The "All Red Line"

C.F. Sise, ship's captain from Boston who was hired in 1880 to run Bell Telephone Company of Canada. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection.

When C. F. Sise arrived in Montreal, in 1880, there were a number of telephone companies in Canada. Under his leadership, Bell merged with some, gobbled up others, and soon became the dominant company. Sise dreamed of a nationwide Bell telephone system, although he did not think it would ever pay to string wire through the Rockies. (The first Montreal-Vancouver call was made on February 14, 1916, through Buffalo, Omaha, Salt Lake City and Portland.)

Sise's dream never came true. Bell, well entrenched in Quebec and Ontario, combined with local companies in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, but was shut out of Newfoundland where AngloAmerican Telegraph had exclusive rights. By the early 1900s, the three Prairie Provinces had set up government-owned telephone companies, spurred by the east-west barriers of geography and viewpoint.

Had it not been for Sise, Bell might have gone under in its first decade. Buying up other companies had taken most of its initial capital. Customers were slow to sign up. When Ottawa-Montreal long distance service opened in 1886, a call cost $1 where a telegram could be sent for 25¢. The company was faced with perpetual financial crises with Sise loaning it his own money to keep it going. Yet, the telephone was galloping ahead technically.

Telephone Construction Line Gang in Ontario, 1902, complete with blacksmith, horses and teamster. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection.

An improved transmitter made it unnecessary to shout any longer. Galvanized wire was replaced by hard-drawn copper. Cables could carry hundreds of strands of wire. In Brantford, an electrician named Romaine Callender produced an automatic phone with four knobs which could be pulled up and down in numbered slots, a type which continued in use for over 20 years.

As technology and the market developed, more and more Canadians began to yearn for a nationwide hookup. The first step came in 1920 when telephone company heads from the four Western provinces met in Winnipeg to discuss the possibility of a western network. Bell officials were invited and the discussion took on a national scope. The meeting formed the Canadian Telephone Convention which later became the Telephone Association of Canada (TAC).

Port Colborne, Ontario, 1907-at the turn of the century telephone linemen became heores to the inquisitive public and sometimes liked to show off by posing at the pole-top. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada telephone Historical Collection.

At its first meeting the next year, the TAC discussed the need for an all-Canadian line. It was referred to as the "All Red Line" since British possessions on the map were always red.

It was the new medium of radio, established in the early 1900s, that gave the All Red Line its greatest boost. On July 1, 1927, the Diamond jubilee of Confederation, postponed from 1917 because of war, was celebrated by a nation-wide broadcast from Halifax to Vancouver over 10,525 miles of telephone wire and 8,965 miles of telegraph line. This was an excellent display of cooperation between the three communications media. Summer heat often caused wires to expand and short-circuit, but linemen went to heroic lengths to keep this from happening. One, west of Pembroke, was ordered by his supervisor to "stay up on the pole and hold up the wire until the broadcast was finished". The Peace Tower carillon was rung. The Governor General, Viscount Willingdon, and Prime Minister W. L. MacKenzie King made speeches. To all Canadians, especially those in outlying areas, it was a momentous event.

When the TAC met in 1928, it asked Bell to undertake a feasibility study for a trans-Canada telephone hookup. The study was completed the next year and a committee set up to coordinate construction of a trans-Canada telephone system. By that time, the three big gaps in Canadian telephony-the Rockies, the Canadian Shield, and Saint John-Quebec-had been bridged. However, many sections had to be upgraded for long distance use. The entire trans-Canada route was to consist of copper wire, one-sixth of an inch in diameter, strong enough to literally bind the country together. The wire would be strung on cedar poles west of Winnipeg, creosoted pine in the east. Over most of the route, a new pyrex insulator was used. In British Columbia, however, high-grade glass was substituted because pyrex became brittle in cold weather, particularly when affixed with the steel pins that were used.

Indeed, it was in B.C. that the worst construction conditions prevailed. Crews experienced everything from heavy rain to snow slides, high winds and forest fires, bears and rattlesnakes. Eventually the job was done and 4,260 miles of the strongest line yet built, the All Red Line, was ready for service.

On January 25, 1932, the Earl of Bessborough, governor-general of Canada, declared the official opening of the Trans-Canada Telephone System. As the CPR had done nearly 50 years earlier, it linked Canada together against all odds.

World Wide Web Resources as of March 2000:
Bell Canada – www.bell.ca
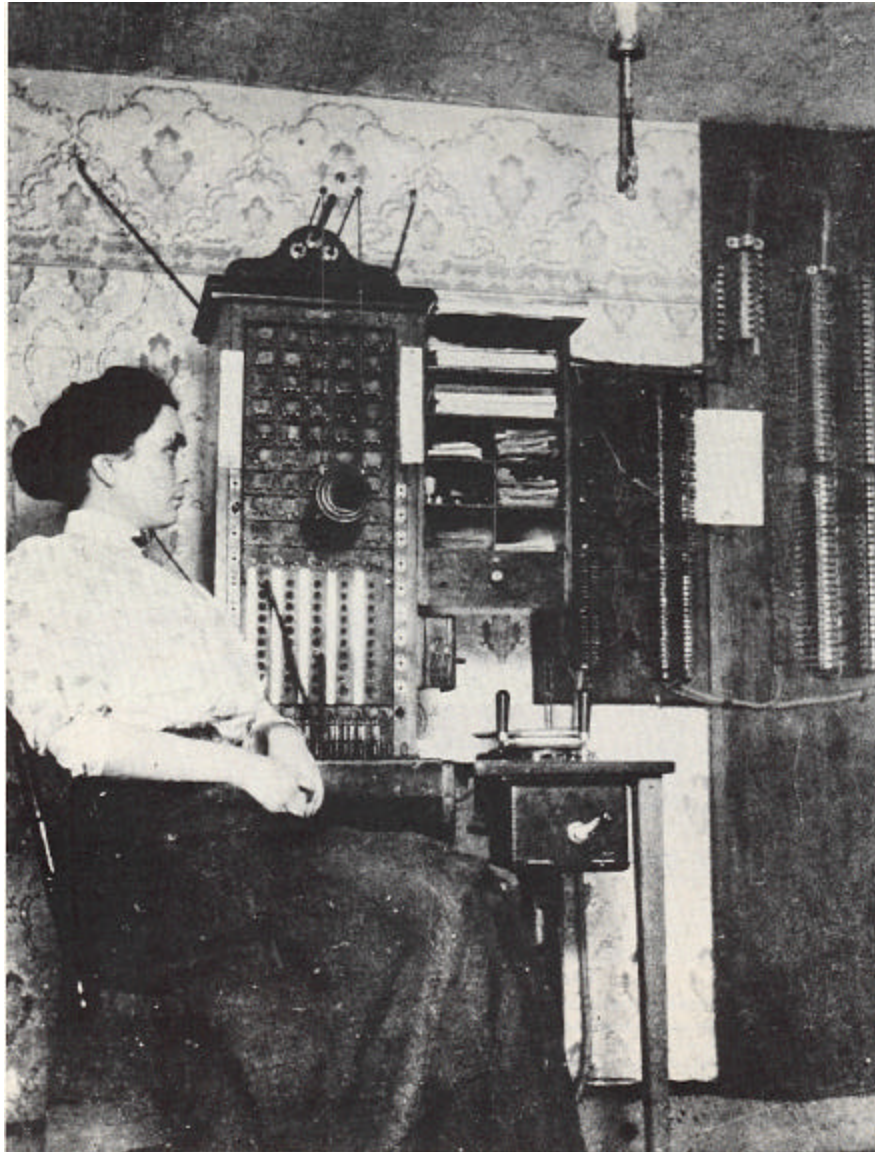
*An early telephone central. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection.*

First telephone exchange in the British empire, 1878, located at corner of Main and James Streets in Hamilton. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection.

Canada's first common battery switchboard, installed in Ottawa, 1900. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection.
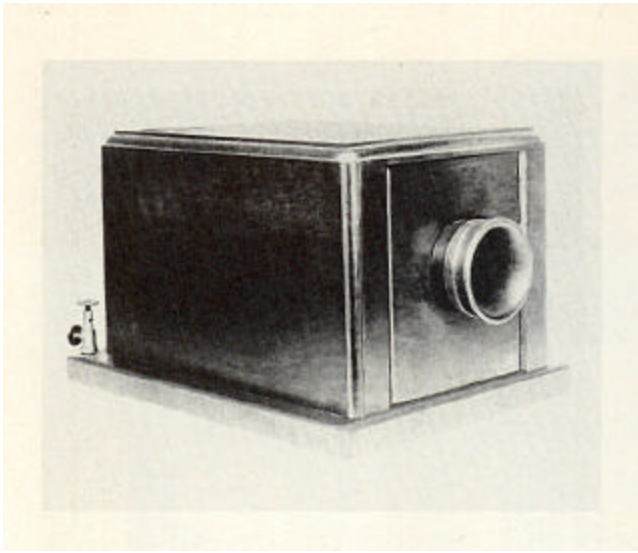
One of Canada's first commercial telephones, the type used in Ottawa, in 1877, to connect Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie's office with the Governor General's residence. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Telphone Historical Collection.
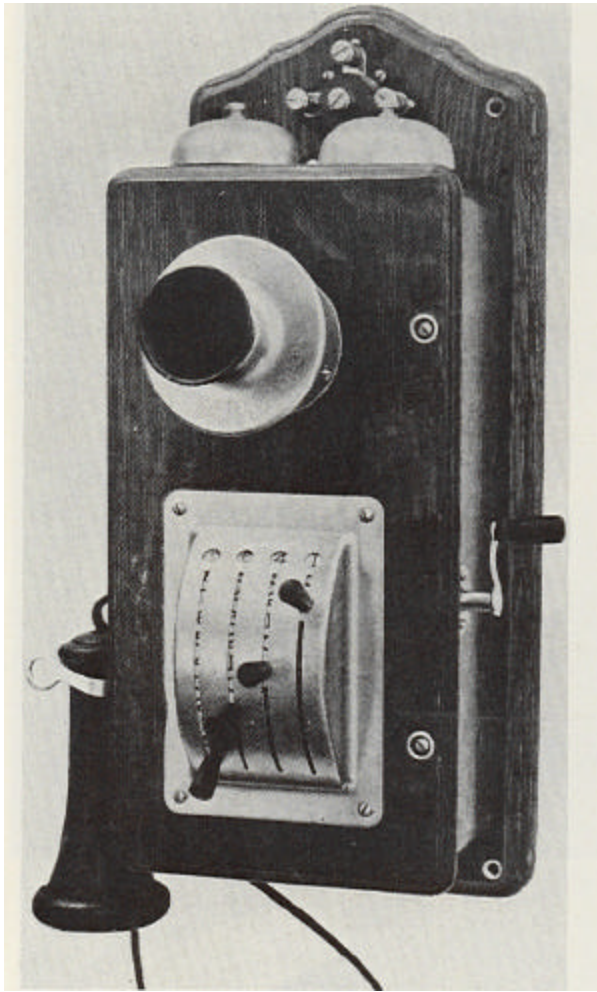

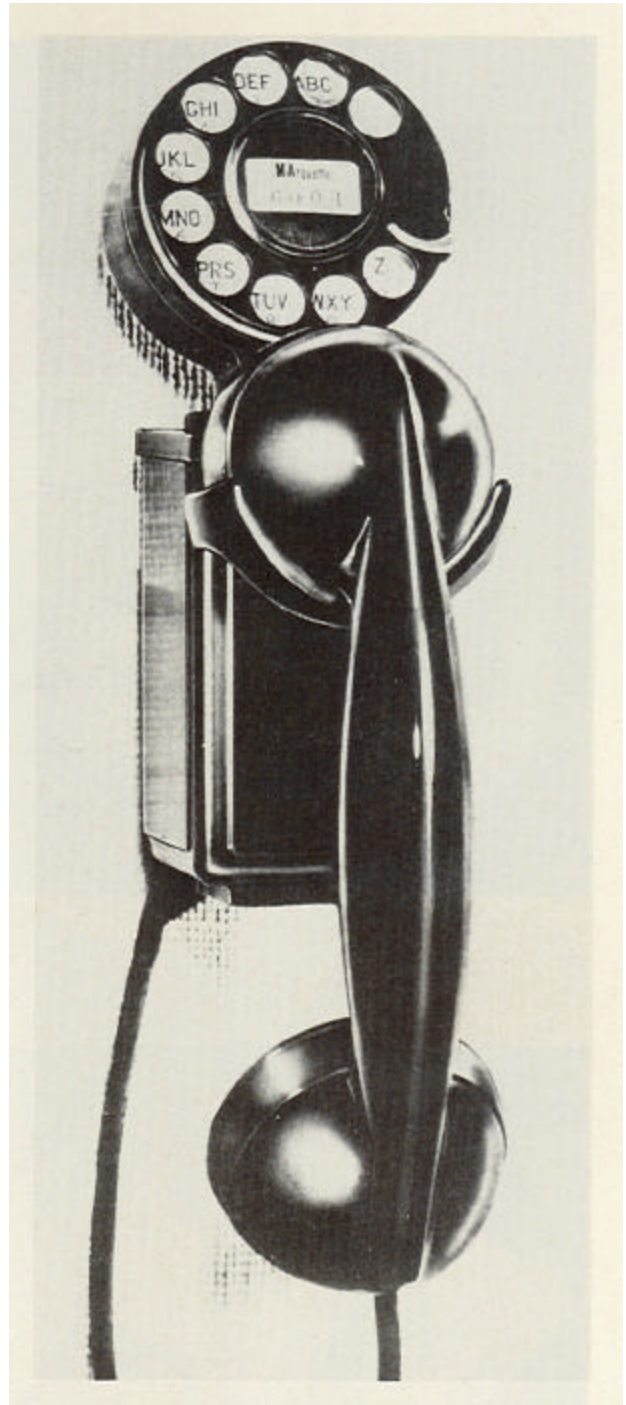*An early shoulder-held telephone set. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection.*

The "Daffodil" telephone was popular by 1910. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection.

This 1904 wall telephone, installed at Ottawa without batteries or crank, depended on the common battery at the exchange and was less than one-half the size of earlier wall sets. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection.

Lorimer automatic wall telephone, 1913. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collections.

Telephone styling became extensive during the 1930s. The square box wall set was replaced. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection.

1937 desk telephone with bell concealed in base. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection.

Glamour in the desk set, the 1960 Princess telephone. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection

Le Contempra telephone, 1968, a Canadian design with mouthpiece, ear-phone and dial or Touch-Tone service integrated in handset. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection.

Canada's first electronic switching system opened in Montreal during Expo 67. Photo courtesy of Bell Canada Telphone Historical Collection.