



Charles E. Hall, secretary of the Northwestern Bell Telephone Company, seated at his desk prior to the close of his telephone career after more than 46 years in the service of this company and its predecessors.

Telephone Builder, Historian

Charles E. Hall, Secretary of Company, Retires

FOR more than two score years Charles E. Hall has been making telephone history in the territory of the Northwestern Bell company, particularly in the state of Iowa. With his retirement, this month, from active service there is closed one of the most productive as well as fascinating telephone careers in the history of the industry.

"It was while working on a farm in 1876 that I first heard about the telephone," writes Mr. Hall in his "Experiences, Reminiscences and Observations". The *Detroit Free Press* arrived at the farm home where he was staying with a story of Professor Bell's exhibition at Philadelphia and the farmer with whom he was working read the account, remarking:

"Boys, you need not believe that story; it is doubtless some newspaper writer's yarn like the sea serpent stories one comes across now and then. If he would have had Professor Bell talking through a tube, it might be possible to do it, but to talk through a solid wire is sheer nonsense."

Mr. Hall was born in St. Joseph county, Michigan, and moved with his parents when he was two years old to "far away Iowa where land was cheap". In Iowa they settled only a few miles from the farm where Theodore N. Vail broke the virgin sod. In 1872 he returned to Michigan with his mother where he went to school and worked until 1882. Even in his youth he was interested in the communication business. He and a schoolmate decided to become telegraph operators. They rigged up a line out of material available to them and started to learn the telegrapher's art.

In 1882 Mr. Hall returned to Iowa, there to remain until he reached the top of his chosen profession. His first years in Iowa

were spent teaching school and waiting for an opportunity to get in the telegraph business. While awaiting this opportunity, however, he was prevailed upon to consider the telephone business, which was then very much in its infancy in the state.

At this point in his story of his life Mr. Hall writes:

"Come with me and I will take you down the long avenue of 46 years of telephone service. An experience replete with adventure; sunshine and shadows; hard work and accomplishments; longings and satisfaction; acquaintance with many phases of human conduct and acquaintance, too, with some of the finest people and best things of life, in all of which telephone service stands out as the pre-eminent and compelling purpose."

To review Mr. Hall's telephone career is to review the progress of the telephone in Iowa. Starting as he did with the Iowa Telephone and Telegraph Company which was organized at Davenport, Iowa, to consolidate the 18 Bell licensees then existing in the state into one corporation, he was associated with all of the movements in the state which were working for a unified system.

Faced with the problems of providing service, maintaining the existing plant and extending the exchange as well as the toll plant, they were further faced with problems of competition, lack of funds and a public that did not fully appreciate the value of the service being offered.

In Mr. Hall's reminiscences he recalls that he and other telephone men of that day often walked between towns and lines were covered on foot rather than pay out money for livery hire because the few dollars meant so much to the struggling company.

During the years that followed Mr. Hall

held practically every job in the telephone organization. As manager in various exchanges he was also lineman, groundman, installer or held any other position that the occasion demanded. Considerable of his time was also spent on the road, helping establish exchanges, building toll lines and ironing out difficulties that arose in relations between companies.

As competition grew stronger Mr. Hall was given numerous opportunities to join other groups of telephone men as telephones sprang up here and there. But he preferred to stay with his "first love" and after the hardships of the first years he hated to leave without seeing that it finally succeeded.

When the Northwestern Group of Bell Companies was formed, consisting of the Iowa Telephone Company, Nebraska Telephone Company and the Northwestern Telephone Exchange Company, Mr. Hall became assistant general commercial superintendent, then general commercial superintendent and still later vice president and general manager.

When this organization was perfected the work of the company was divided into three departments, commercial, plant and traffic. Although holding the title of assistant general commercial superintendent, Mr. Hall still had a great deal of work to do in Iowa and remained there directing much of the work of that section of the company. When the district organization was installed he chose the men who were to head the three departments in the districts then existing in Iowa.

On August 1, 1911, Mr. Hall moved his headquarters to Omaha and assumed active charge of the general commercial department, at the same time retaining his connections with the numerous companies in Iowa, serving as director or official in many of them. He later became vice president and general manager of our company.

When, in 1921, the companies were reorganized and became the Northwestern Bell Telephone Company, Mr. Hall became the tax commissioner for the new company and in 1924 became the secretary, which position he held until his retirement.

Upon leaving active telephone service, Mr. Hall will go to California, there to enjoy a well earned vacation. With him goes a wealth of memories, some pleasant and some of hardships, but all of them replete with accomplishments in his chosen line. With him goes also a wealth of telephone historical information that has been of inestimable value to the present generation of telephone workers. With his active mind and gifted powers of expression, Mr. Hall has not only given much to the Northwestern Bell Telephone Company in work but has retained for the present and future generations the story of those early struggles that have given to us the company as we know it today.