

Louis H. Korty, the Telephone Pioneer of Nebraska and the West

By CHARLES E. HALL

Secretary, Northwestern Bell Telephone Company

WHAT is it that gives to one man's life distinction, a tinge of romance and a charm, while the lives of other men appear dull and commonplace? Is it birth, unusual circumstance, compelling personality, opportunity, chance, constructive imagination, true vision, privilege or destiny?

It must be several of these, for how else could a little immigrant boy, born in far away Hanover, Germany, have the rare experiences he had, achieve the purposes he did, merit the distinction he attained and be opportunely on the spot at the psychological moment?

It is wonderful experience for anyone to cross the Atlantic for the first time, but think what it must have meant to little six-year old Louis H. Korty going to a strange land, to new scenes, different people, to learn a new language and there await experiences that were to carry him on to distinction, fame and happiness, while some of his companions went down to sorrow and death.

It is a wonderful experience to learn the mysterious, weird and witching art of the telegrapher, and had he not learned it, when the opportunity presented itself to him, all of the circumstances of his life would have been different and this story about his telephone career would not have been written.

The acquirement of telegraphic skill opened up wonderful opportunities for him at an opportune time. It enabled him to serve a great Civil War commander in an important duty of much military value and to perform this unusual duty under no less a personage than Andrew Carnegie.

Just briefly we will touch on a few of the incidents and experiences of those days which gave him distinction, added no little romance to his life and contributed largely to his splendid career.

He was one of the cipher code operators who deciphered the secret papers taken from captured spies. So adept at this duty was the 18-year old boy that within four hours he could give a translation of captured code messages to his general. With Thomas A. Edison he narrowly escaped capture at Memphis by the Confederate General Pickett.

Under command to quickly establish telegraph communication, he was the first of General Canby's soldiers to enter Mobile.

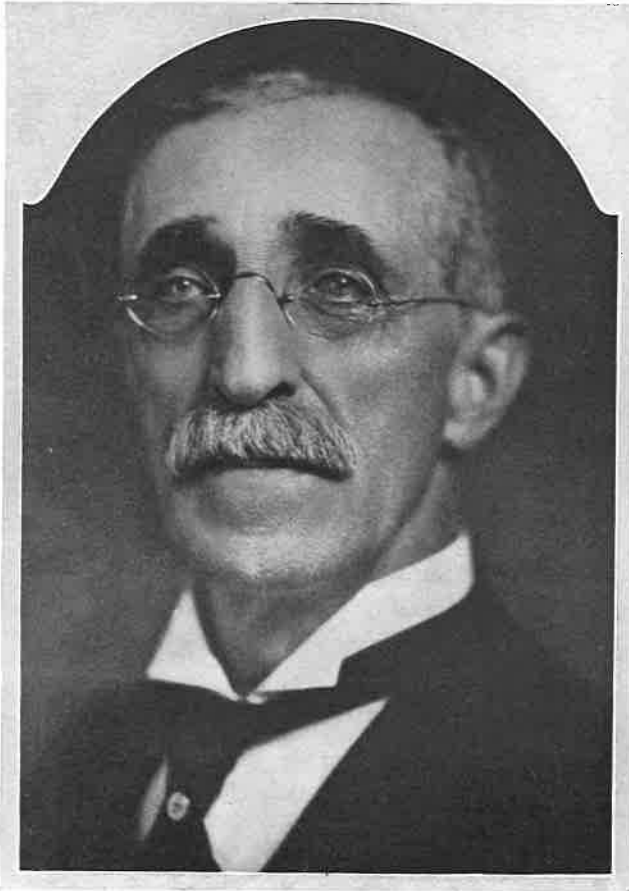
He was one of the few Union soldiers who had yellow fever and recovered. He had the unpleasant experience of watching soldiers leave a coffin before his hospital door, believing that it would soon be required for him.

The building of the Union Pacific railroad across the plains will ever be an epic story.

Written into it are the stories of Lincoln, the president who recommended it to Congress; Grant, the president under whom it was built; Sherman, the builder; Dodge, the engineer, and Korty, the telegrapher who

was convinced of the ultimate practical possibility of the telephone and had visions, if you please, of its wonderful future.

His faith carried him along, gave him confidence, inspired him to convince others to associate with him and help him in the new and untried field of telephonic communication where again romance and distinction followed him and forever gave him the honor of being one of the founders of the telephone systems of Iowa and Nebraska which we of today know as the Northwestern Bell Telephone Company and in turn know it to be a part of the greatest system of communication ever devised or operated.



Louis H. Korty

supervised the wire communications. In the historic event at Promontory Point, Utah, when the Golden Spike was driven in the connecting rail uniting with bands of steel the busy Atlantic with the golden shores of the Pacific, romance and distinction again waited on him as he made the connection at Omaha whereby the hammer tap was electrically transmitted to Washington.

Scarcely had he settled down after the thrilling experiences connected with the opening of the Union Pacific railroad than there burst into the telegraphic world a star of unwonted brilliancy. The telephone was invented and Sherman's military telegrapher and the Union Pacific telegraph superintendent visioned its possibilities as few men of his time did.

Again opportunity knocked at his door for he happened to be in Philadelphia at the exposition in 1876, saw Dr. Bell and his remarkable invention there and discussed it with Dom Pedro, the emperor of Brazil.

At that early time Mr. Korty was con-

HE kept a close watch on the development of the telephone and convinced a friend in Omaha, J. J. Dickey, of the great possibilities of this instrument that was causing telegraph men to wonder whether it would soon or eventually supplant the telegraph. In 1877 Mr. Korty secured two telephones from Boston and wished to connect them up and try them, so he induced Mr. Dickey to cooperate with him. Mr. Dickey was then superintendent of the Atlantic and Pacific Telegraph Company and Mr. Korty was in the Union Pacific railway telegraph department. On November 18, 1877, the first telephone in Omaha was connected, this time with a telephone at the Union Pacific Transfer in Council Bluffs.

Messrs. Korty and Dickey then formed a partnership and acquired the license rights for the Bell telephone in a portion of Iowa, all of Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Montana and Idaho. They put in various private lines together until the latter part of 1878, when the Atlantic and Pacific Telegraph Company was sold to the Western Union Telegraph Company and the latter company required Mr. Dickey to push the Edison telephone instead of the Bell instrument.

The early history of the development of the telephone in America contains many incidents and conditions not often stressed by writers of today. One of these conditions was the strong competition between persons and interests back of Thomas A. Edison as the inventor of the telephone against the persons and interests espousing Alexander Graham Bell as the inventor. Throughout the country the powerful Western Union Telegraph Company was back of Edison, while private capital was backing Mr. Bell, rather feebly it seems now.

Owing to these conditions and circumstances the partnership between Messrs. Korty and Dickey was dissolved but not the

friendship. Later under happier conditions, when the Western Union Telegraph Company conceded that Bell was the inventor of the telephone, the two old friends became partners again.

While Mr. Korty's old friend and partner left him for a time, and strenuously opposed his establishment of the Bell instruments in Omaha, Mr. Korty became the sole licensee of the National Bell Telephone Company in the territory we have described. He sought help and backing and found it in S. H. H. Clark, then president of the Union Pacific railroad. These gentlemen believed that the time was opportune to build an exchange in Omaha, especially since Mr. Dickey could then rejoin them. So the three men, with others, organized the Omaha Electric Company and during the first half of 1879 built and opened Omaha's first telephone exchange on the west side of Fifteenth between Farnam and Douglas streets, where the new World-Herald building now stands.

Much of the story of Omaha's first telephone exchange has been told. There is an incident, however, that will bear retelling many times. In explanation it may be said that in those times there was hardly any complete factory built equipment. Parts had to be collected here and there and assembled at the exchange to be installed. Mr. Korty and Mr. Vail had some correspondence about the proposed Omaha exchange and in one of Mr. Vail's letters to Mr. Korty dated April 15, 1879, Mr. Vail suggested that Mr. Watson, forever famous as the assistant to Mr. Bell in the invention of the telephone, should come to Omaha and supervise the construction of the central office apparatus.

Mr. Vail's letter reads:

"I will have sent to you as soon as possible a complete set of our instruments in order that you may exhibit them and show their work. I wrote Mr. Dickey today in regard to the switchboard and apparatus to be connected with the exchange. I think it would be well to let our Mr. Watson supervise the construction of the apparatus for your central office system, as he can bring to bear upon it an experience of over two years."

HAPPILY for Mr. Watson and for many others in the telephone business today fame and worth do not rest on years of experience alone, but on character, ability, loyalty and industry.

Messrs. Korty, Dickey, General G. M. Dodge and others built an exchange at Council Bluffs, Iowa, in the same year (1879) under the name of the Council Bluffs Telephone Exchange Co. and also in the same year Messrs. Korty and Dickey of Omaha and Messrs. A. D. Hathaway and John R. Clarke of Lincoln under the name of the Lincoln Telephone Exchange Company built the first exchange in Lincoln, Neb.

There were other exchanges built and other fields developed by the courageous and indomitable Korty and Dickey—Marshalltown, Iowa, Sioux City, Iowa, besides many towns in Nebraska, as well as organizing the Rocky Mountain Bell Telephone Company, building in Salt Lake City and elsewhere in that region.

It would be interesting to dwell on the experiences of those days, nearly a half cen-

tury ago; experiences like those of sending the first pair of telephones to the Sandwich, now the Hawaiian Islands, or to writers of the splendid pioneers who were Mr. Korty's associates. But space forbids, so our story will be mostly of him.

His charming story cannot be confined to a few lines yet so compelling is it that one can learn something of value to the telephone worker in any line of it. It has an interest and charm for us as it unfolds, grips us and makes us proud to be identified with the industry which so strongly attracted men like him; the industry he founded so ably and well and which it is our duty and privilege to preserve and carry on to all the heights of the ideals he had when he built the Omaha exchange 47 years ago.

Modesty is an ever existing characteristic of men of achievement and Mr. Korty when asked to relate the experiences of his wonderful life crowded the story into 286 words including the signature. We give it here just as he wrote it:

"I WAS born October 22, 1846, in Hanover, Germany. The family emigrated in 1852, settling at Fort Madison, Iowa. In 1860 I secured my first job in a newspaper office as 'printer's devil.' In a few months a better situation, as a clerk in a book store, presented itself and I took it. The telegraph line reached the town in 1861 and the office was established in this store, which gave me an opportunity to become a telegrapher.

"It was not long before I had acquired sufficient practice to be placed in charge. The following year I was transferred to Chicago. From there I was shifted around to various points in Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota as utility man. In 1864 I entered the military telegraph corps, remaining in that service as operator and cipher clerk until the close of the war, also during the reconstruction period. Returned north in 1867 and again entered the telegraph service at Chicago, remaining until the completion of the Union Pacific railroad in 1870 when I secured a job on that road.

"In October, 1871, I was transferred to the general office in Omaha. On January 1, 1881, I was made assistant superintendent

of telephone. On August 1, 1887, I was promoted to superintendent of telegraph, remaining in that capacity until May 5, 1908, when after 38 years continuous service, I was retired on pension.

"On October 14, 1871, I married Elizabeth B. Sampson at Chicago, whose family had lost everything in the great Chicago fire, five days previous. Immediately after the invention of the telephone J. J. Dickey and myself secured rights covering a portion of Iowa and all of Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Montana and Idaho. The enterprising people of this territory early availed themselves of this great convenience.

"LOUIS H. KORTY."

MR. KORTY omitted an interesting historical fact from his autobiography and that is that in the great Chicago fire the court records and books were destroyed and as soon as possible thereafter new records were established and in the new marriage license record for Cook county, Illinois, opened for use after the fire, marriage license No. 1 was issued to Louis H. Korty and Elizabeth B. Sampson, both of Chicago.

Fortunately for us there are records of his accomplishments in the telephone industry, recollections of his associates and others, who were privileged to know him, that can be drawn upon to supply what Mr. Korty modestly omitted from his life story.

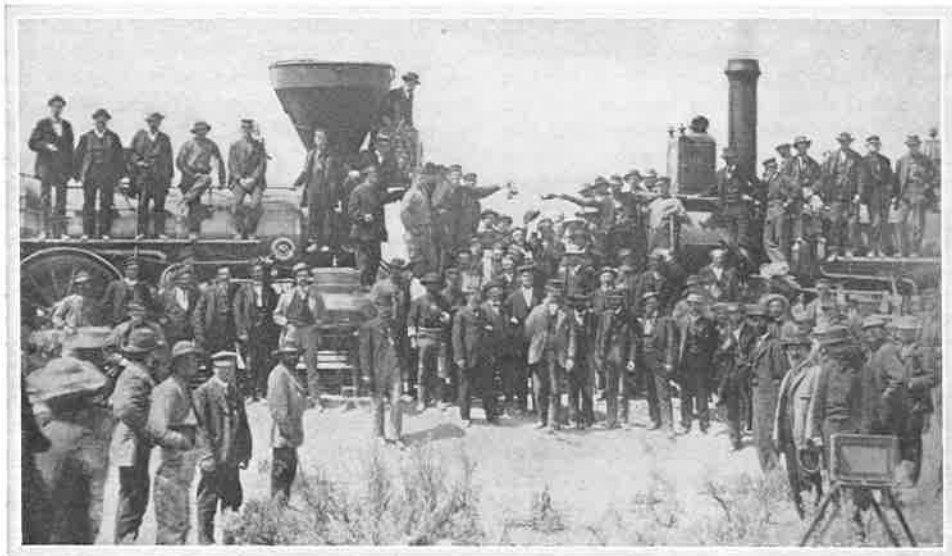
He passed through so much that was epoch making; he was an associate of great men; he was one of the chief actors in it all—yet to him it was a part of the day's work; the unusual to us, was usual to him.

His eyes would light up at the mention of the names of Edison, Dodge and Vail, each his personal friend. I have wondered on these occasions what his memories were of the men and events in his experiences of three score and ten years.

What would ours be if we had known Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, Dodge, Carnegie, Canby, Bates, Clowry, Eckert, Dickey, Bell, Vail, Edison, Beach, Yost, Wallace, Morsman, Leary, McFarland, Clark and others intimately and claimed them for our friends?

There is much that thrills and inspires the telephone worker of today in the stories of

(Continued on Page 16)



Driving of the golden spike which marked the completion of the first transcontinental railroad, the Union Pacific. Mr. Korty personally supervised the repeaters at Omaha which made it possible to transmit the tap of the hammer electrically to Washington.