

Centennial Article # 8

Major Bell hears the call of Technology

If William Robert Bell had died in 2013 instead of 1913, modern-day biographers would describe him as a serial entrepreneur, having built up and then lost considerable wealth at least twice during his lifetime. He was also what we would call an “early adopter”, which is illustrated by his use of the latest technologies on the sprawling corporate farm that he established as the major shareholder in 1882, and then managed. This included the installation of a telephone system on the farm just eight years after another Bell, Alexander Graham, patented his marvelous invention.



William Bell in an office at the Empress Block at 354 Main Street, Winnipeg, likely around 1905. A candlestick telephone is visible over his left shoulder, sitting on a stand projecting from the desk. Candlestick phones had a mouth piece (transmitter) and an ear piece (receiver) that the user put to his or her ear when making a call. Candlestick phones were common from the 1890s until the 1930s.

(Credit: Sask. Archives: Bell Family Collection: GM-PH-412 [2])

True to his background, Major William Bell ran the farm like a military operation, and he also believed that the mass production methods developed by industry could be applied to large-scale farming.

“Depend upon it that in these days farming can only be made to pay by being placed on a thorough business basis,” he told a newspaper reporter. Farm employees worked together in teams, as they would in a factory, using the latest machinery to break the land, for seeding and in the harvest. Major Bell kept systematic records of the work performed each day, along with production costs. He also patented a round grain storage bin that could be moved about the farm. It is in character, then, that in 1884 Major Bell installed a telephone system that enabled him to discuss daily results and work plans with his head foreman and assistant foremen scattered about the farm. A good two decades before Saskatchewan became a province, Major William Bell was making telephone conference calls to his employees on a regular basis.



The main house on the Bell Farm, in 1884. Major Bell had an office in the house, from which he made his daily phone calls to his foremen. No phone lines are evident in this photo, although there are fences on both sides of the house that may have been part of the telephone system. (Credit: McCord Museum: William Notman Collection: V 1385)

“At eight o’clock every evening I press my button and put myself into communication with my divisional foremen,” Bell told a London newspaper in 1885. “I give them perhaps ten minutes each, but in each case the others hear what I am saying, though they are four or five miles away from each other.”

With these evening calls Major Bell almost certainly inaugurated, without fanfare, the first teleconference calls in what would become Saskatchewan. There are no known photos of the telephones in use on the Bell Farm, and no information has surfaced as to where he bought them. Being well-connected politically, he would have seen one in operation in the office of the Lieutenant-Governor for the North-West Territories, Edgar Dewdney, who was also a shareholder in the farm. The phone in Government House was connected with the North-West Mounted Police barracks and the Territorial Administration Building, also located along Dewdney Avenue in Regina.

There is another intriguing possibility that calls for further exploration. A man named Duncan McIntyre, who was associated with the Bell Telephone Company, visited the farm in 1883. Could that visit have led to the installation of the phone system on the farm? If McIntyre’s records have survived and been preserved in an archive, might there be some documents related to his visit to the Bell Farm and perhaps, the purchase of phone equipment? That is a big “if”, but one worth pursuing.

We do know that the telephone system was installed by Ralph Todd, who homesteaded his land near Indian Head on May 1st, 1882. The telephone system that Todd installed in 1884 foreshadowed many of the rural party-line systems that operated in Saskatchewan until well into the 20th century, using strands of barbed wire fencing as “phone lines”. These rough and ready connections were reasonably reliable in the winter, but rainy weather and wayward cattle often caused “outages” at other times.



An undated photo of Ralph Todd, who was 27 when he installed the telephone system on the Bell Farm. (Credit: History of Indian Head and District, p. 715)

However, the alternatives at that time would have been to walk or ride on horseback to communicate with farm employees, so even a rudimentary phone system represented a major step forward, and a great example of how Major Bell operated the farm “.. on a thorough business basis.”



Alexander Graham Bell (above) demonstrating his invention to a crowd of interested onlookers, in 1892. (Credit: website: http://www.corp.att.com/history/milestone_1892.html)

The telephone had already advanced considerably from the wall-mounted model visible behind Lieutenant-Governor Forget in his office at Government House in Regina, in this photo (below) from about 1898. (Credit: Sask. Archives: R-A7617)



The telephone display at the reconstructed Bell Barn, Indian Head. (Credit: Frank Korvemaker)

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