First Area Telephones

BY BARBARA H. BELL

Local, up-to-date residents wanted a telephone system by the early 1880s. Gleaning from hundred-year-ago columns in the *Watkins Review & Express,* the first telephone was installed in 1882 in the Budd Boot and Shoe Store in Watkins Glen. If you wished to make a call, you went there. However, there were relatively few places to contact. The telephone was looked upon as a business convenience or, at home, a luxury which only the richer citizens could afford.

Progress was made and, in 1883, the office was moved to the business place on Fourth Street of F. Davis who operated a malt company along the western shore of Seneca Lake near the foot of Bath Street.

"The instrument has been put in the rear apartment where those who wish to use it will be undisturbed by noise and confusion." Miss Ella Walter was in charge.

The Davis business made history in 1886 when it put automatic bell-call telephones between its two sites. The telephones were of Taylor's patent, the newspaper reported, and did not require an electrical battery.

That year, 1883, marked plenty of telephone growth. Wiring was run from northern Town of Reading to an extension from Tyrone through Weston and other hamlets of Tyrone to Bath. One connection was in the railway depot in Reading Centre. In general, a five-minute call between adjoining places

cost 15 cents. From Reading Centre to Rock Stream, Altay, Tyrone or Weston was 20 cents, to Bath 25 cents and to Hammondsport 30 cents.

Wrote an editor: "This project is an entirely fashionable one as the villages through which the line (is) extended are thriving centers of intelligent communities who, once becoming aware of the benefits of the telephone line to the county seat, would consider it nearly as indispensable as it is now considered by businessmen of the cities."

That year, it was announced in newspapers that "a considerable amount of the next annual tax will be paid by the several telephone lines passing through the county." Assessment — in Reading $2,000 — was based on the number of poles and mileage of lines.

It made news when someone telephoned Williamsport from the Budd Store and had a successful conversation.

In 1884, the office of the telephone system moved from Budd's to the S.G. & C. Railway for a brief time before changing to the former law office of Attorney Warren Barnum, upstairs over the Thompson Drugstore.

Now the village of Watkins had telephone connections with Dundee, Penn Yan, and Ovid and was anticipating more soon.

In 1884 the telephone company was removed from Alpine because the village businessmen, who had raised $100 the previous year to bring it in, would not bind themselves to pay a stipulated sum monthly.

In the same year, lines opened from Havana (Montour Falls) to Catharine by way of Odessa. In Odessa, headquarters were in the G. Montgomery store and in Catharine at Eli Stanley's (possibly a private home). Continuing on to Cayuta and Newfield was anticipated.

In 1885, the first incorporation papers ever brought to Town of Catharine were those of the New York-Pennsylvania Telephone Company. In Catharine, there were six poles with connecting wires. The next year, the service reached Cayuta. A number of companies were formed around the rural areas, financed by the sale of stock. Repairmen traveled afoot or with horses. Severe weather could adversely affect service and it was sometimes weeks before being

restored to all customers.

Folks had telephone parties with everyone on the line for a gab fest. These party lines were helpful in spreading word of emergencies, too. At first, everyone was on a single line. When the 'phone rang', everyone answered until the right party was reached. Then the others hung up — sometimes. You could ring anyone on your own line, after smaller party lines were established. You simply reeled the crank at the side of the telephone box the correct number of long or short rings.

Investors often lost their entire share when companies failed to make ends meet. Between 1885 and 1888, these went out of business: Alpine, Altay, Catharine, North Hector Landing, Peach Orchard, Perry City, Reading Centre Station, and Weston.

Service was extended, in 1890, from Monterey to Beaver Dams. The lines between Sugar Hill, Ellison Hollow and Monterey had, for many years, Mrs. Sate Brown as operator. No matter what she was doing in the daytime, she had to stop to get to the switchboard if a customer rang in. Later, Mrs. Jenny Worden took over. Operators had to get up in the night to respond, too.

Before there were so many telephones, back in the Davis location, calling hours were restricted to 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. But that was when you went there to call someone.

There were separate companies, for various periods, called Ovenshire, Pine Creek, Monterey, and Toll Lines in the Town of Orange.

Usually, when one company failed, someone was ready to start another. There was a new company in 1904 called the Reading-Rock Stream Telephone and Telegraph Company. Chief mover was Charles Chapman. He raised $10,000 at $50 per share. Charter subscribers paid $4 per year.

It was insufficient.

However, Chapman's experience and that of Harry R. Martin, who knew the business in Burdett, were the choice of officers when the Montour Falls Telephone Company lines were installed in 1908. There were about 130 customers.

There was mention of a Wedgwood Company in 1938.

In 1959, the Burdett Telephone Company converted to the dial system at a cost of about $200,000. It had about 300 customers. Watkins Glen modernized similarly in 1962 and Odessa in 1966.

What would some of those early entrepreneurs think about today's telephone services, styles and abilities?