

Telephones in Seneca County

Article written by Betty Auten, Seneca County Historian, and appeared in the Volume 4 Number 3 (circa late 1986) issue of her Seneca County History newsletter.

The concept of being able to talk to friends or relatives who resided many miles away must have been very appealing. The idea was probably even more desirable to the industrialists and merchants of the late 1870's who had to conduct their business by mail or through personal attention.

An interest in telephones in Seneca County was expressed soon after its introduction to the public. Seneca Falls was one of the first villages in the estate to elect to have telephone service. The first subscriber was James H. Gould.

At that time, Gould was in charge of Goulds and also the hood Coal Co. He spoke to Walter D. Brown, a local electrician, about installing telephones at the two locations.

The telegraph company informed Gould that if he could get 15 to 20 subscribers that they would build an exchange in the village. Brown managed to sign up 19 somewhat reluctant customers and he and Wells C. Fairbanks set up an exchange in the engine house at 115 Fall St.

By October, Seneca Falls had 60 subscribers. All were served from a small room in the rear of the engine house. Towers were built on the highest buildings and there was only a short line of poles on Cayuga St.

Waterloo had a primitive conception of a telephone as early as November 1877. On November 2, a line was connected between the Waterloo Woolen Mill's east mill and the office. It consisted of two wires twisted together, and a piece of hard wood at each end of the line. This contained a magnet and zinc plate. A knob was pressed in the office which set a bell ringing by electricity in the east mill. There, another knob was pressed and the answering bell was heard in the office.

A person could speak through the telephone while someone held the other end to his ear. The *Waterloo Observer* described it by writing, "By speaking slowly and distinctly a voice could be heard almost as plainly as if the speaker were in the same room and not in a separate building about 30 rods away."

The Waterloo Village Board granted permission to the telephone company to set poles in October 1880. In November a switch board was placed in John Casterlin's office with 25 wires. Twelve business firms and two residences were connected to the first office. The first residential phone was installed in the Richard P. Kendig house on the corner of Center St. and North Road.

By May 1881, Waterloo and Geneva were connected by telephone and by April 1882 the telephone line between Seneca Falls and Auburn was completed by way of Mud Lock.

The first telephone south of the river in Waterloo was installed on Jan. 2, 1882 in the office of Reamer and Halstead. Mrs. Herman Brehm of Waterloo was one of the first woman operators. In 1904 she worked mornings in Seneca Falls and afternoons in Waterloo. John Brady of Seneca Falls was wire chief for both villages for more than 40 years.

In the early days of audio communication there was no "Ma Bell." Telephone companies were organized and the local municipalities were being persuaded to allow the companies to have the franchise for the telephone business. In February 1898, the New Jersey Telephone Co. asked permission to put up poles in Seneca Falls. If accepted, the private lines would cost \$18 a year, stores would pay \$24; fire and police alarms would be provided at not cost in return for the franchise. Apparently the company did not get the franchise, for in June 1900, Webster Perry of

Richmond, Indiana was granted a franchise to start a new telephone service in Seneca Falls. The maximum rate was still listed at \$18 a year. The company agreed to put in six free phones for the village, install and maintain police and fire alarm systems.

That deal must have also fell through, for on September 20, 1901, a franchise was granted to Rawson Construction Co. by the Seneca Falls village trustees. The company was to construct, operate and maintain a telephone line in the village.

The local company was known as the Home Telephone Company and on May 10, 1904 it published a list of subscribers. There were then 125 telephones in Waterloo and 197 in Seneca Falls. By 1900 the telephone had reached Ovid, although the lines were still not connected between north and south Seneca County.

The October 1900 Ovid newspaper noted that among the first in Ovid to get a telephone were: Peter Flynn, Fayette C. Allen, Benjamin Franklin, Kinne Brothers, the Franklin Hotel, L.C. Pitcher, E.C. Pomeroy, the Rev. Hendricks of Holy Cross Church and the newspaper.

On Sept. 23, 1904, a new corporation was organized as the MacDougall Telephone Company with the following officers: Addison Baldrige, president; Clarence C. Updike, vice president; Alexander Baldrige, treasurer. It required four and a half more years before the MacDougall Telephone Company completed its extension from Ovid to Hayts Corner and in January 1909 the line was nearly finished from Ovid to Elm Beach.

Telephone exchanges were established through the county. In addition to offices at Waterloo, Seneca Falls and Ovid, there were others, some possibly located in someone's house, at MacDougall, Lodi, Interlaken, Fayette and Yale.

Some of those who worked in those early telephone offices were: Fannie Brewer who was central operator of the MacDougall office. In 1913 she was replaced by Mrs. George Slaght. In 1926 Mrs. Early Murphy was chief operator of the Ovid exchange and in April 1936, Miss Mabel Nearpass completed 30 years with the Seneca Falls Telephone office.

The Seneca County Home Telephone Company was purchased by the Bell company in 1913. At that time Newman Jenkins was in charge of the office. Ada Kuney, later Mrs. Marshall was the operator.

The telephone became a necessity rather than a luxury, until today it is indeed a rarity if someone does not have a telephone. New York Bell and then American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) became the major owners, although small companies have still managed to "hang in there."

Although there are always changes and new developments such as the telephone in the 1880's, television in the 1950's and cable at the present time, things still remain the same. For example, it would appear that the telephone company has expanded to the end of the world, but there is still room for expansion. At the present time M.C.I. is preparing to lay wires through Seneca County and soon local subscribers will also have a choice of long distance services.