

HISTORIC ROOTS

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CONNECTING: THE TELEPHONE IN THE MAD RIVER VALLEY

By ANN E. COOPER

Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876. The first call ever made was to his assistant, who was in the next room. “Mr. Watson, come here. I want you,” Bell said.

Before many years passed, people wanted phones in their homes and businesses. Many of them made their own. And, to be able to connect to other phones, some people started their own phone companies.

Eleanor Haskin is the President of the Waitsfield-Fayston Telecommunications Company. She tells about some of these private companies. “There was one in Franklin,” she says. “[It] was formed because the man who was filling the grain [cars] wanted to know when the train [had] arrived at the siding....If it was late, he didn’t want to go down and wait.”



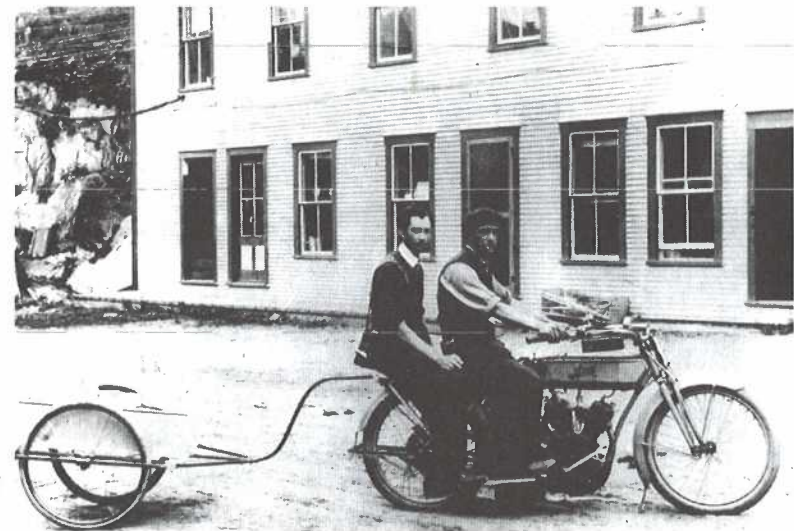
Eleanor Farr Haskin

Courtesy of Waitsfield Telecom

“There was one town in Vermont,” she continues, “where a doctor put in a phone system so that he could stay in touch with his patients and not have to go out in the mud and wind and snow and ice to see [them].”

In 1904, about 20 people got together in the Mad River Valley and formed the Waitsfield-Fayston Telephone Company. Their first telephone book listed 30 customers. But the phone company grew fast. Soon there were lines to Roxbury, Middlesex, Warren, and Moretown.

Eleanor Haskin grew up with the phone company. Her father, Elton Farr, ran the company until his death in 1940. Then her mother took over. Mrs. Farr was one of the few women



Alton Farr, President and Manager of Waitsfield-Fayston Telephone Company, used a motorcycle to get to “trouble calls.”

Courtesy of Waitsfield Telecom



Eunice Farr, mother of Eleanor Haskin, became manager of the company after her husband died. She was as good at trouble-shooting as she was at keeping the books and running the switchboard.

executives at that time. The company is now run by Mrs. Haskin and her children. Its lines reach far beyond the Mad River Valley, into the rest of the world.

In the 1910s and 1920s, the Farris knew just about everyone in Waitsfield. Those who did not have enough money to pay for phone service “would trade service for products.” Mrs. Haskin says that her father “would get wood ashes for his garden, maple syrup, eggs, chickens, half a pig, anything that would pay the bill.”

Before the telephone, when there was no radio or television either, it was hard for people to get news or important information quickly. The phone changed all that.

But phone service was not the kind we are used to now. You couldn’t just pick up the phone and dial. All calls had to go through an operator. The operators had a switchboard with a hole for each telephone line and plugs and wires to connect them. When a call came in, the operator had to plug the right wire into the right hole. If there were a lot of calls at once, the operator was pretty busy.

There was no such thing as a dial tone back then. There were no dials. Phones hung on the wall. They had a crank on the side. Alden



Elizabeth Long and Marguerite Moriarty answered calls on the switchboard at the old meat market in Waitsfield. Notice the wires coming through the window.

Bettis' wife worked as a telephone operator in Waitsfield. As he tells it, to make a call, "...you step up there and take the receiver off and wind that old crank[. A]nd then the operator would



Courtesy of Waitsfield Telecom

Eunice Farr and her repair truck get ready to make another service call along the Valley's muddy roads in the 1940s.

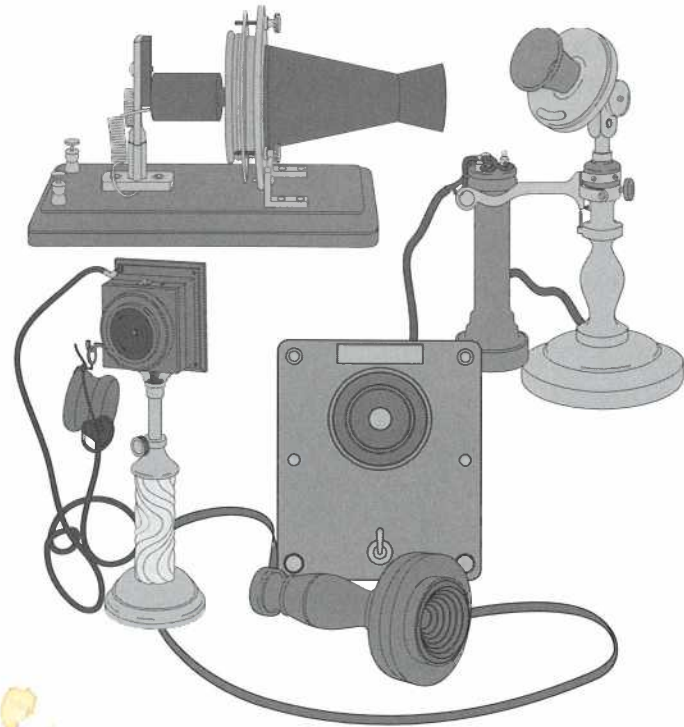
come on and you tell her what number you want and she'd plug in that switch...." And then the phone would ring at the other end.

Because all calls had to go through the switchboard, and because the office was in the middle of town, the operators knew a lot about what was going on. Mrs. Haskin remembers that "if anyone called for the doctor, the operator more than likely would know [where he was]. So she'd say, 'I just saw the doctor go off toward Moretown.'"

The phone company, through the operator, really provided a public service. Because she could connect many lines at once, the operator was able to get help in emergencies. If there was a fire, she would call all the volunteer firemen. There was a coded ring for fires. When they heard it, the volunteers would run to the phone. Alden Bettis remembers, "...She'd put in a whole bunch of those plugs and then she'd ring,...three short rings three times. And then she'd come on the phone and tell where the fire was and everybody would take off and go and help fight the fire."

People also got notice by phone of events taking place in town. "If it was a notice, [the code] was two short rings," Eleanor Haskin recalls.

It is only recently that there have been private telephone lines. In the beginning, many households shared what was called a party line.



Some party lines had more than 20 households on them. Each household had its own special ring, so people could tell whether a call was for them or for someone else.

With so many people on a line, it was not always easy to get a call, or to make one. If someone else was on the phone, you would have to wait until they were finished. Then you had to hope you would get to the phone before someone else picked it up.

Party lines made it possible to listen in on other people's conversations. And many people did. The operator wasn't the only person who

knew what was going on in town! Ed Eurich remembers "you'd always hear click, click, click [when you were on the phone]...Different people...were picking up the receiver, just to see what was going on."

"Stella Boise in North Fayston became very famous," says Mrs. Haskin. "She sat in her chair next to...a clock. And so any time that Stella was listening,...people would say, 'Good morning, Stella,' because they could hear her clock ticking."

One day, Ed Eurich tells, Clarence Strong wanted to use the phone. When he picked up the receiver, "there were two ladies talking. And one of them said she just made these cookies and put them in her oven....He went about his work and he came back, ten minutes or so later, and they were still on talking. So he went back to work....And came back and they were still on the phone. Well, he got pretty well upset....And he finally...went to the phone and snuffed a little....And then he says, 'I smell something burning.' And this lady says, 'Oh my land, my cookies may be burning!'"

Rupert Blair remembers Mrs. Lovett. She "had quite a nose for news....She would sit up there and every time the telephone rang, she would get the news....Party line,...[it was] a live version of your soaps."

In 1961, when there were still only 325 customers, the Waitsfield-Fayston Company

changed over to dial phones and single lines. The reason, Mrs. Haskin says, was the growth of the Sugarbush ski area. Skiing was becoming a popular sport. To take care of its business and its customers, the resort needed to have its own private lines.

The rest of the state took a bit longer to switch. As late as 1979, there were 35,000 party lines in the state. In 1994, there were still more than 8,000. Today there are fewer than 40.

Times have changed since the beginnings of the telephone. This is an age of instant and constant communication. We get news in minutes from all over the world, through radio and television, and the newest phone-connected service, the internet. We can call people



all over the world in seconds. We have extension phones, touch-tone phones, car phones, cordless phones, cellular and digital phones.

We take all this for granted. But once, not that long ago, the idea and the reality of phones were new, as were things like electric power, radio, the automobile. The telephone changed the way we keep in touch and do business. It is hard now to imagine both that newness and what it was like before the phone became a part of everyday life. And it is hard to imagine life now without it.

Rooting Around

You might want to make a list of the number of times you use the phone in a day, and the reasons for those calls. What would you have done if there were no phones? How did people stay in touch and do business in earlier times?

The material for this article was taken from interviews conducted by the Vermont Folklife Center, located in the Gamaliel Painter House on Court Street in Middlebury. These formed the basis for a radio program that was broadcast on Vermont Public Radio in the summer of 1998. You can read more about the telephone in the Mad River Valley in Volume 4 of the Folklife Center's magazine, *Visit'n: Conversations with Vermonters*.

For more information about *Visit'n* and the Folklife Center itself, call 802-388-4964.