

Colebrook's First Telephone

A major piece of Colebrook history was recently donated to the Historical Society. Kitty Winn contacted us saying that her mother wished to donate the first telephone ever to be installed in Colebrook in memory of her late husband, Keith Jackson. Here is the chain of events that led up to this:

Reuben Rockwell, owner of the Colebrook Store throughout much of the nineteenth century, was a forward-looking man and more than once introduced innovations in his hometown; certainly one of the most important was his introduction of Alexander Graham Bell's new invention, the telephone. After the initial laboratory testing, telephones came into practical use about 1876, although on a very limited basis.

The first demonstration of the working of a telephone in Winsted was given in the Music Hall in 1877. A wire had been run from that building (about where Super Saver now stands) to a house just east of Union Street, a distance of about one block. The result was several local citizens agreeing to subscribe for the services.

Initially, each town or district had what was referred to as a subscriber's organization. Exchanges were established in districts and a system of wires went from the individual phones to the central switchboard, where an operator could connect any two phones together. To get the attention of the operator, a device called a call-box was activated by turning a crank at the side of the phone box. The operator would then ask what subscriber the caller wished to talk to. When the conversation was finished, the crank was turned once more and the operator knew to disconnect the two phones. The earliest models required between 50-77 seconds for the operator to connect the two parties. Shortly thereafter switchboards became equipped with lights to indicate lines that were in use.

The first switchboards employed young men as operators, but it was soon determined that women were more efficient and were liked better by the customers.

At this point, I would like to inject an aside here concerning a chair that remained a mystery to the members of the Colebrook Historical Society for quite a few years. Many years ago someone gave us a stool-like chair that had a peculiar metal back rest that flared out from the back of the seat three or four inches, then went straight up about one foot, ending with a curved, wooden back rest. For years we asked visitors whom we thought might be knowledgeable on the subject, if they knew what purpose it might have served; there were a few tentative guesses, but no real answers. Then one day a visitor stopped by and left the answer written neatly on a three by five card, which was left on the seat of our mystery chair. It was one of the first telephone operator's chairs. In the 1870s and 80s, women wore bustles under their skirts, and the peculiar bulge in the back accommodated those skirts.

Apparently, Reuben Rockwell was in attendance at the 1877 demonstration in Winsted, because when the first exchange was opened, he became the first Colebrook subscriber, and remained the only one for a number of years. The phone recently donated has a note attached, written in Clarence Stotts' handwriting, stating that it was installed in 1882. Based upon drawings found in the entry on telephones in the 1911 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, the model Reuben bought was the first one sold in the United States. Ours does not have a patent number, only that the patent had been applied for.

Apparently the owner of the phone paid for each call, rather than a fixed base rate. The reason for this supposition is that we also are in possession of a ledger kept by Ed Simonds when he clerked for Reuben at the Colebrook store in the 1880s and early 90s, and there are four entries mentioning the telephone between January and December, 1890. The entries are: "Jan. 27, 1890 – cash for telephone to April 1, '90 \$10.59." "April 7, 1890 – cash for telephone \$1.24." July 14, 1890 – cash for telephone \$3.48." Dec. 30, 1890 – cash for telephone \$4.60."

This seems to indicate a rate based upon the number of calls made.

Clarence Stotts owned the Colebrook store from 1923 until his death in 1953, after which his widow sold to Keith and Alma Jackson, who ran the store for the next ten years. Alma had kept the phone, because it had been special to her husband, but has decided that now is the proper time to donate it in his memory, and for this we are grateful, as it truly is of great historical significance, and will serve as a remembrance to them both.

To those old-timers who will notice such things, the photo of the phone shows that it lacks two parts, the funnel-shaped mouthpiece and the disk at the end of the earpiece. As these didn't change until the 1930s, I think we will be able to replace them without too much trouble. If any readers can help with this, please contact the Winsted Journal at 738-4418.

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg