

Telephone Historical Collection

by ISABEL GERACHTY

Bell Canada's Telephone Historical Collection is a research archive containing approximately three and a half million paper documents and twenty-five thousand pieces of equipment dating from the late 1800s to the present day. Taken together they provide a record of telephone history in Canada with a particular emphasis on the role played by Bell Canada, though they do not form precisely a Bell Canada company archive.

The Collection originates from a decision made in 1880 by the officers of the newly formed Bell Telephone Company of Canada: to preserve all of the records of their predecessors in the telephone business. Another step, taken by a plant employee, laid the foundation of the equipment section of the Collection. Frank Field joined Bell Canada in 1889 as night operator and a year later was made inspector and wireman, installing and repairing telephones. Since improvements in telephone hardware were very rapid, Field began to retain samples of outmoded equipment which might otherwise have been thrown away. By 1928, the collection had grown to more than one thousand items and had already been displayed many times at open houses, family nights and conventions. When the head office building on Beaver Hall Hill, Montreal, was built in 1928, space for the historical documents and artifacts was provided on the twentieth floor. A museum was established there, in 1931, under the Company Historian and remained until 1966 when the space was appropriated for air conditioning equipment. With pieces borrowed from the Telephone Historical Collection, the Public Relations Department later established a museum on the ground floor of the Beaver Hall Building although, for budgetary reasons, this has since been dismantled.

In 1938 George L. Long was appointed Bell Canada Historian. He enlisted the help of Canadian members of the Telephone Pioneers of America, an organization of long service telecommunications employees, in searching for items of historical interest and value. Pioneers became and remain faithful and constant donors to the Collection, where details of telephone history are contained in their life stories, in Bell Canada and Northern Telecom annual reports, articles and studies dating from the 1870s to the present day, circulars and bulletins, magazines and newspapers. The Collection includes the most modern apparatus as well as telephones of types long since obsolete, and some of the switchboards that bore the burden of early intercommunication. Telephone operators and telephone linemen are well represented in thousands of



Postcard postmarked 1913. (BTHC)

photographs in Collection files while the number of poles and the type and number of miles of wire the men erected are recorded in long distance ledgers and shown on early long distance line maps.

The first subscribers to telephone service were listed on sheets that hung beside the telephone; in 1879 the first directory in book form was issued in Toronto. As the popularity of the instrument grew and wires passed through towns and cities, new dots appeared on line maps and telephone directories became ever larger, recording not only subscribers' names but also the opening of exchanges, the names of Bell local managers, the names and locations and subscribers of independent companies, the rates for service, and the quality of transmission. The Collection's lists and directories dating from 1878, for offices in Bell territory, have been invaluable in the preparation of the seven hundred exchange histories on file.

The postcard craze of the 1920s brought in some five hundred telephone postcards, and the Collection has about the same number of motion pictures showing such events as the erection of the first transcontinental line (United States) in 1915, the round-the-world call in 1935, the Newfoundland (Defence) Project in the 1940s, the erection of the Trans-Canada Microwave System, and various other milestones in telephone history. Tape recordings range from Thomas Watson speaking of his work with Alexander Graham Bell in the 1870s to President Nixon's conversation with astronauts on the moon in 1969.

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Operators Millie Coulson and Elizabeth Pride with friends at the Lowville, Ont., telephone exchange in the early 1900s. (BTHC 31637)



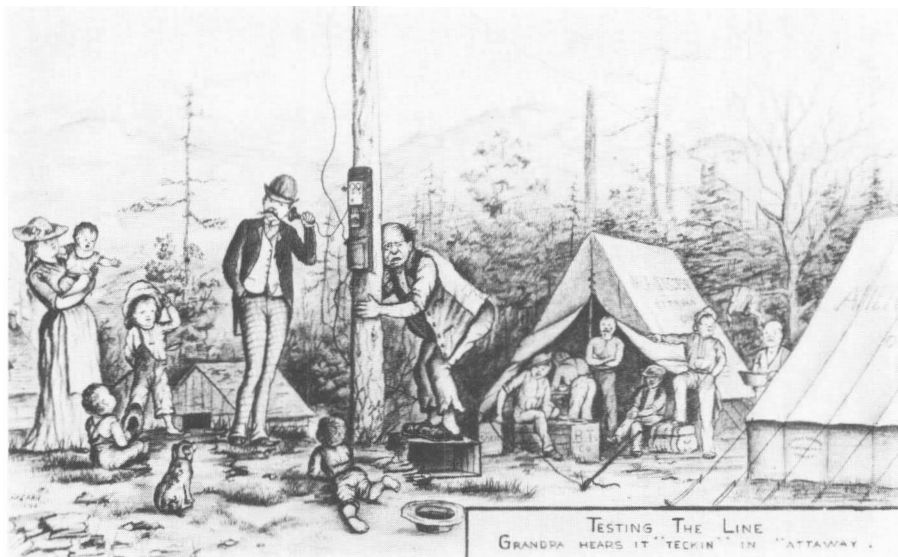
Placing underground cable, Montreal, 1922. (BTHC 5956)



Lena Owens, Wainfleet, Ont., at a number one standard switchboard, 1900s. The calculagraph at right was used for timing long distance calls. (BTHC 2697-A)

The Collection houses documents, photographs, catalogues and equipment tracing telephone manufacture from the first factory at Brantford, Ontario, in 1878, to the Bell-Northern Research and Development Laboratories of today. It has, too, comprehensive files on the Trans-Canada Telephone System, the Telephone Association of Canada, Northern Telecom, independent and connecting Canadian telephone companies, telecommunications in foreign countries, and on every subject from cigar box telephones to the "Contempra" and modern "Logic 10" instruments; from correspondence written by inventor Alexander Graham Bell to descriptions, dates, photographs and equipment samples for electronic switching; from comments of the 1870s on the new-fangled instrument to customer opinions of today. Recent acquisitions include the architect's plans for the first company building in Hamilton, completed in 1891, and fibre optic artifacts. Some exhibits with special appeal are a book of sketches showing the erection of the Almonte-Pembroke telephone line in 1886 by the brother of contractor Thomas Ahearn, the company founder's tobacco pouch, duplicates of items placed in the Beaver Hall building cornerstone, tools used by early linemen, a piece of wire from early Brantford tests, albums of telecommunications stamps from around the world, tokens, colourful badges, telephone booths that look like elevator cars, and pieces of venerable telephone poles.

The variety of types, sizes, contents, and ages of items in the Collection pose filing, storing and cataloguing difficulties as well as serious preservation problems. The increasing frequency of requests for information from the Collection's 3,200 telephone directories and the resulting wear and tear on the books has long been a major concern. Microfilming of these directories commenced



The Ottawa firm of Ahearn and Soper contracted to build the first long distance telephone line from Almonte to Pembroke in 1886. Morris Ahearn's sketch book records adventures encountered along the way. (BTHC 8260)

this year. The directories are photographed in the Collection offices where the microfilm is examined by staff. If the film is satisfactory, a copy is immediately ordered for office use and the original film sent to safe storage. An index to the places noted in the telephone books along with the titles and dates of the directories in which they appear, microfilm reel numbers and odometer readings is being prepared and, if all goes well, the Historian hopes to make the films and index available to interested libraries and institutions. Arrangements are underway to microfilm early press clipping binders and scrapbooks of newsclippings which are rapidly deteriorating. The originals of the clippings and the telephone directories will be retained under proper archival conditions.

Bell Canada will be one hundred years old on 29 April 1980. Collection holdings detail the growth of the company since its formation and testify to the vision and courage of the telephone pioneers.

Résumé

La collection historique de la cie de Téléphone *Bell* (Canada) raconte les origines et l'évolution de l'industrie des télécommunications.