

South Crosby Rural Telephone Company

Submitted by Neil A. Patterson

On the 7th day of November 1907, at The Empire Hotel in Elgin, a group of public-spirited citizens of the village and surrounding district met for the purpose of forming what was to become the **South Crosby Rural Telephone Company**. Hiram S. Davison, of Phillippsville was appointed Chairman and Sautelle Dargavel was named Secretary. A committee composed of John Dargavel, Dr. D.A. Coon and Dr. J.M. Dunn was formed with the direction to create an action plan for the new undertaking. Two weeks later, on November 21st, those present appointed a Board of Directors and a unanimous vote elected a President, Dr. D.A. Coon, a Secretary, J.S. Dargavel and seven directors: Wiley A. Coon, A.L. Campbell, J.G. Delong, W.E. Gray, B.M. Cannon, B.N. Henderson and E.V. Halladay.

The new board established a Constitution and Bylaws allowing for application to be made for incorporation. Prior to receiving the first call, start-up costs (required for a building with the necessary equipment, erecting poles and lines and paying early salaries) were estimated at \$13,750.00. To raise these funds, shares were sold in the new company; its shares, listed on the Canadian Securities Market, could be bought and sold by any stock broker. The Telephone Company began operation on March 15th, 1912.

A bill for \$12 from the Telephone Company to C.S. Johnson for toll calls between July 1, 1912 and July 1, 1913 was signed on behalf of the Telephone Company by J.S. Dargavel. The 1921 Census shows only 2 employees - operator Jennie Kerr (wife of the postmaster Charlie Kerr) who was paid \$700 a year and lineman Horace Judson.

In 1930, the site of early telephone operations, lot 11 in Elgin, was sold to Adelbert Campbell; eventually, in 1948, becoming Ben Campbell's Hardware. The Telephone Company purchased lot 29 and constructed what was to be known as - **The Central Office**. These property transactions were handled on behalf of the board by the President A.L. Campbell and Secretary Aileen Fahey. Despite it being The Depression Era, demand showed a need to expand the entire system. A.R. Patterson, from Burrridge, was hired to restructure the complete operation. The 1931 census showed that the Company only employed 3 operators, Muriel George, Wilhemena Tole and Nell Pinkerton. Ali Patterson's plan included doubling the switchboard size to accommodate all the new private lines he planned to establish. More lines meant more operators: Ali hired his sister Hilda from Crow Lake as well as Mildred Kerr and Verna Lewis. Later, Annie Weeks and the Gard Girls worked as operators in the late 40's and early 50's. Charley Lake was added to the Horace Judson's technical staff; Ike Updegrove and Royden Pope began setting up new polls and lines where none had existed previously.



Central Office, Elgin, On. Today, it is a private home.



Operators – Ruby Mustard and Annie Weeks

The Telephone Office had 2 switchboards needing 2 operators from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. The room was closed off from the public by a glass and wood wall with a wicket to accept payments or receive call information. In the public section, a booth with desk, chair and phone allowed for private calls to be made. Businessmen like Fred Acheson, a cattle buyer

who shipped his product to meat packing companies, came to the Central Office 2 to 3 times a week using the desk and phone to make his mostly long-distance calls. Cottagers on Newboro, Clear, Sand and Whitefish Lakes did not have telephones: while here, they came to the Central Office to call back to their homes in the United States. Ernie Oliver, from Toronto, a summer resident on Sand Lake, came to the Central Office frequently to place what were likely business calls. He and his big blue Chrysler were always noted when he arrived as he often brought chocolates for the operators and Ali's son. Ali took up residence in the home part of the Telephone Office as did Hilda who was the overnight emergency call operator. After Ali married, his 2 eldest sons were born in the building.

During Ali's 20 year management, there was great growth in numbers of customers and in technology. He began the process of changing the party lines to private lines. The party line system, which saw as many as 10 households on one line was flawed. A caller would ask the operator who answered a call to be connected to a particular person. She would put an extension cord into the plug designated for that person's line, pull a little switch to ring the intended customer (perhaps 2 long rings and one short ring). The person at that home would hear the 2 long rings and 1 short ring and knew the call was for them. At the same time, 9 other households would also hear the phone rings; one or more of these households would pick up their phones and listen in. You dare not say that your unmarried daughter was pregnant as almost all of South Crosby plus Phillippsville, Portland and Newboro would know all the details in 20 minutes.

The telephone lines spread across the country were ready targets for lightning strikes during thunderstorm; the electricity would follow the wire back to the telephone office. Both the walls inside and the outside of the office were marked with the black burn marks from the lightning strikes. When the lightning struck, the line keys would all open as though there were in- coming calls. The operators knew that they had to leave the switchboard when a thunderstorm was active in the area: they said it was time for "thunder tea". No long distance or emergency calls would be answered.

The private lines grew to the point that the 2 switchboards required 2 operators, 14 hours a day, 7 days a week. By the end of the Second World War, the technology had changed to the degree that private line calls could be connected automatically. Long distance calls were kept under the control of the operator. Because time and charges had to be added to the subscriber's account.

Following the WW II, Bell Canada began to modernize the system; by the 1950's, when Ruby Mustard became the manager, except for long distance calls, dial phones with 4 number dialing had replaced the need for 2 operators. Bell took over the system in 1956/57, building what were called repeater stations. In 1972, Bell made an agreement with the Community Telephone Company of Ontario to operate their rural phone system. The South Crosby Telephone Company ceased to exist and the Central Office was sold as a home to Gordon Curry.