

# Bethel's



## Telephone Story

The Van Den Kerckhoven Family

The Bethel Journals  
Donald G. Bennett  
PO Box 763  
Bethel, Maine 04217  
[Donald@thebetheljournals.info](mailto:Donald@thebetheljournals.info)

## The Telephone

Individual families strung Bethel's early telephone "networks". In fact Bethel had some private lines before the U.S. Capitol was wired. 1897 -Telephone lines from the Capitol to the new Library of Congress Building are run as well as internal lines for the Library of Congress Building. A year later, Mrs. Harriott Daley became the first Capitol switchboard operator.

Bethel weekly news December 1889 reported: William E. and Julius P. Skillings have just completed a telephone line from their mills to the depot. There are quite a number of these lines in our village and more are being considered.

Skip forward to 1895 and the news reported in May—West Bethel reported that we are to have a telephone line run through this village from Berlin Falls, NH to South Paris.

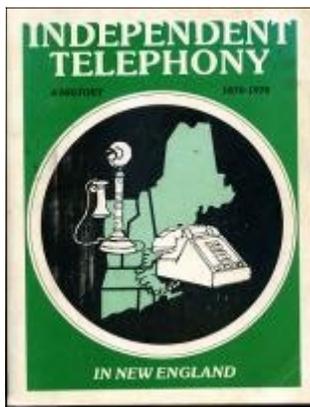
A month later, June 1895, there are already fifteen subscribers to the New England Telephone Co. and telephone company workmen were setting poles in the village Friday and Saturday.

In 1878 the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company had been formed in Massachusetts and Rhode Island but a year later it was dissolved and merged into the Bell Telephone System.

In 1976, Eleanor Haskins of Waitsfield, Vermont, was the editor, assisted by nine others, who published *Independent Telephony in New England 1876—1976, A History*.

The following story of Bethel telephony comes from this book.

### BETHEL, WEST BETHEL, LOCKE MILLS EXCHANGES



The first telephone service provided in Bethel, Maine, was over a toll line built by the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company, presumably from Rumford. This line connected to a single public pay station and is believed to have been established sometime in the 1890s. Then, in 1903, Alphonse and Emma Van Den Kerckhoven, residents of Bethel, had the town's first switchboard installed on the second floor of the so-called Odeon Hall building on Main Street. This impressive frame structure today contains



the town offices.

Originally Al Van, as he was better known, was hired by the New England Company to run the Bethel exchange but he soon bought them out and formed his own independent company which was called the Van Telephone and Telegraph Company. Originally there were just 10 telephones, all located right in the village. Then, as time passed, farmer lines began to spring up and these too were connected to the Van company switch-board.



Hastings home corner of Routes 2 and 26— first telephone “office” in Newry.

In 1899 the New England Telephone Company was granted permission to erect a telephone and telegraph line from Bethel to Newry Corner.

There was a public office at Newry Corner in the Hastings home. This was a great convenience to the Bear River families since the nearest telephone had been in Bethel.

Each farmer line was an incorporated company and single-wire grounded circuits were standard construction. The three companies which were provided with toll connections through the Bethel exchange were the Bethel Local Telephone and Tele-



graph Company, the Mason and Grover Hill Telephone and Telegraph Company (see certificate), and the Mount Abram Telephone and Tele-



**Alphonse Van Den Kerckhoven** was born in Boston on December 1, 1872, the son of Eugene and Clemence (Dagor) Van Den Kerckhoven and was educated in Boston schools.

In 1898 he married Miss Emma Jones of Bethel and they have four children: (in 1931) Eugene A., associated with his father; Louis A. in the Bethel National Bank; Mrs. James MacFarlane of Cambridge, Mass., and Miss Lucia, a student at Gould Academy .

In 1906 Mr. Van organized the Van Tel & Tel. Co. and managed it individually until 1921 when the company was incorporated under the same name. All the stock is owned by family members.

For several years his family occupied the Dr. Morton homestead in Kimball Park. In 1921 he built a modern two story house with a telephone office on Elm Street. Here Mr. Van raises flowers as both a pastime and commercially.

In 1931 he is secretary of the Telephone Association of Maine in active in Masonic functions. He is also a member of Easter Star and the Bethel Lions Club.

(1931 Special Edition of the Oxford County Bethel Citizen)

graph Company. The Van company charged two cents to connect a call from one farmer line to another through its switchboard. Another company, the Albany Telephone Company, was also connected to the Bethel exchange, but only for local calls. Toll connections for these telephones were provided through North Norway.

The Van Den Kerckhoven family came from Belgium. Alphonse's father was a peasant and his mother a high class French lady. Always a colorful character, Al Van, in the early 1900s, not only was the local telephone entrepreneur but also was an American Express agent, a dairy farmer, and a florist with a greenhouse.

The Vans lived on Grover Hill at their farm which was called Cobblestone. During World War I Mr. Van promoted home gardening and personally instructed and demonstrated canning of fruits and vegetables. He had charm and exquisite manners and was prominent in Masonic circles. His wife, Emma Jones Van, was the adopted daughter of Dr. Addison Morton, who was the family doctor in Bethel for more than 50 years. Mrs. Van is described as having been of high intelligence and interested in cultural activities. She was instrumental in bringing art, music, and dramatics to this small country village. Of the four children born to Al and Emma Van, three survive today (1976)."

The Bethel switchboard at first was only tended during the day but, in 1912, it was moved across the street to a small office beside Elmer Young's harness shop, now the parking lot of The Window Box gift shop. The switchboard was tended in the daytime by numerous local women, including Miss Alice French, Miss Mona Martin, and Miss Ida Packard-The operators, (wearing high-collared shirt waists, floor-length black skirts, and "pugs" of hair on the back of their heads), sat at a high switchboard with a transmitter



**The Van telephone office and home on Elm Street. Behind the ell which housed the telephone office is Alphonse Van's greenhouse. Large brick building in the rear is the Bethel Grammar School which stood where the McLaughlin Science Center stands in 2011.** Bethel Historical Society photo.

suspended in front of them and were separated from the public by a small wooden fence that crossed the floor. Long distance calls could be managed between the hours of 9:00 am and 9:00 pm. Daniel R. Smith was the first night operator and he also served as lineman for the telephone company and for several of the farmer lines in which he held stock.

Pearl Ashby Tibbetts, who remembers these early days, provided the following anecdotes in a letter written recently from her home in Bethel:

"We would grind the crank on our wall in-

strument... and promptly the voice said, 'Number please? Often we would say the name of the party we wished to contact. A neighbor of mine always said, 'This is Minnie, please give me Mother.' We talked (or listened) as long as we darned pleased. Many a dinner burned black if the news or gossip was spicy or tragic. The operator was well informed and interested and attended to the business of giving service with a smile.

Once, a bridegroom, 12 miles away, already for the service, minister with Bible in hand, had forgotten the marriage license. On the single line from Bryant Pond our operator was called. She sent a messenger after the license, called a taxi (the only one in the village was a Model T with flapping curtains), got the precious document and sent it down. The wedding was less than an hour late.

One night a student at medical school in Philadelphia, Penna., called his mother and she, a bed, was slow to awaken. The operator, by crossing the office, could see the mother's house and persisted in ringing, keeping the son posted, and at long last she exclaimed ! Her light is on! and half a minute later the homesick son was talking with his happy mother.

Mrs. Tibbetts concluded her letter by saying,

"Older subscribers miss the warm and friendly service given half a century ago by discreet, faithful, and 'highly intelligent hello girls.' They deserve recognition. "

In 1921, with business growing, Al and Emma Van decided to incorporate. All of the stock was held by themselves ; and by members of their family, including their four children, Eugene, Louis, Grace and Lucia. Also that year the Vans built a new home for themselves on Elm Street, just off Main Street, and on the south end of the house an ell became the telephone office when the original single-position switchboard was moved from the cobbler's shop.

Dan Smith remained night operator and his wife, the former Alice French, assisted and later took over the job when Dan died. Lucia Van learned to operate the switchboard at an early age and, when the regular operators wanted time off, would fill in for an hour. By this time the telephone company was serving many of the houses in the village and, as an inducement to taking service, a five-cent charge was made on the bill of any customer who allowed a neighbor to use his phone for a local call. A line was also run to East Bethel, and to West Bethel, and to Locke Mills. Public pay stations were located in the general stores in each of these villages. There was no coin box in these phones, so after each call was completed, the operator would call back with the time and charges, and the storekeeper would collect the money.

In 1903 the Androscoggin Lakes Telephone Company was organized and was granted permission to erect a line from Bethel to Upton. This company later leased its

line to the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company.

In 1905 a farmer's line was installed from Bethel to North Newry with a switch at Newry Corner. This farmer's company was purchased by Van Telephone and Telegraph company, which had its central office in Bethel. About the same time a farmer's line was established on Sunday River with a central office in Bethel. The Van Telephone and Telegraph Company took over this line as well.

**Maggie Newton's East Bethel Store:** These were also the days of messenger service, when a subscriber could volunteer to carry a message to a person without a telephone for an agreed-upon amount. At Maggie Newton's store in East Bethel the carrying of the message was not much of an effort as in some other places. The store not only had a phone on the telephone company's line, but also on a local farmer's line which did not connect with the Bethel switchboard. For five cents, a caller could telephone Maggie and she would go to her farmer's line telephone, call the wanted party, repeat the message, and bring back a reply if one was needed. The five cents fee was credited to Maggie on her telephone account and debited to the calling party, regardless of whether or not the caller was in the local exchange or calling long distance.

**Bethel was situated in a position which made it a natural switching point** for calls in several directions. When the Bell System agreed to connect its lines with those of the Independent companies, open wire circuits were built to a point of connection in the Town of Hanover and Rumford became the toll center for Bethel. A toll route was also built from Norway to Bethel and from Bethel to Berlin, New Hampshire, with a point of connection on the state line at Gilead. Normally these circuits were used only for calls which originated or terminated in the Bethel or Upton exchanges but sometimes bad weather or an accident would change the routine.

Julia Brown, who began working for Van Telephone & Telegraph as an operator in 1928, recalls that the toll circuits in New Hampshire which connected to Berlin often went out of order during storms. Then the only way to get a call into Berlin was over the circuits from Bethel and the operators of those days knew all the backdoor routes they could use in a pinch. Miss Brown said the Bethel switchboard would begin to receive calls from operators everywhere, requesting a line to Berlin. And Berlin would ask for connections out. This is when it helped to be on good terms with your fellow operators, for it was left to the Bethel operator to decide whether these requests for use of her circuits would be honored.

Up until the Second World War it was common for public pay stations and intermediate exchanges to share circuits to toll centers and other offices. This was the case on both the Berlin and Norway toll circuits. For a long time the only telephones in the vil-

lage of Gilead was a public pay-station at the general store, connected on a Bethel-to-Bethel toll circuit. On this circuit Berlin was to answer one ring, the Gilead general store was two rings, and Bethel three. It is said, however, the receiver at Gilead was usually taken down, no matter what code was rung. Of the original two toll circuits to Norway, one circuit was shared with the switchboard at Bryant Pond One ring signaled the Norway operator to answer, two rings summoned Bryant Pond, and three rings called Bethel to the line. The operating practice called for each operator to monitor before ringing on these shared circuits, to be sure no other conversation was in progress, but it was not unknown, especially at busy times, to get a blast of ringing in the ear when another call was waiting to be put up.

**In 1938 Al Van died and the operation of the telephone company passed to his eldest son, Eugene.** In the early 1940s the company was building its lines further out of town and the number of parties on each line constantly increased. The farmer lines continued to exist too; the one which ran over Mt. Abram to Twitchell Pond had 43 subscribers. Ringing codes became incredibly complex, with rings such as "-1012" going out as a long, a short, a long, and two shorts.

The coming of World War II brought several changes. Walter Tikander, who married Lucia Van, was discharged from the Navy, started to learn the business, and later became plant superintendent. With the volume of calls increasing there were not enough cord sets on the one-position switchboard, to handle peak-hour traffic and the single operator could not answer the calls as fast as the drops were falling. A new two-position switchboard, manufactured by Western Electric, was installed, and the original one-position board was retired. It was also during the war, when sons were calling home long distance that the demand for private lines first developed.

The days of operator direct dialing were yet to come and it was exasperating to have a call built up the whole way to Bethel and then find the local line busy. But cable was not available and open wire was the only means of providing the needed lines. The streets of Bethel became lined with poles supporting multiple cross arms and it was not until several years after the war ended that the first lead cable was erected along Main Street.

The next few years passed by with continued line construction as the major project. Ernest Perkins joined the company as a full-time lineman and during his first few years the company took over the remaining farmer lines and converted all of them to metallic circuits. Traffic continued to increase too, and a third switchboard, a partial multiple of the first position, was added. Julia Brown and Viola Lord Luxton were the company's regular day operators, Leslie McAllister and Joyce Swan assisted part-time, and Alice Smith worked nights. Between calls Alice slept on a bed near the switchboard and got

up to answer when the night alarm went off.

**In 1950 tragedy struck the telephone company and the Van Den Kerckhoven family.** Eugene's only son, young Gene, was home from the University of Maine for summer vacation, prior to his senior year, and was helping his father by working as a lineman. Between Bethel and Locke Mills the telephone company shared poles with the power company and at a road crossing, near what is now the local veterinarian's home, the clearance between the open wires of the two utilities was a matter of only a few feet. Gene was working on one of these poles and accidentally let a length of open wire stray too high. The wire came in contact with the power line and he was killed instantly. Back at the telephone office the operators called to Eugene in the next office when all of the drops on the Locke Mills lines fell with a loud snap. He came into the room where the switchboards were located and expressed fear over what the reason might be; in a few minutes someone arrived at the office with the news. The loss of Gene's life was acutely felt for he was an outstanding young man and was very well thought of.

About 1953 it became obvious that the villages of West Bethel and Locke Mills, five miles in either direction from Bethel, were in need of better service. Applications for new service kept coming in and no sooner was a new line run and an old line split than it became necessary to create another because all of them were kept busy constantly.

Plans were formulated to create exchanges at both West Bethel and Locke Mills and, in 1955, dial service was inaugurated in Locke Mills using a North CX-60 dial machine and the exchange name TRemont 5. A year later West Bethel was converted to dial, also using a CX-60 switchboard, and



**Eugene A. Van Den Kerckhoven** is a native of Bethel born on Cobblestone Farm, June 4, 1900, the son of Alphonse and Emma (Jones) Van Den Kerckhoven. His education was received at Gould Academy and University of Maine.

Mr. Van served in the U.S. Navy in 1918-1919 during the World War. He trained for service in the Naval Ammunition Depot in Hingham, Mass., and on the U.S.S. Admiral S.P. 967 plied between Provincetown and Nova Scotia.

He married Miss Jane Handy in 1927 and they have two children, Eugene A. Jr., and Lois Ann. Mr. Van purchased the Ziba Durkee place on Paradise Road in 1929 and has made many improvements there. (Source: 1931 Special Edition of the Oxford County Bethel Citizen.)

its exchange name was TErrace 6. Three trunks connected each of these CDO's to the switchboard at Bethel and EAS was provided between all three exchanges. After both Locke Mills and West Bethel were converted to dial these two exchanges had dial EAS while calls to Bethel, and toll calls, were handled by the Bethel operator who was reached by dialing "4."

With the exception of entrance cables, and some short stretches near the central offices, the foundation of outside plant in both of these new exchanges was open wire. Customers were polled prior to the cutovers and were given the opportunity to choose between one-, two-, and four-party service. Those outside the base rate area who did not respond were placed on multi-party lines. Base rate areas were established and included a half-mile radius of both central offices.

Bethel was responsible, prior to dial, for timing and rating toll calls to a vast area. It was common for a manual office to ticket calls to its own toll center and all of its toll centers other tributaries. These were what were known as flat board points (?) for, although other operators assisted in completing the calls, a record was only kept at the originating, or "A", switchboard. Bethel, however, ticketed calls to its own toll center of Rumford, and Rumford's tributaries, plus calls to Norway, Lewiston, Farmington, Skowhegan, and Berlin, New Hampshire, and all of their connecting offices. In times of heavy traffic at the Rumford toll center it was sometimes quicker if the Bethel operator put through calls beyond this area, passing the call herself and giving Rumford a copy of the ticket when things calmed down. A call to Conway, New Hampshire, for instance, was properly passed to Rumford for connection and ticketing. However, if the need arose, the Bethel operator could route the call through Norway and Cornish. For all of the "A" board tickets which Bethel wrote, a list was sent to the New England Telephone Company once every 10 days, showing the number of calls each day to each exchange and the total charges. This was commonly called the ten day list" and was the basis upon which the Bell System settled with the Independent company for the calls it originated and ticketed itself.

The Maine Forestry Service (circa 1955) maintains a line to the tower on Spec Mountain which connects with the Upton and Bethel central station.

With the West Bethel and Locke Mills portions of the original Bethel exchange broken away, the task of converting the remaining territory was undertaken, and in 1957 the Bethel exchange, too, went dial. The exchange name, which retained a flavor of the old company, was VAndyke 4, and the dial equipment, Federal Step-by-step, is still in use today (1976). With the conversion at Bethel, all three exchanges were re-centered on Norway and the Berlin and Rumford circuits were abandoned.

**In 1960 Eugene Van Den Kerckhoven died** and his sister, Lucia Tikander, be-

came manager and treasurer while her brother Louis assumed the president's position. Louis, however was also manager of the local branch bank and had never been too involved in the telephone business so most of the responsibility for the company's operation fell to Lucia, and her husband Walter. After the dial conversion Julia Brown and Leila McAllister, who had been operators, both moved into the business office. The monthly bills being rendered then were entirely done by manual means; there were no computers involved in those days.

In 1962 Louis Van's daughter Judy returned to Bethel with her husband, Don James, who joined the company as an installer/repairman. The plant department at this time consisted of Clarence Remington, Ernest Perkins, Don James, and Walter Tikander as superintendent. Then, in 1965, Walter Tikander died. Having been associated with the company for 20 years, Tikander had become quite knowledgeable about the operation and, with his wife Lucia, these two were the last members of the Van Den Kerckhoven family to have an active interest in the business.

Meanwhile, demand for more and better service continued unabated. At Locke Mills the original dial machine had exhausted and there were held orders for new services to customers plus toll circuit orders awaiting completion. Restricted by the small plot of land on which the central office was situated, the decision was made to build a new office in another location, rather than to expand the existing office and put in toll selectors, which would have freed up additional lines in an office of this type. In the Spring of 1966 the new office situated on the Twitchell Pond Road, was cut into service with a CX-200 machine which had previously been used by the Oxford County Telephone & Telegraph Company at its exchange in West Paris.

A similar exhaust (no more additional line capacity) situation was also on the verge of occurring at West Bethel and on, many pole lines in all three exchanges major reinforcement of the open wire facilities was clearly needed. The Van Den Kerckhoven family recognized the necessity of a substantial capital investment in order to improve service, but at the same time, with young Gene gone, there was no heir to the business. In 1967 the decision was made to sell the company and, on March 1, 1968, the Van Telephone & Telegraph Company was sold to the Continental Telephone System. In addition to the original Bethel territory the Van Company had also acquired the Androscoggin Lakes Telephone & Telegraph Company of Upton, Maine, in the mid-1950's, and this exchange was sold to Continental at the same time.

The telephone company business office was retained at Bethel until February 14, 1972, when the records were transferred to the business office at Fryeburg. (On April 19, 1976, the Fryeburg office was also closed, and this entire area is now the responsibility of the business office and repair service center at Raymond, Maine, formerly head-

quarters of the Poland Telephone Company.) The Van Den Kerckhoven home and office had served well for more than 50 years, but with the business office gone, it was no longer needed for use by the telephone company. Standing vacant and subject to vandalism, it was a liability, especially with the dial office situated just behind it. It was not torn down, however, for it still had many years of life left. Instead it was sold to an area resident and, in September 1974, the house was dismantled in three sections and was moved, section by section, to a site on the Mount Abram Road in Locke Mills, five miles away, where it was reassembled and stands today.

The Locke Mills exchange is presently served by the 150 lines of CX-200 equipment from West Paris plus 50 additional lines added in December 1973. At West Bethel the original CX-60 machine was taken out of service in the Fall of 1968 and replaced by 200 lines of CX-1000 equipment which had been used by the Lovell United Telephone Company at its Center Lovell dial office. The West Bethel CX-60 machine was subsequently sold to Jeff Webber of the Island Telephone Company, for use at Frenchboro, a small exchange southeast of Swan's Island off the Maine coast. Both of the small brick dial office buildings originally used in Locke Mills and West Bethel have since been torn down.

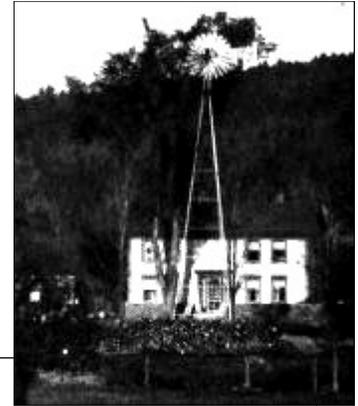
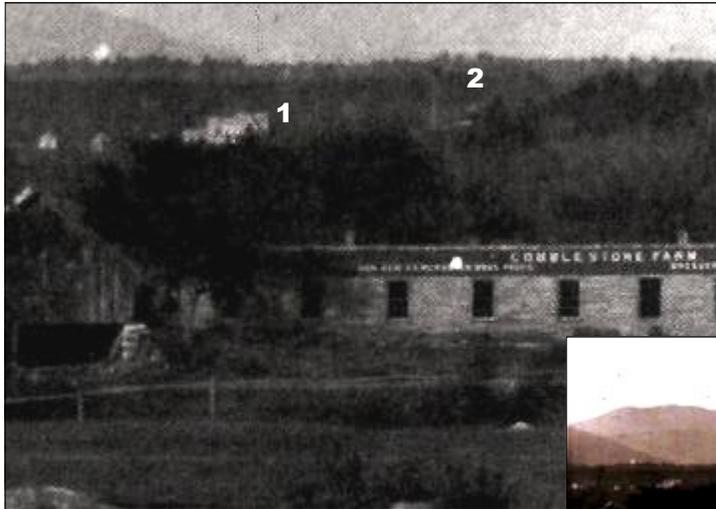
The Bethel dial office was enlarged in 1974 to accommodate additional lines and terminals and carrier equipment needed for direct distance dialing, and on June 7, 1976, automatic number identification was introduced for the exchange's one-party and two-party customers. In contrast to the 10 telephones served in 1903 there are today 920 customers in Bethel, 175 in West Bethel, and 240 at Locke Mills. (Continued on Page 11) The Bethel dial office, equipped with 800 lines and 1100 terminals, requires 54 trunks to handle the local and long distance traffic this office now generates.

As a footnote: During the Continental Telephone Company ownership, fiber optic cable replaced overhead wire telephone lines.

**Calling long distance from the Van's telephone office in 1952:** After walking up the steps to the office door and entering you faced two or three phone booths. You the caller told the lady operator on duty at her switchboard the place and number you wanted to call. When the call had been put through and your party's phone was ringing you entered a booth, picked up the receiver and your operator told you to go head—your party was either on the line or coming to the phone. When you finished and had hung up, the operator would tell you the amount of the charge and you paid her for the call.

Photographs (below) of Cobblestone Farm is one of very few farm photos showing a

windmill. The slope behind the farm buildings is Pine Hill, in a section of the town called Grover Hill. Puzzle Mountain in Newry stands in the far background.



In above photo (1) marks the location of the Skillings Mill boarding house and (2) which can barely be made out is the mill's chimney.

About 2004, a new subdivision was approved on Grover Hill in the same general vicinity as the Cobblestone Farm of the Van Den Kerckhovens; it is named Cobblestone Farm Village.

**Eleanor Haskin, Waitsfield-Fayston Telephone Company, Waitsfield, Vermont. Advisors and collaborators in compiling Independent Telephony 1876-1976: Sarah Ferris, Fayston, Vermont; Ruth McGill, Waitsfield, Vermont; and Thomas Thurston, New England Office, Continental Telephone System.**

**Sources: Independent Telephony in New England, courtesy, Stephen T. Seames. Local source news/ photos property of the Bethel Historical Society.**

**The History of Newry 1805 to 1955 by Carrie Wight—Telephone section.**

**Front page telephone—Stephen T. Seames collection. Photos of the Mason and Grover Hill stock certificate, Cobblestone Farm and the Van home and telephone office were copied from An Illustrated History of Bethel Maine by Randall Bennett.**



Eleanor Haskin

**The Bethel Journals** Donald G. Bennett PO Box 763 Bethel, Maine 04217