

Celebrate 110 Years with The Lansdowne Rural Telephone Company

In honour of the 150th anniversary of Confederation, it is important to celebrate the businesses and organizations in our community that have endured the test of time and remained an integral part of our community.

One such business that deserves recognition is the Lansdowne Rural Telephone Company Ltd., proudly serving Lansdowne and the surrounding area since 1907. Set to celebrate 110 years in business this summer is no small feat for the local company. One of only a few independent telephone companies left in this part of Ontario; the Lansdowne Telephone Company has much reason to be proud!

Privileged to have spent some time recently with Bill Grier, long time General Manager and Bill Boulton, local Historian and member of the Board of Directors, I was provided with stories surrounding the humble beginnings of the company, which as I understand grew from necessity. Although, Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876 and made it possible to transmit speech it would take another 30 years for a group of rural residents in Lansdowne to pool their resources and start The Lansdowne Rural Telephone Company. The need came mostly from area farmers who wanted a better way to communicate with their suppliers and customers. Up to that point, communication was limited to letter writing and commuting to discuss matters in person. Now days with phones and instant messaging we find it impossible to imagine waiting weeks for a response from a letter as our ancestors did.

Starting with small switches and quickly moving to their first 100-line switchboard, housed in a men's clothing store on the main street of Lansdowne, the telephone company had Shareholders who ran it from the beginning. The initial Shareholders paid \$50 a share, which equated to paying just \$10 a year for a period of 5 years. Those involved were clearly committed to continued growth for the benefit of their community and embraced the advancements in technology every step of the way.

When other local telephone providers such as those in Elgin, Delta, and Mallorytown fell by the wayside in the 60's because they were unable to afford the necessary updates in keeping with modernization, the Lansdowne Telephone Company remained a viable business that was capable of taking the next step. They installed a battery switchboard with a dial system service giving them capacity to handle 640 customers.

This forward thinking allowed the telephone company to expand their reach continuing to add equipment, erecting a new building all while providing exemplary customer service as their client base climbed. The area covered by the company also includes parts of Hill Island, even servicing Canada Customs at the International Bridge and numerous islands in the St. Lawrence. Interestingly, this requires the telephone company to have boats for maintenance services including a pontoon boat for use when working with underwater cable.

The company has faced a number of challenges including the unpredictable forces of Mother Nature, which caused severe damage during the ice storm of 98. Locals witnessed the telephone company's commitment to customer service as employees worked 21 days straight in order to restore services. Bill Grier, who has been with the company for 50 years spoke with pride while reminiscing about those trying times and the dedication the employees have for the company and the community they live in. Strong supporters of community events such as Lansdowne Fair and LAFR, the telephone company has also provided a bursary in connection with St. Lawrence College for the past 15 yrs given to a deserving student in the technology field. Recognizing the importance of family within the community, the company also hosts an open house each December with fun activities and entertainment for the kids including a visit from Santa himself.

Community involvement and consistent, caring service clearly sets this company apart. Bill Boulton made quick mention that he often hears from others that they are "always impressed with the customer service," noting "when you call you always get to talk to a person!" Bill Grier chimed in that "Kathy and Trish in the office are often able to trouble shoot right over the phone and resolve issues immediately." Mr. Grier also pointed out that his service men some that have

been with the company upward of 40 years are able to complete all aspects of a job when sent out on a maintenance or install call. For any of you who must deal with the bigger companies you know that this is not common practise and often multiple visits by varying technicians are required before an issue is resolved. Both men agree that the Board's decisions over the years to stay competitive and on trend, for instance choosing to get into the internet business 18 years ago by starting 1000island.net, has kept them on the path to success and given them the competitive edge that they needed.

When asked what the biggest competition for them is Mr. Grier pointed to the cell phone hiding in his pocket. At first, I was caught off guard because my assumption was that Bell Canada would have been the obvious answer. However, after a brief pause I realized that a number of people have given up their landline for sole use of their cell phone. Unfortunately, with that decision people are forgoing the benefits that come with the landline such as inclusion in the phone book and more importantly the 911 capabilities that provide instant location information direct to emergency responders.

The progression of the company is an interesting one as you look at the equipment used in the early days with cranks required to turn for ringing the bells on the phones to the modern cordless phones that exist now. They have experienced transitions from what now looks archaic to dial tone, touch-tone to dial up internet to high speed with the next phase being fibre optic. The Lansdowne Telephone Company's ability to evolve and embrace an ever-changing technology has permitted it to remain strong in an industry dominated by giant corporations. Mr. Grier is proud of the company's success and all those who have had a hand in allowing them to remain independent over the years even in the face of rising costs that are out of their control. I am sure the citizens that formed this company so many years ago would be equally proud of all those that have come after and committed to continually growing it forward and simultaneously providing excellent service within their community.

I ask you to take a moment and appreciate the accomplishment that this company has made to reach such a milestone and join them as they celebrate 110 years in our community with a giant Customer Appreciation Day July 14th!

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