

Alexander Graham Bell's Telephone

Last year we had an article about the first telephone in Colebrook, which had been presented to our historical society by Kitty Winn, daughter of Keith Jackson, who had purchased the Colebrook Store from Mary Stotts, the widow of Clarence F. Stotts. The store had a collection of memorabilia from our town's past, and certainly one of the crown jewels was the telephone that had been installed only a few months after the new invention had come on the market.

I graduated from Lyndon Institute, a prep school located in Lyndon Center, Vermont, and right up the road from our campus stands a very large edifice built by one of the town's most prominent former residents, one Theodore Vail, who had acquired a vast fortune while with the American Telephone Company. Most of the old timers were only too happy to recant the story of how this had come about, and I clearly remember hearing the story more than once. I will run through these particulars rapidly, because it is not the reason for this article, rather to act as a background for it.

When Vail was a young man, he worked in an office with several other young men. He was engaged to be married, and was busily saving enough money for his and his intended's nuptials. One evening, while he and the others were working overtime, a scruffy-looking gentleman with a beard came into the office for the purpose of interesting anyone who might wish to invest in an invention of his. He was not having much luck, because this fellow had invented other products that had not panned out, and his current passion, a device that would carry the human voice great distances, was not raising any public interest. That evening, however, luck was with him, because young Vail, for some reason, became convinced that this invention would be worth a fortune, and he not only put up the entire amount he had saved for his marriage, but convinced his coworkers to put in every cent they could raise as well. The amount, in excess of four thousand dollars (a great deal of money in the post Civil War years of the 1870s,) was enough to get Bell out of the laboratory and into the homes and offices of America. His fiancée was so disgusted with him that she broke the engagement and went out of his life.

Now to return to the purpose of this article: I was rereading an article in the April, 1962 "American Heritage" entitled "Thanks, but no thanks, Mr. Bell" written by L. White Busbey, and I realized that it complimented the story of our Colebrook phone.

"When ex-speaker of the House Joseph Gurney Cannon of Illinois retired from politics in 1923, he had served almost continuously in the House of Representatives for nearly fifty years, and was regarded as a master political strategist and a shrewd judge of men. But, as he sorrowfully confessed to his longtime secretary and biographer, L. White Busbey, his discernment did not extend to inventors and their get-rich-quick schemes":

"I met a learned Justice of the Supreme Court who had looked into an invention for converting base metal into gold, and he assured me that a man who had a thousand dollars to invest would become a millionaire in a few years. I had been a man of frugal ways and had saved a thousand dollars. I had the money in the bank and I took the advice of the jurist and got in on the ground floor. All those investors are no longer looking for millions, but would be happy to get back our thousands."

"A few years later I was on Fourteenth Street, where the newspapermen had their offices, and I met Uriah Painter, one of the veteran Washington correspondents. He was also a good businessman. Painter asked me if I had ever seen a telephone and I confessed

that I had not. We went into his office and he walked over to a little box on the wall. He put a little instrument to his ear, rang a bell and spoke into the box. He said ‘Hello, Puss, how are you?’ I want you to speak to Mr. Cannon, who is here in my office,’ He handed me the receiver and putting it to my ear, as I had seen him do, I heard Mrs. Painter’s voice distinctly. It was amazing. Then he told her to play on the piano and I heard the music. It was magic. I was very much interested, and Mr. Painter told me about the young Scotchman Bell, how they were organizing a company and insisted the men who invested their money could not lose. He said if I had a thousand dollars to invest, I would be sure to double, perhaps quadruple my money in a few years; I might even make ten thousand by getting in on the ground floor. I had been much impressed by hearing a human voice that I recognized come out of that little piece of metal, but I was even more impressed by the proposition to get in on the ground floor. I remembered my experience with the wonderful discovery to make gold out of any old thing, and I said ‘Nay, nay, Brother Palmer, I’ve tried these get-rich-quick inventions and I am done.’”

“Not long afterwards, I went down to the office of the Superintendent of Railway Mails to get a young man appointed to that service. The Superintendent, Theodore Vail, was a bright young fellow, accommodating and always ready to help me when he could. That morning Mr. Vail was not there. His assistant told me that poor Vail had become moonstruck and resigned to be the manager of a telephone company that had been foisted on the market. Vail had saved up about four thousand dollars, and in a crazy moment had blown it all on telephone stock and resigned from the government service. Worse than that, he had persuaded every friend in the office who had a dollar to let him have it for investment. We all liked Vail and were much concerned about his sudden madness, for he was a good Superintendent of Railway Mails and we thought he had a future in the service. We condemned him for the reckless use of his influence over other young men in the service who had saved a little money, and we did not know what would become of them when the magic bubble burst and the telephone stock went like that of the company that was to make gold out of junk.”

“Some years later, I was in Boston and met Theodore Vail. He was round and jolly and looked prosperous. He was the President of the American Telephone Company and the Western Union Telegraph Company. I asked a mutual friend how much Vail was worth, and he said at least twenty-five million. All those fool friends who had let Vail have their savings thirty years ago had made money. They accepted the offer to get in on the ground floor on telephone stock and I refused. I had been a member of Congress and Vail and his friends had been poor devils working in the treadmill. I had the same opportunity as Vail, but I guessed on the wrong card.”

Historic Bytes
Bob Grigg