

Taking its toll

Phones blossom since drugstore era

"Ringing. Ringing." A man struggles out of bed to answer the phone.
"Collect? Yeah, I'll accept. Johnny?"
"It's me dad."
"Johnny? What's the matter? What is it?"
"Oh, I just thought I'd call to let you know I'm going to sleep now. That's all."
"You're calling from school 500 miles away at 2:00 in the morning to tell us you're going to sleep?"
"Sure dad. Long distance, y'know, it's the next best thing to being there."
"Well how about writing a letter next time. That's the next to next best thing to being there."
"A letter to let you know I'm going to sleep? Come on dad, don't be ridiculous!"



This 1904 telephone construction crew erected one of the first long distance cables leading from Detroit. (Photo courtesy of Michigan Bell Telephone Co.)

By JEFFREY BLAKE
It's not exactly how the Michigan Bell Telephone Co. really addresses long-distance dialing, but it's not that far off. The actual ad has one guy calling an old friend to tell him about his new dog.

The new Michigan Bell advertisements, in fact, don't even use the words "long-distance." In a new campaign to vie for the customer's "discretionary dollars," one Bell spokesman says that "we don't want to isolate the long-distance call as an inherently different activity than calling a friend across town."

The point of this story, though, is to show just how far Ma Bell has come: The phone company has transcended competing with its list of many but minute independent phone company competitors, and is now offering its wares in the leisure-time market.

The company has come a long way. In Rochester above the space where now sits a pizza parlor on the east side of Main, south of Fourth, this city's

first telephone was installed nearly 98 years ago. John T. Norton, who ran a drugstore at the spot, was the first in Rochester to ask the Michigan Telephone Co. for a connection with the Pontiac telephone exchange.

THERE WAS a great rush, naturally, to follow Norton's lead. Four years later, the Western Knitting Mills built a line from its factory to the drugstore (to hook up with the Pontiac connection), and then Norton had another phone installed in his own home. In 1888, The Sidney House, the Saint James Hotel and two other businesses had phones installed.

The result: A whopping total of seven installed telephones in the city of Rochester alone by 1888.

Subscription to the exchange boards really did pick up after 1897. In that year, the village of Rochester granted the New State Telephone Co. the right to construct and operate telephone lines. The village ordinance stipulated that the village should have a free telephone and that the maximum rate for

homes should not exceed \$20. These days, you pay more than that for installation alone.

B.E. Norton, John's son, operated the exchange for 10 years, moving the switchboard to another building and encouraging 45 subscribers to join him.

As users increased, so did improvements in the phone system. While a single piece was first used for both listening and speaking, a separate transmitter and receiver were soon introduced. And while each phone user had originally to maintain their own battery storage, a centralized battery system of operation was devised so that only a storage battery at the central office was required.

THEN TOO, it was necessary at first to turn a crank on the phone to get "central." At "central" you would give the operator the number of the connection you wished to make. Even as early as the 1920s, though, these "crank" phones began to give way to the "dial" (direct) phone.

While the number of telephone users has been increasing steadily since the phone's introduction to the market, the number of suppliers has turned the other way. The records of the Michigan Public Service Commission show that in 1951, there were three major telephone companies operating in Michigan. Almost 93 per cent of all the phones registered with the three companies were operated by Michigan Bell.

Besides the three major companies, 141 independent companies of far smaller stature were also registered with the commission. Twenty-seven years later, in 1978, there are but 50 phone companies in Michigan, and except for Michigan Bell, not one is considered a major company.

All of which goes to show that 102 years after Alexander Graham Bell made the first connection in 1876, the practical policy is still: "Ask not whom Bell tolls, it tolls thee." And most of your neighbors too, at least once a month.

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