

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

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On October 26, 1899, Jacob Brown & Son announced their new exchange on the second floor of the Reflector Building [where the Little Ike Park is now located]. The site for this joint office of the telephone and electric light companies was well chosen. Since the Browns now paid rent to, and worked in the same building as, the city newspaper, they immediately had a good rapport with the press. The *Reflector* commented that the office “will be a very handy and central location and will be fitted up especially for the headquarters of the Telephone and Electric Light Co.”

The plant system was entirely of open iron wire leads. The only cable used was strung from the office pole just outside the operating window to “the homemade main frame.” Wires were stretched on homemade ten-pin cross arms. C.L. was able to save even more by using the electric light poles already constructed to string his telephone lines throughout the city.

A one hundred-drop American Express switchboard was purchased, but so many people began asking for phones that a second board was put in even before the exchange officially opened. American Electric telephones were installed in subscribers’ homes. These phones appealed to Abilene citizens because of the fancy, adjustable transmitter arm and the all-American union shield that was the trademark of the manufacturing company.

Abilene’s Bell-owned system was shocked into action by the sudden turn of events. In response to Brown’s rates of \$1.75 [\$44.87 today] for businesses and \$1.00 [\$25.64 today] for residences, the Bell exchange radically dropped their rentals to \$1.50 [\$38.46 today] and \$0.75 [\$19.23 today], respectively.

Since the newspaper was now on Brown's side, their comment about the rate change is not surprising.

The company (Bell) evidently intends to give the local system a hard blow but Abilene people will be inclined to thank Brown & Son for their good work and stand by them. In Salina, the rival to the local system gave free phones and then did not win. The home plant (Brown) is going to stay and rate wars won't have any effect on its success.

An answer in kind was soon made by Brown to the Bell System. Since the Brown Company also owned the power plant, their telephone subscribers were given a discount on their light bills. This final blow almost forced the local Missouri and Kansas Telephone Co. out of business. McDaniel recalled that the Brown Co. "soon took all of our paying business and we have operated the exchange since that time as toll terminals, collecting no rental."

Brown wasted no time in establishing long distance lines to neighboring communities. The first of these copper metallic circuits was opened on February 1, 1900, connecting Abilene with Herington. Conversation was routed from Abilene through Enterprise, Chapman, Rinehart, Pearl and Woodbine to Herington. At Herington, a connection was made that enabled a caller to phone people living at Hope, Council Grove and other towns in that vicinity. Long distance was rapidly becoming a way of life for Dickinson County.

Later in February, the *Abilene Weekly Reflector* came out even more strongly for Jacob Brown & Son. Their article was entitled "Stand Up for Home."

Give the Brown telephone system your support. The Brown telephone system has about 110 phones in and it is proving most convenient for every subscriber. Abilene has never knew [sic] before what it is to have comfort in that line. But there ought to be 100 more. Even Herington has

100 phones. Salina uses 300 and Manhattan 400. With everybody on the line it becomes more valuable. Furthermore, there ought to be only one phone system patronized. The Bell phones are left in free simply to embarrass the home system and make it difficult for it to get subscribers. Who are you in favor of –a lot of rich stockholders in New York or Abilene folks? It is the duty of everyone to stand by the home people first, last and all the time and the way to do it is to be in earnest. That is what Salina did and what Junction City is doing. One phone and that the home phone should be Abilene's motto.

Once given the initiative, C.L. Brown never seemed to let up. As a special treat for his subscribers, Brown set up a transmitter at the Markee concert hall. All a patron had to do was lift up the receiver and enjoy the entire program “as clearly as it was heard by those in the audience.” His public image campaign was helped by the addition of a new iron exterior stairway to the upstairs offices of the telephone and light companies. Later on in June, good business forced Brown to rent the entire upstairs of the Reflector block. The extra space was used for offices, a workshop and display rooms. As the home plant expanded, long distance lines seemed to spread out like hungry fingers. A circuit event was planned to link Abilene with Junction City via Chapman, Zion Church, Upland and Alida.

Courtesy of Dickinson County Heritage Center

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