

A HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TELEPHONE IN ABILENE, KANSAS, 1879 – 1975

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For many years, the old Child's Grist Mill south of Abilene on the Smoky Hill River provided a quiet, rustic place for farmers to meet, grind grain and discuss the problems of the day. By the 1890s, however, farmers started shipping their wheat to large new elevators and began buying their flour from grocery stores. In 1892 Jacob Brown purchased the old mill and two years later began a massive rebuilding program which required over 40,000 feet of oak timber. For several years, Brown did a good business operating his renovated mill, grinding feed and sawing timber.

On September 2, 1897, Jacob Brown traveled to Junction City to see the new electric plant there. He was interested in electric power for his own house and, since Abilene's light plant was totally obsolete, he reasoned, why not supply power for the whole city? By February 1898, Brown had installed his power generator and even had received permission from the city council to place electric light poles in the streets and alleys. Realizing that such work would take a man much younger than he, Jacob asked his son Cleyson to return from Wichita where he had been working for a creamery. C.L. Brown arrived the same month and immediately went to work, gaining both the confidence of his father and the community. Sufficient capital was obtained from Abilene citizens in addition to that offered by the Brown family. With this backing, work forged ahead and lights were shining on Abilene streets by Christmas 1898. For the first few months, service was intermittent, although vastly improved over the old power companies. Finally, a steam engine was installed to assist the water wheel and the situation cleared.

Seeing the success of their first utility venture, friends began besieging the Browns to establish a locally owned and operated telephone exchange. After giving the matter considerable thought, Jacob and C.L. Brown applied to the city council for a telephone franchise. About that same time, W. Reese of Salina also requested permission to open an independent exchange. On August 4, 1899, after meeting in executive session, the city council declined a franchise to Reese of Salina and awarded the franchise to the

Browns, passing Ordinance No. 176. This ordinance referred to the Browns as copartners in business under the firm name of Jacob Brown & Son. The franchise was granted for twenty years and provided that work on the system be commenced within sixty days and be completed by May 1, 1900. With the acceptance of these terms, the Browns agreed to post a bond of \$500 [\$12,820 today] within ten days (Abilene didn't want a repeat of 1896.) Furthermore, Brown & Son agreed to provide free phones for the mayor, city hall and give fireboxes situated around the city. After all this, monthly rates could not exceed \$2.00 [\$51.28 today] for businesses and \$1.25 [\$32.05 today] for residences.

The next two months were full of frantic legwork to raise funds. An electric generator and a few miles of power line were one thing; but a modern telephone exchange requiring large amount of capital to cover equipment and labor was still another. C.L. Brown later recalled the problems:

My father had a prejudice against borrowing, but I did not, and I won the argument. To succeed in business, you must not be afraid to use other folks' money if you can pay interest on it. I went to Chicago—this was back in the '90s—where a friend was located and told him my plans. He suggested that we visit some of the bond houses. The greeting was most hospitable. They would be glad to underwrite our bond issue under specified conditions. The bonds were to be sold to them at a price ranging from 85 to 94; in addition, an engineer was to be sent out to make a survey of the property—at my expense. This would cost about \$5,000 [\$128,205 today]. Then the underwriters were to have 25% of the stock. I went back to my hotel and spent a night thinking it over. The next morning I took a train for home—I would put it to my home people first and see if they would stand by me.

Stand by him they did. It took weeks to canvass the whole community, but by the time he was finished C.L. had the necessary number of subscribers to begin construction.

Courtesy of Dickinson County Heritage Center

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