

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

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Telephone poles were fine for telephone insulators, wire and the porcelain phone company signs, but city fathers were noticing that the poles were being used as a mounting bracket for just about every other form of advertising. Billboards, signs, advertisements, political posters and notices were plastered all over town. To stop this, city council declared Ordinance No. 267, forbidding any new additions and requiring the removal of all old advertising material.

Soon afterward, on November 3, 1905, the Abilene City Council amended Brown's original franchise to allow the first rate increase since Brown entered the telephone business. The Brown Telephone Company was given permission to raise magneto phone rates to \$2.00 [\$48.78 today] for businesses and \$1.25 [\$30.48 today] for residences. For those fortunate subscribers with central battery service, rates were hiked to \$2.50 [\$60.97 today] and \$1.75 [\$42.68 today]. The public was assured of the right to choose which type of service they wanted.

Jacob Brown had worked as manager of the Brown Electric Light Co. ever since the Brown Telephone company was incorporated in 1902. By January 1906, the light company was completely reorganized and set up with \$50,000 [\$1,219,512 today] capital and renamed Riverside Power and Light.

Two more ordinances pertaining to telephones were issued by the City Council in 1906. Ordinance No. 274 declared that all new telephone poles must be located just inside the curb line. Violations of this rule were subject to fine as a misdemeanor. A second ruling by the council was made public in Ordinance No. 286. By this decision, Section 6 of the original Brown franchise was repealed. Brown could now transfer the rights and privileges of his franchise to anyone he wanted to.

By the end of the year, C.L. Brown was serving as president of the North Kansas Telephone Association. His telephone company employed thirty people regularly, in addition to construction gangs that were almost continually building lines throughout the Brown territory. Another first was recorded by Brown's sales department in December 1906. The Seelye mansion became the first Abilene home to have a complete system of extension telephones.

In 1907, Brown continued the precedent that had been established with the Holland Mutual Telephone Co. By March, all the farm phones in the county could be reached over Brown lines. These connections added more than 2,000 new phones to the many hookups already available with county towns. The toll charge was dropped from 15 cents [\$3.65 today] to 5 cents [\$1.22 today] for a call anywhere in the county.

Abilene's local Missouri and Kansas Telephone exchange had not been completely asleep during the intervening seven years. Although the system had ceased to collect rental for local phones, its toll lines were being quietly revamped. R.B Gemmill had moved to Abilene in 1904 to supervise the long distance work. Under his guidance work moved ahead as noted in the *Reflector*:

The bell telephone system is spending \$85,000 [\$2,023,809 today] on improvements in this part of the state. A complete new toll line is being built from Topeka to Abilene. Everything about this line is to be new. Work is already being done at several points along the line and work between Topeka and Rossville has been completed. The company proposes having the work finished by December 1905.

However, work was not completed until the spring of 1907. That May, a member of the Missouri and Kansas Telephone construction Gang was severely shocked on one of the light poles at the corner of Third and Buckeye. "He escaped with the loss of two fingers after a month in the hospital at Kansas City."

By 1909, the Brown Telephone Company was becoming an extremely large business. After ten years in the business, C.L. Brown had obtained almost complete control of the phone business in his area. Brown summed up his success as honesty in his business dealings. He felt that “the public is suspicious of a utility because the utilities’ managers often have not been frank with the public. The only way to succeed is to give the public the facts.”

Courtesy of Dickinson County Heritage Center

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