

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

By Mark L. Beveridge*

pp. 7-10 (The Brown Telephone Company)

Brown's telephone subscribers were kept up to date on new telephone numbers by an ingenious method. Patrons received a heavy paper card with their phone and were instructed to read the local newspaper daily. As new telephones were added, a small column would appear in the paper entitled "New Phones." This public printout would list the new names and phone numbers plus the reminder, "Paste this list on your cards."

With the beginning of a new school year in September 1900, Brown & Son installed telephones at Garfield School, Lincoln School and the high school. Teachers were happy with the new addition, and on stormy days worried parents could check up on their children before letting them come home. Western Union soon followed suit and became a subscriber in November. Telegrams could be phoned in and received from the comfort of home.

Abilene's first telephone cable appeared in 1900. Third Street was rapidly becoming a maze of overhead wires, creating working problems and, as a by product, providing birds with a convenient perch from which to bombard passersby. Brown installed his aerial cable, containing 100 wires, from the telephone central on Spruce and Cedar Street. The new cable permitted fifty more phones on the west side of town and greatly simplified maintenance.

The year 1901 was one of great expansion for Jacob Brown & Son. Advertising was stressed and long distance toll lines continued to spring up. Subscribers were given a brand new volume of telephone numbers containing listings for over 7,000 people. Independent telephone companies were getting organized, with C.L. Brown right in the middle of things. Telephone poles around town began sporting colorful porcelain signs that read "Independent Local & Long Distance Telephone." These measured 17" x 18" and were ordered from the American Electric Company, supplier of the local company's telephones. One of the bright little signs was located over Abilene's first public telephone booth. From the Citizens Bank corner at Second and Broadway, anyone could make a local call for one Indian Head penny.

Since the Bell Telephone Company had made it perfectly clear that Independents were not welcome to use its long distance lines, a separate set of Independent toll lines had to go up. The Kansas Union Telephone Co., formed in September, sought to bring all Independent work under one management. Brown's telephone company was one of the founders. A Brown-owned exchange had just been put into Enterprise when Abilene's first telephone ads began appearing in the newspaper. This pioneer public relations project informed patrons of their opportunity to call almost anywhere in central Kansas. County calls cost only 15 cents [\$3.75 today]. One common ad featured the now-familiar union shield with the slogan "Hello Central!" A subscriber could call the toll line operator for:

Talmage	Buckeye	Enterprise	Dayton
Manchester	Moonlight	Detroit	Dillon
Longford	Upland	Rhinehart	Carlton
Oak Hill	Pearl	Woodbine	Banner City
Industry	Chapman	Hope	Herington

and 200 other towns in central Kansas

Things were looking good in 1902 when the telephone enterprise known as Jacob Brown & Son was incorporated. This firm, now doing business as the Brown Telephone Company, received permission from the Secretary of State to set its capital at \$50,000 [\$1,250,000 today]. Before a year was over, the new corporation had raised its capital to \$100,000 [\$2,500,000 today]. The annual statement showed earning to \$11,000 [\$275,000 today] with a valuation of \$7,700 [\$192,500 today]. C.L. Brown was named as the manager of the telephone company. His father, Jacob, took over as manager of the electric light company.

Telephone growth in Abilene soon forced the addition of a third switchboard to the two existing boards. Ella Hudson and Marjorie Gregg were kept busy switching calls from their switchboard positions in the corner of the telephone office. C.L. Brown was now missing from the exchange at times since he had been elected to the executive committee of the Kansas Independent Telephone Association. This newly formed group met in Topeka and represented more than 100 Kansas exchanges.

There were problems as well as successes for the Brown Telephone Company. While putting in a new long distance line through Newborn Township, unexpected opposition was encountered. Georg Hersh and John Reeves, a road overseer, claimed the new telephone poles were too close to the road. The telephone charter had given the Browns the right to set poles up to six feet from the fence line. At the disputed area, poles were only three to four feet from the fence. Nevertheless, on April 24, 1902, linemen were shocked to discover that during the night more than a mile and a half of telephone poles had been chopped down. Wires had been cut and the line ruined. A lawsuit followed which was finally won by Brown.

Courtesy of Dickinson County Heritage Center

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