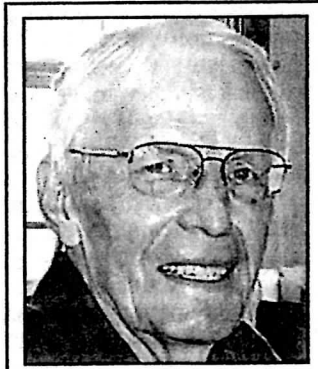


# The telephone comes to Washburn

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The first mention of a telephone in Washburn appeared in a description of the new Washburn Hotel in October 1884, which noted that it had "telephone connections with Bayfield and Ashland," while a "telephone exchange" was reportedly one of the buildings destroyed in the great fire of September 1888. In June 1893 the town board granted a franchise to the Wisconsin Telephone Company "to construct and operate a telephone system" in the village of Washburn. The following month the newspaper reported that "The work of putting in the new telephones is nearing completion. Nearly forty new instruments have been put in within the past six weeks" and "The poles have been set" for a new "telephone circuit" between Washburn, Ashland and Bayfield. The "new instruments" were probably equipped with a magneto, which when turned with a small crank on the side of the telephone, sent an electrical signal over the line that rang a bell on each telephone connected to the line. Each telephone had an assigned number of rings, so if a caller wanted, for example, to talk to the party with number five, he or she briskly turned the crank five times. Since all telephones received the signal, people could easily listen to any conversation—called "rubbering"—over this ultimate "party line." Electrical power for the system was provided by batteries at each



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telephone.

The Wisconsin Telephone Company, faced with the possibility of competition from another company, modernized its system by establishing a central switchboard. When the magneto crank was turned a bell rang once at the switchboard notifying the operator to make the appropriate connection by asking the calling party the number to which they wished to be connected. In 1898 long distance service was established with the "outside world," meaning Drumond, Hayward, and other places "down the line." Apparently there was only one telephone from which long distance calls could be made, located in the Pioneer grocery store. In January 1899 the Times reported that "there are about eighty-five instruments in use in Washburn, and nearly everyone talks once or more every day over the line." In July the

telephone company reduced monthly rates across the board to \$2.50 for a private line, \$2.00 for a two-party line and \$1.50 for a three or four party line. In 1902 the local system was further improved by "selective ringing," whereby a signal from one telephone (one turn of the crank) only rang a bell at the central switchboard and not on all other telephones, thus reducing the possibility of "rubbering" on party lines. In the early 1903 the Wisconsin Telephone Company installed "long distance phones throughout the city," which were "capable of talking to Chicago, New York, New Orleans or any place in this country where telephonic communication can be had."

Taking advantage of dissatisfaction among the customers of Wisconsin Telephone Company over its tolls, the Bayfield County Telephone Company, was organized in August 1903. A switchboard, "the finest money can buy or science invent," was to be installed in the basement of the Northern State Bank. . . . The poles to be placed on the main street will be fifty feet high, will all be painted and will be put up on the same side of the street as the electric light poles now are." By November the company had "about 150 instruments in working order . . . and three 'hello' girls were answering calls at the office of the company, which is located underneath the North-

ern State Bank." The Times came out strongly against two telephone systems, declaring that they were "likely to prove a good deal of a nuisance to the people of the city" and recommending that the subscribers of the two companies get together to decide which one they would patronize, but this never happened.

Both companies moved their poles from Bayfield Street to the alleys as part of the 1916 paving project. They also modernized their systems, installing central energy sources and automatic switchboards. With these two changes a customer need only lift the receiver off the hook and a device on the switchboard would signal the operator to respond. When the operator connected the calling party to the desired number, the telephone would automatically ring there. While this system appears cumbersome today, at the time it was considered to be quite advanced (automatic dialing systems were available in some cities). The Wisconsin Telephone System moved its central office to the second floor of the Estabrook-Downs building, where it remained for many years. Washburn's two-telephone system arrangement finally ended in December 1919, when the plant of Bayfield County Telephone Company was consolidated with that of the Wisconsin Telephone Company.