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"Mr. Watson, Come Here. I Want You."

March 10, 1876

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by *Ronald Wolf*

The great communicator... the telephone. What can be said about it that hasn't been said many times over?

I remember Elvis Priestley's song, 'Are You Lonesome Tonight' to celebrate Bell's 100th Anniversary in 1976. The plush oversized telephones seemed to crop up everywhere at fairs, and stores to celebrate the anniversary as well.

How can you ever forget the telephone receivers of the 1970s? They were so heavy that you could use them as a hammer in emergencies. What about the famous party lines? Today party lines are for people who want to chat with strangers on a lonely night. Years ago if you had a party line a distinctive ring would tell you if the call was for you or someone else.

Alexander Graham Bell, (1847-1922), was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on March 3, 1847. He was an eminent scientist, inventor, engineer and innovator who is credited with inventing the first practical telephone. He moved to London, England in 1867, and entered the university there, but left on account of his health, and went to Canada with his father in 1870.

Bell's telephone grew out of improvements he made to the telegraph. He had invented the "harmonic telegraph" which could send more than one message at a time over a single telegraph wire. Bell reasoned that it would be possible to pick up and transmit the sound of the human voice using an adaptation of his "harmonic telegraph." In 1875, along with his assistant Thomas A. Watson, Bell constructed instruments that transmitted recognizable voice-like sounds.

On this day, we don't celebrate his birthday or even the invention of the telephone. What really happened on this day was his famous test message to his assistant Thomas A. Watson (1854-1934) with Bell's immortal words, "Mr. Watson, come here. I want you." Bell had upset a battery, spilling acid on his clothing. He soon forgot the accident in his excitement over the success of the telephone transmitter. This breakthrough occurred on March 10 in Boston, Mass.

But how did Bell wind up in Boston? In 1871, Bell accepted a position teaching at a school for the deaf in Boston. He spent summers with his family at Brantford, Ont., retreating there to rest when his tendency to overwork left him exhausted. Bell taught "visible speech" by illustrating, through a series of drawings, how sounds are made, essentially teaching his students to speak by seeing sound. He helped the deaf become aware of the sounds around them by feeling sound vibrations. One teaching aid was a balloon; by clutching one tightly against their chests students could feel sound.

Bell died in Baddeck, N.S., on Aug. 2, 1922. At the time of his burial, all telephone service stopped for one minute throughout the U.S., in simple respect for a life well-lived.

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