



Sebago
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SEBAGO ECHOES

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All the talk recently about broadband connectivity makes us think about the very first form of connectivity here in Sebago: the telephone, and how it came to us.

Alexander Graham Bell first exhibited his telephone at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. His original phones had to be hardwired together, with a wire running between every set of phones. It wasn't until the switchboard was invented a couple years later that the invention became practical. A switchboard allowed wires to come to a central location and be connected, by a human operator, to any other line in the system.

Over the next 20 years Bell's company installed over 600,000 phones, but mostly in urban areas. It took a lot longer for phones to reach rural areas like Sebago. An interesting statistic from 1893: only 4 people out of 1,000 in the U.S. had a phone.

For us, this changed in 1899. Quoting from an article by Lawrence Nason in the *Bridgton News* from 1955: "Doctor Lorenzo Norton of East Baldwin first saw the need of a telephone company in Baldwin and Sebago. Being a physician, he knew that a telephone would be a wonderful help to him. Dr Norton wanted a telephone so that his patients could get in touch with him more quickly when he was needed in a hurry.

"During the year 1899, Dr Norton talked over his ideas with his numerous friends. 'The telephone,' he said to them, 'will benefit many people besides myself. People can use it to order supplies from the general store, make business appointments and to do many other things besides call the doctor.'

"At that time many of the country telephone companies were just organizing. The telephone was a fairly new gadget and it would take time for everyone to get interested in it. New uses, such as the morning chat and listening in on the party line, would show themselves as time went on.

"William H Fitch and Edward S Douglas were Sebago businessmen who agreed with Dr Norton that the telephone was something definitely needed. Besides rendering a service to Baldwin and Sebago, the telephone would increase the amount of business already being done in these communities.

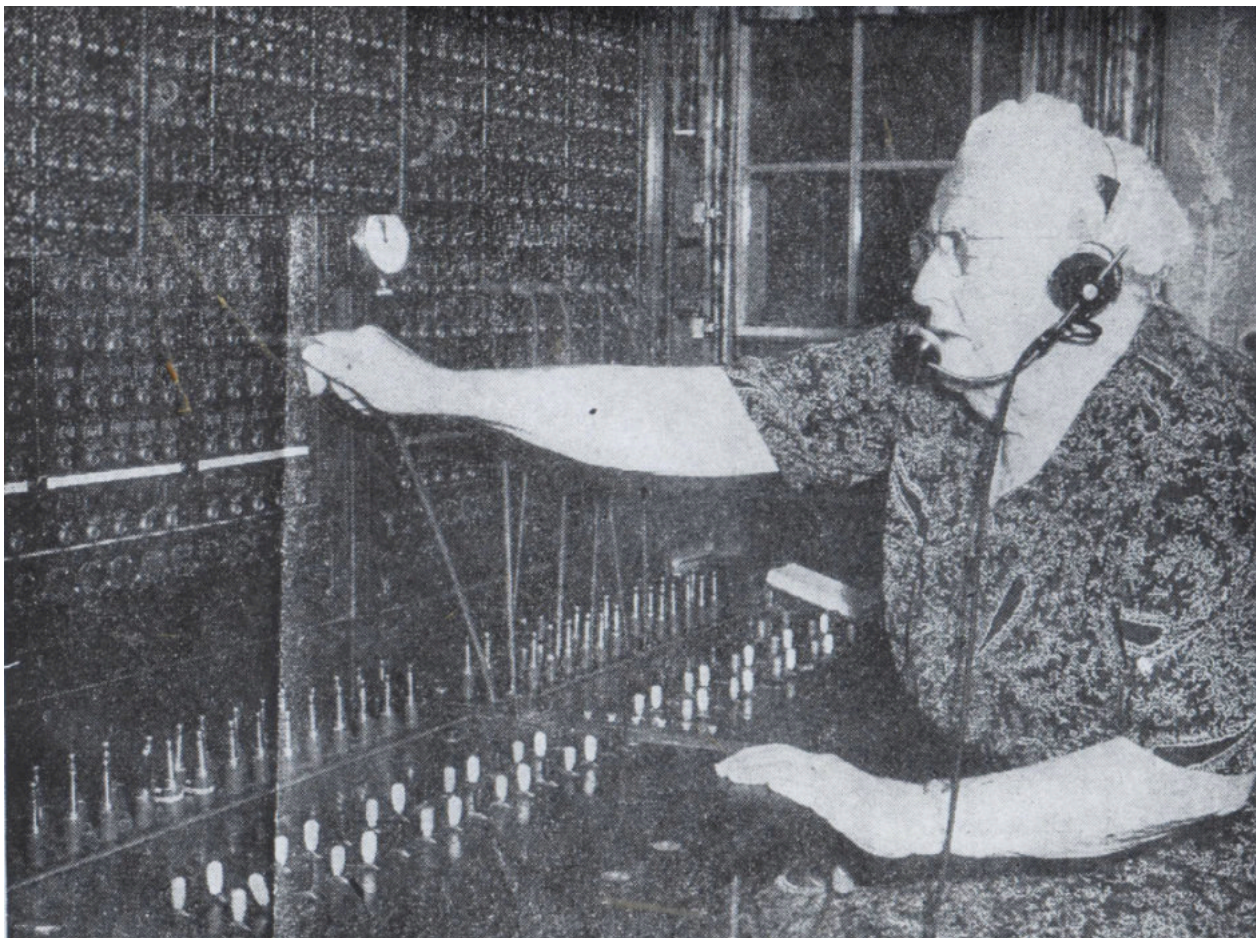


One of the first phone models, circa 1895



Blake House in East Sebago, original home of the Baldwin & Sebago Telephone Company

“NUMBER, PLEASE” CONT’D



Nel Cartret at the switchboard in 1955, age 82.

“Dr Norton’s labors were not in vain and on August 2, 1899, William H Fitch, E S Douglas and Dr Lorenzo Norton incorporated the Baldwin & Sebago Telephone Company.

“The Blake House in East Sebago was the location for the first switchboard, a wall type affair with five party lines and a combination party line and toll circuit to Cornish. Mable Washburn and Blanche Burnell were the first operators. They ran the switchboard while it was in the Blake House and after it was moved to Jesse Burnell’s house, about 1910.”

Pine and hemlock trees that died while standing were used to make the first poles. Some of these poles were still in service when Nason was writing in 1955! At first the telephone wires were strung from East Sebago to East Baldwin, North Baldwin, Douglas Hill and vicinity, North Sebago, the Larrabee District and South Naples. As the company grew, the remainder of Sebago and part of Standish were also served. As electricity was coming in to Sebago around the same time, phone wires were often run on electrical poles, but to some places phones came first, and the electric company leased space on phone poles.

A heavy lumber wagon was the first truck owned by the company. All the equipment and supplies needed to

maintain the lines were loaded into it and hauled by a team of horses. A bad storm could put service out for several days until the linemen could replace broken poles and the broken and snarled wire.

In 1913 the switchboard was moved to the home of Mrs Nellie Cartret, who for most people in Sebago was the public face of the company. Nel, as she was known, was the familiar voice asking "Number, please?" or telling you where the doctor was at the moment, or who had the cake recipe you needed. An article from the *Portland Press Herald* in 1955 tells her story.

Nel was the only child of Lorenzo and Emma (White) Thorne. Growing up on the family farm in North Baldwin, she not just milked the cows and made butter, but also drove the oxen to plow and harrow. At the same time she attended school and studied music. Starting organ lessons when she was 12, she was playing at the North Baldwin Union Church before she was 15. Meanwhile, she taught herself the piano, and she played at Saturday night dances all over the region. Nel’s Model T parked outside dance halls as far away as Freedom NH was as familiar a sight. She married John Cartret Jr of Baldwin in 1892, and with him she raised three children.

At the start in 1913, the switchboard hung on her wall

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and had six lines, each with a bell that could be heard all over the house. Rings were not that frequent, and Nel could get all her housework done between calls. There was one toll circuit to Cornish, with pay stations at the Douglas Inn and the Dyke Farm, used by summer visitors.

The first phones were installed at businesses, with only a few in homes, but the business grew steadily. Before long, most homes in Sebago had a phone, mostly on “party lines” – eight or ten houses sharing a line, with each house having its own distinctive ring. Anyone on the line could surreptitiously listen in on other people’s conversations – a breach of good manners, but not unknown! By 1955, there were 308 subscribers, needing a staff of six operators.

Along with the switchboard, the business office had moved to her house, and she was bookkeeper, general manager, and head operator. “I did everything but climb poles,” she said. In 1917, Nel and her husband bought the controlling interest in the company, which they held until 1945. Both her daughters worked the switchboard, and her son was a lineman.

Fire departments in Sebago, East Baldwin and North Baldwin depended on Nel and her crew to assemble the firefighters. They had a specific fire signal -- a ring of 30 seconds -- that alerted firemen near a blaze.

Nel's position with the phone company made her known throughout town, but she was known also for her active role in the Grange and the Republican Town Committee, as well as the Baldwin school director, and other civic organizations. She was still working the phones in 1955 at age 82, when the Baldwin & Sebago company was bought by George and Francis Twombly of the Standish Telephone Company. It was the Twomblys who switched the company over to direct dial phones in 1957, ending the era of human operators. Nel had certainly earned her retirement by then, and the new system was undeniably more efficient, but as Nason commented, “We will miss the pleasant voices of the operators and their help in emergencies. It is another instance of mechanization replacing the human element; a gain in efficiency, perhaps, but at a loss of that warm, personal touch.”

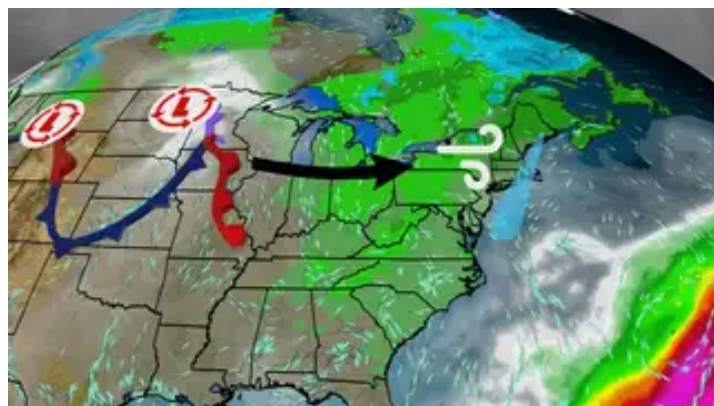


An early dial phone, @ 1950



Listening in on the party line, a popular activity that fueled gossip circles everywhere, inspired this Norman Rockwell illustration from 1919.

RECENT EVENTS



The wet weather pattern this year has been so unkind to us: two of our biggest events of the year cancelled for storms! First, Hurricane Lee caused us to give up a talk on turn-of-the-last-century musical instruments. Then our annual outdoor Fall Festival was facing a predicted wet weekend. In both cases, the weather turned out to be less severe than expected, and we probably could have gone ahead. So frustrating!

Next year, we trust, will be better!

But kept inside by the rain, we’ve been making improvements to the interior of the museum. More about that next time . . .

THE FIVE-TON CORN CLUB

Back in the day when commercial farms were the economic backbone of Sebago, the Maine Canner's Association kept track of top producers. They awarded a certificate, suitable for framing, to Philip Douglas of Douglas Farm, for "having achieved an average yield of over five tons per acre of commercial or freezing corn." This made him a member of their Five-Ton Corn Club.

Corn canneries, or corn factories as they were often known, had a long history in Maine, and there were several located in the Lakes Region. Maine had been one of the first regions to get into canning corn, and in the 19th century and well into the 20th it was a major industry. Although large western farms could produce corn more cheaply, Maine's canned corn had the reputation for being the highest quality. But one by one, economic pressures closed down the local industry – shortly after Phil's award, the factories were gone.



Phil Douglas shows off his award-winning corn, 1949

Corn being delivered and dumped at the Burnham & Morrill Canning Factory in Fryeburg, 1938.

Photo courtesy Maine Memory Network



Sebago
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

OUR MISSION:

To encourage and promote an interest and appreciation of the history of the Town of Sebago through the collection, research, and preservation of such information, materials, or items and to develop educational programs of historical or genealogical importance relating to Sebago's history.

MUSEUM:

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sebagohistoricalsociety.org

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