

Trying To Stay Connected

by Lynne Belluscio

A couple of months ago, I bought on eBay a wonderful wooden Stromberg-Carlson telephone. It doesn't work any more, but it was just right for the Lapp Insulator Exhibit about the importance of insulators for telephone service. I also bought a removable wall mural of two telephone poles, with birds sitting on the wires. But as luck would have it, I put the rolled mural down and couldn't remember where I put it, until last week, when I discovered it was right on top of one of the library tables, buried under a pile of papers. So I put up the two phone poles and think it looks pretty neat.

In 1894, Alexander Graham Bell's patent for the telephone expired and two Swedish immigrants, who had worked for Bell in Chicago, were determined to establish their own company. Alfred Stromberg and Androv Carlson began working on a magneto-operated telephone which successfully avoided patent infringements. Bell Telephone concentrated on the urban market, but independent companies like Stromberg-Carlson developed equipment suited for rural areas.

Their phone was known as the "Farmer's Telephone." The crank on the side would allow you to ring the operator for service. Inside the phone were batteries and a magneto to operate the phone. By lifting the ear horn, the rest would pop up and open the phone line for service. This was the time of the party line, when several households shared the same line. It wasn't at all uncommon to pick up the phone and hear your neighbor talking, and you would have to wait for them to get off the line before ringing the operator.

You could also ring others on your line, if you knew their "ring." This was usually a combination of long and short rings, unique to each person on the line. When I was growing up in Rochester, I remember well into high school, being on a party line. It was pretty difficult carrying on a long conversation with your boy friend when you knew your neighbors might be listening in.

In 1902, Stromberg-Carlson of Chicago, was sold to the Home Telephone Company of Rochester and most of the manufacturing was moved to Rochester. Stromberg-Carlson manufactured home telephones, switchboards, switching machines and eventually radio receivers. They acquired the oldest Rochester radio station, WHAM, and rebuilt it into a high power AM station. They also acquired one of the first three FM stations, WBZA and developed one of the earliest television stations in Western New York, now WROC-TV.

In the meantime, in LeRoy, in the later 1800s, when telephone service was being developed, the Bell Telephone Company was in trouble for not getting permission to erect telephone poles on private property. The trouble began in 1883, and didn't come to a head until 1897. James McVean on the "Creek Road" (Oatka Trail), refused to allow Bell to erect seven poles on his land saying that when the first poles were put in place in 1883, seven trees were mutilated. The hearing was set for June 11, 1897, and several witnesses declared that Mr. McVean's property would not be devalued because of the new telephone poles. I never could find out what came from the hearing.

On Main Street in the Village, Bell Telephone installed underground cable conduits, with a capacity of 600 lines. But out on East and West Main Street, the phone wires were stretched along telephone poles with five or six arms. Each arm had six or ten insulators. There were as many as sixty wires strung from pole to pole. I was driving out



Circular Hill Road on the way home, and looked west from the railroad crossing, and there were several poles still standing - most of the insulators gone or broken - but there were the remnants of an eyesore. In some cities, they

described the mass of phone wires so dense that you couldn't see the sky. Today, the thousands of phone poles and wires have been replaced by fiber optic wires or cell towers.



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