and Acton in November of 1884 was greeted almost casually. The Acton editor reported a satisfactory "social chat" with his Guelph counterpart and went on in the next issue to complain that nothing had been done to fix a street lamp broken sometime previous by Bell's careless employees.

But why should anyone, at least in Acton, get excited about the arrival of the Bell monopoly, when just two years before this another telephone had been invented locally?

Acton's Early Days attributes the invention to Cy Stafford and Bob Rae. While Rae was never mentioned in the contemporary accounts of the new wonder, shortly after it was patented, he did take six months leave of absence from his post as the Grand Trunk Railway station agent. Most of the credit, however, was heaped on Cyrus V. Stafford, a 23 year old teamster, who announced his patent in December 1882.

Other men mentioned in connection with the new enterprise included Henry F. Hill, who came home from Buffalo to manage the office, and A.H. Selwood and James Matthews, who took up the rights to market the new product.

ACOUSTIC TELEPHONE

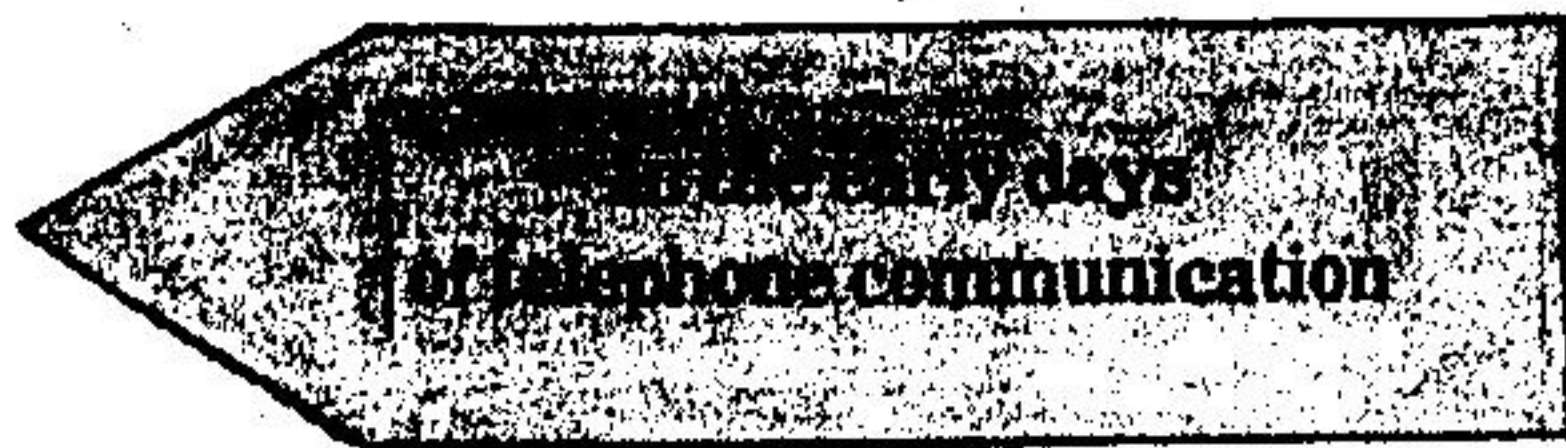
"Stafford's Acoustic Telephone" was described as being "on an entirely new principle, being on a wire without battery or electricity in any form." It was, H.P. Moore claimed, "much clearer on short distances than the electric telephone" and thus was ideal for private lines, say from home to office or factory, or from hotel room to front desk. To demonstrate its value a line was installed between Moore's newspaper office and J.E. McGarvin's drug store, another line between Matthew's post office and Nicklin's bakery and a third demonstration line in London, Ontario.

All three attracted considerable attention and much "heloing" ensued. While the "Stafford Acoustic Telephone" ultimately failed to be competitive because it couldn't be integrated into the general telephone network, it certainly took the edge off the enthusiasm with which Bell was later greeted.

The new Bell agencies had been established in McGarvin's Drug Store in Acton and J.H. Jackson's stationery and furniture shop in Georgetown. Within a year these men had installed 14 phones in Acton and all of 20 in Georgetown and Glen Williams. The new service was principally a business tool, Acton having only two residential installations, at W.D. Beardmore's and H.P. Moore's and Georgetown three, John R. and Joseph Barber and G.S. Goodwillie.

It is not surprising that the Barber brothers so readily took the telephone into their homes. Apart from their pioneering work with electrification, just before the Acton version of the telephone was announced, they had petitioned Bell to establish a local agency.

In both places medical men were early subscribers, as were the railway companies, manufacturers and newspaper offices. Thus it is not surprising that the major advantage was seen to be the direct communication with Guelph, Hamilton, Toronto and other communities.



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