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For the Junior Members

## Otago's First Telegraph, Telephone and Wireless

When the first settlers arrived in Otago in 1848 there were no motor cars, electric light, moving pictures, telephones, radio, type-writers, gramophones, aeroplanes, or tape-recorders anywhere in the world, yet the people were probably happier than they are today. I am to tell you when we were first able to send messages by telegram or wireless and when the first telephones arrived.

We are able to sit in an office in Dunedin and talk to someone in London just as if we were both in the same room, or we can talk to people flying in an aeroplane or sailing in a steamer out on the ocean. We can broadcast a message by radio, or listen in to a football match being played in England or a cricket match played in South Africa and know the score as soon as people watching the match. Our early settlers would have believed this quite impossible. Even the astronaut travelling round the earth several times in one day can talk to or listen to people on the ground. What a wonderful world we live in today, the most wonderful age that ever existed.

Before the telegraph or wireless people sometimes paid runners to carry a message to its destination, or they beat their tom-toms, or lit bonfires. The first telegraph was invented in 1827 and a better and more reliable one in 1837, ten years before the early settlers of Otago left Scotland, but it is exactly 100 years ago since the first telegraph line was commenced from Dunedin to Port Chalmers. The very first line in New Zealand connected Christchurch to Lyttleton. A Dunedin firm of merchants (Driver and McLean) got permission to build a private line which left their shop in Bond Street and went through North-East Valley, along the slopes of Mount Cargill through dense bush and so down to Port Chalmers. Mr. Richard Woolley, who built it, used beech saplings for posts and these were of different sizes and heights. The line was so unsightly that he had to replace these posts with square sawn posts. This line was first used in August, 1862, fourteen years after the first settlers arrived here. The next year the public were also allowed to use it. When two years later the Government had erected another telegraph all the way from Bluff to Invercargill, they caused the first line to be dismantled. So from 1865 people in Dunedin could send messages to Bluff, Invercargill, Oamaru, Timaru or Christchurch at a cost of half a crown for twelve words. The Dunedin telegraph office for 75 years was in a building at the corner of Lower High Street and Bond Street which is now the Social Security Building. In 1937 it was transferred to its present location in Princes Street. In 1866 a cable was laid across Cook Strait and in 1876 another cable was laid from New Zealand to Australia.

The telephone was not invented till 1876, nearly thirty years after the settlement of Otago, and it was six years later before the first telephone exchange was opened in Dunedin with 56 subscribers. The telephone was invented by a Scotsman named Graham Bell and first shown to the public at an exhibition in Philadelphia. No one took much notice of it till the Governor of Brazil who was visiting the exhibition was handed the receiver by Dr. Bell while he spoke into the mouthpiece in another room. "The thing talks," was his surprised comment. It wasn't long before the telephone was to be found in almost every country, but speech was very faint until another man named David Hughes invented the microphone after which the sound was as loud as the speaker's voice. All the same the earlier instruments were rather crude and clumsy compared with the telephones we now have. Today the automatic telephone enables us to talk directly to anyone in New Zealand who has a telephone and that includes most homes and business premises.

Now, the radio or wireless telegraph and wireless telephone was not known till about the year 1900 and was not available to the public in New Zealand till 1911. Many amateurs began experimenting with wireless from about 1900 onwards. The first sets built in Dunedin were built by Mr. Ernest Strachan and Mr. Robert Scott in the year 1900. The next was the set belonging to Mr. J. L. Passmore built in 1902. Three other amateurs who worked as a team were Cedric Stark, Stanton Hicks and Cyril Brandon and I also built a set. The sets were rather crude and the receiver or coherer was very unreliable. It was not till the ionic valve was invented that commercial wireless and radio transmission became possible. I remember being in the University of Canterbury one evening when Prof. Jack of the Otago University managed to send a message by wireless to Prof. Farr. This was considered a remarkable feat at the time, about 1915 or 1916. About 1907 I opened up some equipment at the Otago University and put together the first set, similar to the set in the Otago Early Settlers' Museum, but the messages could only be sent by morse from one room to the next and then with great difficulty. Today we can send radio messages all over the world. The first time a radio message got across the Atlantic Ocean it was sent by Marconi in 1901 and that was a single word. By 1907 it was possible to send any message but the first commercial station in New Zealand was opened in 1911. Now we can listen to the Queen in England or the Pope in Rome, or to music or speeches delivered in any part of the world. Indeed we are so used to the radio today that we almost cease to realize how very wonderful it is. By its aid and the use of tape recorders we can even listen to the voices of people long since dead or to orchestras no longer in existence. What would the early settlers think if they could come to life again and see aeroplanes, motor cars, moving pictures, sewing machines, electric light and all the other inventions we are now so familiar with?

—W.M.