

The Crosby & Barrington Telephone Company – 100 Years Ago

The telephone was invented in the 1870s. Alexander Graham Bell controlled most of the important patents so his company had a jump start in putting together exchanges that would enable the use of the telephone by the average person. The first exchange was in New Haven, CT; others quickly followed. Of course, the large companies like Bell, wanted to build exchanges in the densely populated cities. The smaller companies would work in the smaller communities but few wanted to build in rural areas. In the 1890s, associations of farmers sprung up to provide rural telephones for themselves and their neighbors. In the early 1900s many independent telephone companies were active in Penn Yan and the Yates County area. Among them were the Empire State Telephone Co., Crosby & Barrington Telephone Co., Dundee, Rock Stream & Reading Telephone Co., Himrod Telephone Co., Milo Telephone Co., Pulteney Telephone Co., Hammondsport & Wayne Telephone Co., and Inter-Ocean Telephone Co.

Crosby and Barrington Telephone Co.

On Tuesday of this week people in the vicinity of the Lake road and the Bath road organized an independent telephone company, which will connect with the exchange of the Inter-Ocean company at Penn Yan. The new company will be known as the Crosby & Barrington Telephone company, and the line will extend from Penn Yan along the Lake road to Arch. Thayer's corners, where it crosses to the Bath road, and thence as far as Warsaw on the Bath road and to Amos Wortman's on the Lake road. The company will be capitalized at \$5,000, divided into 100 shares of \$50 each. Thirty-four shares have already been subscribed for. Directors were chosen as follows: Howard Fullager, S. I. Thayer, Herbert Ovenshire, A. P. Wortman, Isaac Crosby, T. W. Windnagle and Charles E. Guile. The officers are: President, Charles E. Guile; vice-president, Howard Fullager; secretary and treasurer, Herbert Ovenshire. The work of construction will begin soon, and will be rushed to completion.

Since it covered the territory where several of my Bullock ancestors and relatives lived, my interest focused on the Crosby & Barrington Telephone Company, hereafter called C&B. A newspaper item in the July 4, 1902 issue of the Penn Yan Democrat is shown to the left. Among the directors of the C&B were Charles E. Guile, T. Warner Windnagle, and Isaac Crosby; all close neighbors of my grandfather Herman Bullock. Note that the territory covered was from Penn Yan south to Crosby; later it would stretch further south to the hamlet of Keuka in Steuben County. The C&B was to connect with the exchange of Inter-Ocean Telephone Company in Penn Yan. Would the \$5,000 (\$150,000 in today's dollars) be enough to cover the startup costs?

A bulletin "Farmers' Telephone Companies: Organization, Financing and Management" published in 1917 by the federal Bureau of Agricultural Economics provided information on how to put together a rural telephone company. It presented what was needed for a telephone line and the cost of that line. For example, the cost was given as \$16.50 per mile for oak brackets, insulators, and wire. The total would be \$660 for C&B since they anticipated 40 miles of line. Not included was the cost of the 1200 poles (30 poles per mile) and the labor to install them. Likewise, since C&B had 122 customers in 1917 the cost of telephones would be \$361 (\$19 per phone). Using rough guesstimates about the telephone pole and labor costs in 1917, the total was probably close to the \$5,000 startup costs.

Thanks to Mary E. Collins, a volunteer at the YCHC, the handwritten diaries of Guile and Windnagle (1882-1908) have been transcribed and are available in searchable text at the YCHC. In a search of these diaries, C&B activities are mentioned quite often. C&B director's meetings were held at least once a month; Guile, as president also had meetings with the presidents of all the independent companies. Guile kept the books and both he and Windnagle and their employees provided transportation for the line crews, brought supplies to the crews, installed telephones, fixed telephones, solved grounding problems, found new customers, sold C&B shares, etc. They still had time to run their successful basket making business with their father-in-law George W. Finton. Although the newspaper article states that the C&B was started in 1902, there were telephone entries in the diaries as early as February of 1897. Considerable work was done prior to the formal organization.

Tragedy struck the C&B in 1907; on October 16, 1907 the Yates County Chronicle reported the article shown to the right. Llewellyn's father, Samuel Thayer, a member of C&B's board of directors, later sued the Village of Penn Yan for \$25,000 and was awarded the sum of \$1,200.

In the YCHC archives there is a 1918 document describing the relationship between the C&B and the exchange in Penn Yan (Inter-Ocean Telephone Co. in 1902 and New York Telephone Co. in 1918). The document contains a list of 122 customer names and indicates that C&B paid the Penn Yan company \$696 per year for the exchange service. In 1918 each customer paid \$24 per year; a rate set by a public service commission in Albany. The income for C&B in 1918 would have been \$2928 (\$24 x 122). It would be interesting to know if the shareholders were happy about their initial investment.

The map on the next page was also in the 1918 document. It shows the location of the 122 customers using red dots. With this map I can pinpoint the location of at least five of my ancestors and relatives who had C&B telephones. The insets on the map are items that C&B would have used in 1902; a wall telephone and 12" oak brackets with insulators.

KILLED BY CHARGED WIRE

Llewellyn Thayer Was Stretching Telephone Wire Across Municipal Cable.

About 3 o'clock yesterday afternoon Llewellyn Thayer, of Barrington, was instantly killed by an electric current from the Municipal plant in Penn Yan. He had taken the contract to stretch an additional wire on the Barrington & Crosby line in connection with the Inter-Ocean system. He was working opposite the Empire State Wine Company, in company with Harford Bellis and was on the ground stretching the wire when it sagged and came in contact with the live power and light wire, belonging to the electric light system of the village of Penn Yan. His companion noticed he had received a shock and attempted to cut the wire with his pliers, but was knocked down. He then attempted to draw the wire away from his companion with a rope, but was too late.

The young man was about 20 years of age and was the only child of Samuel Thayer, of Barrington. He had had considerable experience in putting up telephone wires, not only in this county but elsewhere. Coroner Frank Sampson was immediately called but could render no assistance. The family of the young man was notified of his death.

