

CHAPTER IX

BEATING THE BELL TELEPHONE COMPANY

Wausau, in the 90's, had a wonderful spirit. It was still dominated by the first generation of lumbermen who had made a desolate mission camp which had been reported to the Presbyterian Mission Board as too far away to be worth continuing, into the most attractive city in Northern Wisconsin.

One example of the spirit of the town will suffice. About the time Grandfather went to Wausau, the business men petitioned the Bell Telephone Company for better service. Not getting satisfactory response to the request, they determined to build a telephone system of their own, and sold shares to citizens on the basis of one share (\$50) for each telephone - not to exceed three shares all told, the shareholder getting 6 per cent on his investment through monthly rebate on his telephone bill.

A local service was established - not only efficient, but with the spirit of the city back of it. The Bell tried to kill this budding competitor by offering "pauper" service - that is, by offering to install and maintain telephones without charge for service. The city resented the move. Here and there, however, some impecunious persons accepted - a woman, for example, and her married daughter both allowed Bell to install free phones that they might talk to each other.

Through suggestions from Bell, these persons began to request merchants to install Bell phones, and some merchants put them into obscure corners of their stores. The women of the city solved this problem. One by one they would place an order with a store and then inquire - "Have you a Bell telephone?" If the answer was "Yes", then "Cancel the order."

Merchants could not wait for the Bell Telephone Company to remove the telephones. They took them out themselves and set them on the sidewalk. The national headquarters of one of the local express companies ordered a Bell telephone installed in its Wausau office. Practically all express went over the other line until the order was rescinded.

After a time the Bell Telephone Company abandoned pauper service. Then a few business places installed Bell phones for long distance work. Citizens generally wanted long distance connections and having unsuccessfully petitioned the Bell Telephone Company to give long distance connections to local phones, took the matter to the state legislature. After a bitter fight, the Bell Telephone Company convinced the legislature that the Wausau system was mechanically too inefficient to make long distance connections satisfactory.

In the next year the Wausau Telephone Company entirely rebuilt its system, making it the last word in telephone construction - e.g., installed the dial system more than thirty years before it was used in eastern cities.

The Bell Telephone Company, facing a new fight in the next legislature, surrendered and gave long distance service to all local phones. It was said to have been the first instance in which a local community had beaten the Bell system. The local company removed the restriction on number of shares of its stock an individual might hold and proceeded to do an amazingly profitable business, as Grandfather can testify, as he came to own a number of shares of its stock.

These profits were to a considerable extent made possible by the fact that the president of the company, Mr. Heinemann, and the attorney, Mr. G. D. Jones, donated their services. Both gave freely of their time and efforts to do a service for the city. Such was the spirit of Wausau in the