# 2004 WAITSFIELD HISTORY

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## 1

## *Making the Connection*

No one ever claimed that living in Vermont's Mad River Valley was easy in the late 1800s. The Green Mountains form a backbone of double mountain ranges that include two of Vermont's highest peaks, bringing snow and transportation woes alike. Compounding the troubles was that the Valley was flood prone, thanks to six brook-sized streams that fed the Mad River from the slopes of the surrounding mountains. Just getting to and from the little village of Waitsfield, the Valley's biggest community,

was a feat. No rail lines came that way because of the expense of running a line. Granville Gulf effectively sealed off any major southern exit, and years would pass before a good highway ventured north. Farmers trying to move their extra sheep and cattle stock to market had to drive them two hundred miles on foot or wagon.

Sometimes, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, people just grew tired of fighting the water and the snow and the hardscrabble life and left for the new lands in the West or the industrial centers elsewhere in New England. Those who stayed were hungry for connection to their neighbors and to the rest of the world.

The Valley seemed perfect for what Colonel Andrew C. Brown had in mind.

Colonel Brown—he had raised a company of volunteers when President Lincoln issued his call in the fall of 1862 and served at the front during the Civil War—was a man familiar with modern things. The son of a Methodist minister, he'd learned the trade of printer and became the editor and publisher of a weekly in Bradford, then editor and business manager of the Watchman and State Journal in Montpelier before going to war. When he returned, he became successful and prominent selling fire, life, and accident insurance in his adopted city.

In 1880 Brown imagined a new adventure in an industry that was destined to change the fabric of American life: telephones. He spent early winter inviting the businessmen of Montpelier, the nation's smallest state capital, to think about the advantages to their business of having a telephone. Telephone service was still in its infancy, and service borders were defined by economies of scale and, perhaps, who got there first. The one rule that had to be followed was the matter of an operational license: Companies that wanted to provide service had to be sublicensed by the American Bell System, and in Vermont's case, the New England Telephone and Telegraph Co. (NET&T). If NET&T had no business reason to operate in a particular area, granting the sublicense was a simple formality.

In December, with thirty-three subscribers willing to pay a combined five hundred dollars, Brown received the direct license from NET&T to form an independent telephone operation to serve Washington and Lamoille counties. He installed telephone poles, strung line, and on April 1, opened the Montpelier Telephone Exchange.

The world was coming to an isolated corner of Vermont.

## Living with a Monopoly

*Alexander Graham Bell*

Alexander Graham Bell first conceived of the telephone in 1874; on March 18, 1876, he and his assistant, Thomas A. Watson, transmitted speech over wire beginning with Bell's famous phrase, "Mr. Watson, come here. I want you." During the next few years patents were secured and the business organizations that eventually became the base for AT&T and the Bell system were formed. The company held a monopoly until Bell's key patents expired in 1893–1894.

Steady but slow growth in the number of telephone subscribers characterized the monopoly period. When the Bell Telephone Company was formed, only 778 telephones were in use, and the firm desperately needed money. Bell invested its scarce capital in its most profitable markets, the cities; typically, only two subscribers per mile of pole line could be counted on in rural areas, but forty or more subscribers per mile could be served in urban areas. The math made the decision easy.

In this environment, rural areas like Vermont held little hope of getting telephones without the residents taking matters into their own hands At the time anyone wanting a telephone line could take up a subscription to buy the equipment and string lines. Farmers would run the lines between their own farm and that of their children. Shopkeepers in towns such as Warren and Waitsfield did the same.

Stringing line meant hanging the line from pole to pole, draping it along fence rails, and running it along the ground or wherever else was handy. Each family maintained the line from their home to the next. None of the lines serving different areas connected with each other, because the lines didn't go "that way."

Eventually, members of these small areas would feel the need for connection with the outside world. Either Bell or an independent company owned by men like Brown would make arrangements for taking over the cooperative. The independents would pay a fee to Bell to secure equipment and licenses for the few residents who had subscription money.

But change was coming. After the Bell patents expired, both non-Bell manufacturers and service providers entered the market throughout rural America. These providers were known as the independent telephone industry—rural companies

that launched in the early 1890s and heralded a dramatic period of growth. In 1893 Bell provided roughly 266,000 telephones in the United States. Just ten years later thousands of independent telephone companies were serving more than a million subscribers, nearly equaling the Bell system's network. By 1912 the number of independent telephone companies had climbed to more than 3,200—in large part because of a manual that Montgomery Ward & Co. produced, which showed farmers how to hook telephone lines to fence posts and, not incidentally, that sold the equipment needed to do so.

Many of the independent providers were marginal operations that employed cheaply built and poorly maintained facilities and suffered from a shortage of capital and managerial skills. Colonel Brown was better than most, and word of both his service and the marvels of the telephone kept bringing him more business. Prominent citizens of Waitsfield and Fayston drafted and signed a subscription service request and submitted it to Brown in about 1882. The subscription request asked that Brown be allowed to build and maintain a single line from the Montpelier exchange to a centrally located site in the village of Waitsfield. The line would serve forty-seven citizens whose subscription prices ranged from $2 to $2.50. A single toll station—the one and only phone—was installed in Jacob Boyce's general store, which now houses the Masonic Temple. Anyone wanting to receive or send communications by phone did so at the store, within earshot of merchants and shoppers alike.

*Frank Boyce's Store*

With the addition of the Valley towns of Warren, Waitsfield, Fayston, and Moretown, Brown had 250 patrons and 400 miles serving 27 towns and 5 counties.

As the telephone system grew, NET&T became more interested in rural areas and in 1897 purchased Brown's entire operation, which by then was operated under the name of Vermont Telephone and Telegraph Company (VT&T). Included in the deal were toll stations in general stores in Moretown and Waitsfield, along with and a handful of private subscribers. In 1902 NET&T gave Walter Jones, now the president, "permission . . . to connect his lines with the lines of NET&T at Waitsfield."

During this time privately installed lines stretched all over the Valley: from Northfield to Warren; Roxbury to East Warren, to Granville; through Waitsfield, and so on. Different people owned the lines, none of which were connected. Until the lines were held under one entity, subscribers could only talk to others along their particular line.

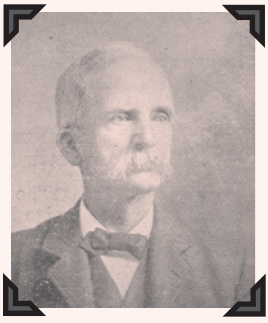
## Waitsfield Grows Restless

In October 1904 two of Waitsfield's most prominent citizens decided the town should have its own independent telephone company—to allow more phone lines to be established and to have interconnecting lines. W.A. Jones and Ziba McAllister had been among Brown's first subscribers when he was petitioned to extend his service into the Valley. Jones, born in Waitsfield, had attended St. Johnsbury Academy but came back to Waitsfield to run an extensive mercantile business. McAllister, another native son, spent many years as the Waitsfield town clerk and postmaster.

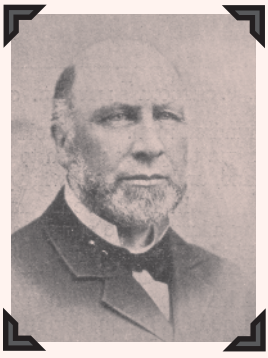
Jones and McAllister, together with twenty other Waitsfield businessmen, petitioned the state legislature to incorporate the Waitsfield & Fayston Telephone Company "for the purpose and with the right of acquiring, building, maintaining, and operating telephone lines." The incorporation became effective on November 30, 1904.

The new company had seventy-five subscribers and a central office in McAllister's home. They had telephone poles, telephone lines, and the will to keep connected. Now, all they needed was someone willing to spend their life keeping the phones working.

*Oscar Eaton*



*Ziba McAllister*



*Jonathan H. Hastings*

# 2

# *WFT Lands a Leader*

*Alton Farr*

People in villages similar to Waitsfield in the early 1900s appreciated the struggles of their friends and kin, the work that went into everyday life. They appreciated knowing that most of their neighbors in the tiny adjoining community of Fayston were Irish, from families that had fled the potato famine and could be counted on to grow thousands of bushels of Irish potatoes each year. The villagers appreciated knowing that the Wards over in Moretown had roots in America going back to the early 1700s, and that Hiram Q. Ward—though a newcomer, not one of their own—milled the best lumber for clapboards of anyone in the area.

They liked knowing who they could count on when things needed fixing or something needed to be done. Alton Farr was that kind of man.

Alton E. Farr was born in Moretown on November 8, 1881, to Lewis and Carrie E. (Miner) Farr, a local boy who came to live with his Aunt Abbie Miner in Waitsfield after his parents divorced in 1887.

He was educated in Waitsfield in the two-story school next to the village cemetery north of town that had been new in 1847 but was showing its age by the 1890s. In 1898, at age seventeen, Alton attended a three-month business course at Gloucester Business College. Eager for more education, he enrolled in Mt. Herman School for Boys in Northfield, Massachusetts, an academically rigorous school for students in grades seven through twelve who were offered the equivalent of a freshman year at college.

The school was known throughout the region and attracted students from all over the country, but its one-hundred-dollar tuition was beyond the ability of many families, including Alton's, and he soon had to drop out. He worked that summer as a bellhop at a hotel on Campobello Island on the border of Maine and New Brunswick, spending his free time taking a course with the American Correspondence School of Electrical Engineering. In the fall he lucked into a job in the construction department of NET&T.

Alton remained with NET&T's construction department until 1906, becoming a husband and family man living in Melrose, Massachusetts, after he married Mary Belle Rose, a young woman he met in front of the Lanesville post office while he was inspecting lines.

In 1906 he transferred to the company's engineering department, settling in for two more years at NET&T. Because he still had family and friends in Waitsfield, Alton's success, work ethic, and personal life were commonly known among the owners of the now four-year-old Waitsfield and Fayston Telephone Company. Although E. S. Joslin had been named president when the business was incorporated, he had a grist mill to tend to; Joslin found he couldn't do all the maintenance work himself. Matt B. Jones, who lived in Boston but was a Waitsfield native and brother of WFT's Walter E.Jones, was vice president of NET&T and knew the difficulties that WFT was having. He and his brother hit upon the idea of asking Alton to come back to the Valley and take over operations at WFT.

Alton quickly saw the advantages of the switch to the little company and wrote a letter to WFT pledging, "For $15 a year, I propose to give you continual service and service to any station of the system in the Mad River Valley, and the quality of the service . . . will be of a first class character." The move was a risky one, and when he tendered his resignation at NET&T, his boss told him he'd "never make a go of an independent company."

Alton had more in mind than just tending shop as a paid man, though; his first order of business was to take ownership control of WFT. Alton petitioned the shareholders of WFT to purchase their shares in the company, with the proviso that if he didn't perform, their shares would be returned to them at an "amount not to exceed $1 per share." He took a unique approach in the buyout offer, proposing that, in lieu of a direct cash purchase, he would provide free local telephone service for one year, not to exceed fifteen dollars in value.

Alton and his wife, Mary Belle moved to Waitsfield with their two very young children, Ruth and Everett. They lived for a short time at the Cady house on Main Street, then moved across the street to an apartment in the Brown house. A room was set-aside on the first floor for the telephone business office.

## Establishing a Territory of Operations

Alton's next order of business was to fully establish WFT's territory of operations. Though the company had installed its own switchboard and connected up lines in 1904, its subscriber base was limited to Waitsfield and South Fayston. NET&T was the licensee for the territory covering Moretown, Waitsfield, Fayston, and Warren. To continue expanding its network, WFT needed control of the larger service area.

*Operators Floy Bettis Foslin and Edna Boyce*

On July 24, 1908, WFT and NET&T reached an operational agreement giving WFT what it needed to expand its operations. The agreement allowed WFT to connect the towns of Waitsfield, Moretown, Fayston, and Warren. Residents could, for the first time, talk to each other, and by 1914 Alton had 175 customers, compared to 55 in 1905. Alton made sure the customers had twenty-four-hour service by providing operators a place to sleep during the evening when the call volume was at its lowest. In 1910 he moved the switchboard to the Ernest Chase building in a three-year lease. WFT would remain at this location until a fire destroyed the building in 1944.

By this time the telephone was settling into the national consciousness as a fixed and permanent part of American life. In the process, the technology was bringing about great changes in the ways of working, living, and thinking. The telephone's effect on rural America was intensive; between 1902 and 1907, a 449 percent increase took place in the number of rural phones, and the rise in the morale of farmers and

their families brought about by this quasi-revolution quickly translated into an increase in farm productivity. By the end of 1910, President Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission had designated the telephone as one of the foremost influences making for "the solution of the rural problem."

Everyone began to feel they needed a telephone, and the Bell company—now known as the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T)—wanted to make sure every telephone was serviced by them. The company carefully doled out lines to cities and territories where it could make money, and refused access to its lines to any upstart telephone company, making it impossible for independent companies to act as any more than a closed community of communications. The company's monopolistic attitude was looked on unfavorably by the government, which began under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act to pressure AT&T to change its tactics.

In December 1913, to avoid an antitrust investigation, AT&T's Vice President, Nathan Kingsbury, told the U.S. Attorney General that AT&T would provide long distance service to independent phone companies and refrain from acquistions or forcing them out of business. The most immediate change affecting Waitsfield and Fayston Telephone Company was that AT&T "would make arrangements, promptly, under which all other telephone companies may secure for their subscribers toll service over the lines of the companies in the Bell System." The agreement gave Alton the ability to start looking out for his company's best interests in a new way—and to identify a new target standing directly in his path.

## Calling on a Competitor

Gilbert R. Andrews was born in Northfield in 1844 and was by the early 1900s one of its most prominent citizens and businessmen. He had been an agent for Pillsbury flour, proprietor of a gristmill and a sawmill, wheelwright/blacksmith, lumber manufacturer, dealer in watches, beekeeper with twenty

*McGlaflin Home, East Warren*

colonies, and farmer. By the time he was thirty-three years old, he owned hundreds of acres of timberland in the Mad River Valley area.

Like many people of the time with foresight, Andrews turned his attention to telephones, specifically with the little independent Orange County Telephone Company; he became the company's owner and manager about 1906. Orange County's operations then included the Northfield area of which Roxbury was a part, but Andrews had also extended telephone service into the town of Warren and parts of Waitsfield by obtaining permission from NET&T to run a telephone line via the East Warren Road to and through Waitsfield and then north to the Moretown town line. He operated here under the name of G. R. Andrews Telephone Company. WFT and G. R. Andrews Telephone Company did not have any connections between them. Consequently, some business people in Waitsfield took advantage of G. R. Andrews's line running via the East Warren Road and through the heart of Waitsfield village to add a second phone to increase the service area.

The Kingsbury Commitment of 1913 left the territory that these two companies served wide open to competition, and Alton decided to win out.

In 1918, when Andrews was seventy-five years old, he offered up his Warren exchange to Alton for a price of $1,700—a purchase that the WFT board of directors approved on July 6. The sale was a friendly one, and WFT mortgaged it through G. R. Andrews, putting up its network as collateral.

Alton's little kingdom was growing—but so were his workload and his debt.

Like many independent telephone companies, WFT struggled financially. In the mid-1920s NET&T's Vermont manager sent a letter to Alton, expressing the company's concern over WFT's delinquent account. Other similar letters would follow.

WFT's 1926 annual report to the Public Service Commission listed 256 subscribers, 2 operators and 4 pay stations. The network had 79 miles of pole line with 191 miles of iron wire and 7 miles of copper clad wire, all worth $10,356. Alton's liabilities that year were $10,174, and his expenses of $6,347 were equal to his revenues, leaving no profit.

WFT's financial struggles led to a much-needed shot in the arm: a rate increase in 1928. NET&T engineers noted improved transmission, and their accounting manager sent a letter to Alton Farr congratulating him on bringing the account up to date.

Alton had long before realized his old boss at NET&T had been right when he had said making a living with an independent phone company was nearly impossible. In an effort to make ends meet, he became involved with Green Mountain Power, bringing electricity to the Valley. Alton became one of the Valley's first electricians when he began wiring homes.

*Oscar Eaton Home, currently owned by Dana and Eleanor (Farr) Haskin.*

Another major change occurred in Alton's life in the early 1920s, one that would have far-ranging effects on the company's future. Alton and his wife, Mary Belle, had in 1921 purchased a home from his Uncle Oscar Eaton and Aunt Addie Miner Bushnell Eaton. After closing on this property Alton moved WFT's business office from the first floor of the Brown house to its new location on Bridge Street. The couple only lived there two years when, like his parents, he and Mary Belle divorced, and she moved back to Massachusetts. The children stayed with Alton.
A year later, Alton married again, this time to Eunice Florence Buzzell of Warren. Eunice immediately began working as WFT's secretary and bookkeeper.

"Altee," as he was affectionately called, had taken seriously his promise to his stockholders years earlier to provide first-class service to his customers. He used his Model T Ford or a motorcycle to answer repair calls and make new installations. He was constantly on call, expected to make repairs and put calls through no matter what the conditions.

The lines during this period were still party lines, with potentially dozens of people on each of them, but a vital link nonetheless. When the lines went down, communication stopped: Customers who were accustomed to using telephone operators as everything from emergency dispatch systems to answering services found themselves hopelessly out of touch.

Certainly this feeling of isolation was never truer than during the devastating flood of 1927, which demolished much of Vermont and still stands as the greatest disaster in the state's history.

Rainfall during the month of October before the flood had averaged about 150 percent above normal across the state. Heavy rainfall periods were separated enough so that flooding did not occur. Instead, the rain saturated the soil and wreaked enough havoc for Alton that he'd spent much of the time on his motorcycle, shoring up downed and damaged lines.

*The Great Flood of 1927 (The Mad River)*

No one, though, expected what happened next. The rain that began late in the day on November 2 continued through the night and increased the following morning. Torrential, unrelenting downpours lashed the land just east of the Green Mountains; by the end of the morning of November 4, almost nine inches had fallen. Devastation occurred throughout the state, with 1,285 bridges lost as well as countless numbers of homes and buildings destroyed and hundreds of miles of roads and railroad tracks washed out. Telephone service, now such an essential part of life, became a thing of the past.

Alton waited impatiently for the water to recede so he could tackle the task of restoring his phone service. Finally, on the night of November 9, Alton put a canoe into the water at Waitsfield and paddled along the Mad River for thirteen miles, stopping along the way to repair the lines that linked his customers to the main line at Middlesex that was serviced by NET&T.

Alton was a hero, heralded in the Barre Times as the man who "repaired phone by canoe."

A year later, NET&T's toll station in Warren was disconnected. Because NET&T no longer needed to maintain the Warren line, they sold 275 poles and 2 pairs of wires to WFT for one dollar. Clearly NET&T was becoming less and less a viable entity in the Valley while WFT became more and more vital.

At the same time, another of Alton's partnerships was growing and maturing and taking WFT along with it, although this hook-up was of a more personal nature.

# 3

# *A Family Business*

There was nothing fancy about Eunice Florence Buzzell Farr.

She was born in Warren on December 13, 1897, into a family of five brothers and sisters who lived with their parents on a farm on what is now Sugarbush Access Road. The farm was small and poor, and the family grew up with little more than love and faith. They were known at church in Warren as the "singing Buzzell" family. Faithful attendees, Eunice and her older sister walked to church every Sunday because the wagon couldn't hold all of them.

She wasn't a beautiful woman, or highly educated—Waitsfield High was a two-year school, and she graduated when she was fifteen—but she knew her own worth. Eunice knew how to work hard at making something of nothing, just as her father had worked his meager hillside farm. For a brief time after finishing high school she taught the younger children, as many of the young female graduates did. But she clearly had other talents. When Walter E. Jones asked her to help in his general store on Bridge Street in Waitsfield, Eunice took over the selling of dry goods and groceries.

Jones had been instrumental in starting WFT and in bringing Alton Farr in to manage it. Alton was in and out of the store often; Eunice, with her quiet manner and gentle way of speaking, was a soothing presence.

In 1924, when she was twenty-seven—just about the age most women of that era would be labeled "spinster"—she and Altee married. Eunice moved into the brick house on Bridge Street, becoming WFT's bookkeeper and managing the company's office out of her living room.

*Alton and Eunice Farr*

## All Alone—With My Phone

Eunice had married both a man and a company. What's more, the business involved an invention that was as firmly entrenched in society as any had ever been. A writer named Herbert Casson, who produced a long series of stimulating business books during the first

half of the twentieth century, had already recognized the impact in 1910 when he wrote, "Who could have foreseen what the telephone bells have done to ring out the old ways and to ring in the new; to ring out delay and isolation and to ring in the efficiency and friendliness of a truly united people?"

By the 1920s, the telephone was all-pervasive, seeping into every aspect of life, in literature, in popular culture. One of the hit songs the year Altee and Eunice married was Irving Berlin's "All Alone," woefully declaring:

> All alone—I'm so all alone,
> There is no one else but you.
> All alone by the telephone
> Waiting for a ring.

And, if there were more people than cows in Vermont in 1930, every one of them felt entitled to that wonder of wonders, the telephone. Eunice and Altee's job was to make sure those telephones worked, Altee out in the field and in his customers' homes, Eunice in her own home, overseeing the house and the business.

One of Eunice's jobs was to keep up with the operators hired to handle the switchboards that connected all of the WFT customers. The operators had been women almost from the beginning of telephony. Male operators proved a disaster; the young men first hired were too impatient and high-spirited for the job. A visitor to one early exchange run by "the lads," as one historian labeled them, called it "a perfect bedlam." Bell leaders desperately turned to women—who they saw as calm, gracious, diffident, and never impolite.

The ladies had always been on the job in the Mad River Valley. At first, service was only given during the working man's day, attended to by the wife of the manager between her housework. Twenty-four-hour service was provided when it became necessary for the company to rent separate quarters. These quarters became the apartment for the two young women employed as "Central Girls," who earned fifteen dollars a week.

Being an operator was much more than setting up calls between two parties. The operator had to create toll tickets and constantly monitor the calls to determine whether they were still in progress. Because there were no visual cues to show if the

*Waitsfield switchboard located in top left corner of building on left. (south of 4857 Main Street)*

call had ended, operators entered the connection to ask, "Are you waiting? Are you through?" She would be pulling cords out to terminate one call and simultaneously plugging them back in to set up another.

The operators were also the earliest form of emergency dispatch systems. Three long rings three times in succession alerted everyone along the line of a fire, calling all who could to come to fight the flames. The Central Girls could follow the progress of the local doctor as he made house calls, the doctor checking in as he left one place for another and to pick up his messages.

The Farrs began a service of paid advertisements and public notices to help meet the costs of the company. For one dollar, businesses could place ads that would be delivered over the entire telephone network. The operator would plug into the telephone company lines and provide two rings repeated two times (known as a general alarm) and then read the advertisement. Public notices would be delivered in the same manner.

All this activity was quite a lot to heap on the backs of people like Mary Moriarty, who began working at WFT in 1931 and spent the next eleven years operating the switchboard located on the second floor of the old G.A.R. Hall owned by Carl Long.

*Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) members*

Although the operators had a strict code of confidentiality, they sometimes found themselves acting as telephone police. When Eunice and Alton asked for a rate hike in 1928, setting new charges of $2 for a fifteen-party line and $3.25 for a private line, they included a threat meant to aid their operators: WFT could refuse service to anyone who "willfully interfere(s) with the service of other patrons, either by listening to their conversations or otherwise causing annoyance of any sort." The condition went even further by telling patrons they had use of the phone only five minutes before an operator or another patron could ask them to yield the line.

## Juggling Family Life with Work

In addition to running the company, Eunice and Alton were busy with their family and their social obligations. Their daughter, Eleanor Geraldine Farr, was born October 14, 1931, completing the little family. The couple had lost a son, Alton Jr., shortly after his birth in 1929, and they worked hard to both protect and enjoy their daughter.

*Alton and daughter Eleanor*

Alton was very special to the children of the community, teaching a whole generation how to swim, with lessons usually taking place in the Mad River under Waitsfield's covered bridge. Alton built a raft and secured it near the Great Eddy so the children could use it for jumping and diving in the water. He and Eunice welcomed the young people in the Valley, planning skating parties on the river for them, Eunice making pans of homemade potato chips along with gallons of hot chocolate. Alton cleaned the snow off the ice and kindled fires for warmth. Using his knowledge of electrical wiring, he strung electric lights under the covered bridge for night skating.

*Alton and daughter enjoying a canoe ride*

He was a lover of the outdoors, a master at grafting apple trees and an avid beekeeper, keeping the hives in his orchard in the area of the Mill Hill Cemetery in Waitsfield, where many of

the trees still exist. Alton was active in the Boy Scouts, and a troop would come from Ossining, New York, every year to camp with the Valley troop he led.

Eunice, seemingly the most patient person in the world, never was known to get angry or raise her voice. She was soft-spoken and a good listener. She made wonderful wedding cakes, laboriously mixing them by hand with a wire whisk before the development of electric mixers, and people from all over the Valley came to ask her to bake for them. She loved plays and took part in some of the ones performed in the Valley by friends and neighbors.

Their business was growing. The number of subscribers peaked in 1930 with 246 accounts and 35 lines, in part because of large logging operations in Fayston. When the logging operations pulled out, the number of accounts dropped to 196—but Alton and Eunice worked just as hard.

While theirs was hardly a perfect life, the Farrs were happy and productive. Alton was clever, offering up innovative plans and thinking, taking delight in writing a story for The Vermonter magazine about his observations of nature.

A freak accident brought an end to the family circle and started Eunice on a different path, as a parent and as a business owner. In 1938, while Farr was helping his lineman, a telephone pole began to fall. Alton stepped under it to break the fall and protect his employee. The accident crushed his lungs. He became mostly bed-ridden after the accident, contracting tuberculosis and finally dying just shy of his fifty-ninth birthday.

The obituary in the Barre Times mourned the loss of "one of the best known men in town," a man whose "loyalty and efficiency in his work marked him among men. He was a true friend to those in trouble."

Eunice and nine-year-old Eleanor were on their own.

*Eunice and Eleanor taken shortly after Alton's death*

## A Housedress and an Apron

Eunice spent the next twenty-one years doing what Alton had done: running the company. It was a notable feat in an industry and era clearly dominated by men. Eunice was one of the first women to run a utility company in the United States. She kept the books, managed the office, and installed the phones, sometimes going out during a windstorm to poke apart lines that had crossed and short-circuited. Over the years, she developed an advanced level of understanding in every aspect of the telephone business, her tenure a seemingly endless string of challenges.

*Eunice working with the old truck*

Labor was short, money was tight, and leisure was almost nonexistent.

World War II was a difficult time for most Americans, and Eunice Farr's problems were compounded by being a woman and a single parent running a telephone company. The war also brought on another responsibility that was perhaps the most difficult. Families learned about the disposition of their loved ones in the armed services via telegram. Delivery of these messages often fell to the local telephone company.

Eunice delivered many of these dreaded messages, sometimes taking her daughter with her for emotional support. Waitsfield resident Jessamine Larrow recalls those times—and remembers telling others that if she ever saw Eunice Farr heading her way, she would run in the other direction. Indeed, Jessamine one day did receive one of those dreaded messages from Eunice, saying her husband was missing in action.

Financial struggles were the norm for most businesses in the Valley during these times, and WFT was no exception. Logging and farming were the chief ways of making a living, neither one highly lucrative. Eunice was always in the position of deciding which bill had the larger impact on the business when determining the one to pay first.

People knew Eunice was struggling herself, and they paid in any way they could. It was not uncommon for bills to be paid in sides of beef, pigs, eggs, vegetables, firewood, maple syrup, and even wood ashes as barter to settle accounts.

Eunice abhorred the idea of borrowing money. She had been brought up to make do with what she had, yet the stark reality was that she was forced to borrow from time to time to keep things going at the phone company. Eunice used her own home as collateral for these loans.

In order to keep WFT solvent, Eunice petitioned the PSC for a rate increase in 1947. The new rates took effect on August 1, 1947. Although the increase helped, the financial struggle continued. By 1950 the annual PSC report contained the following statistics for WFT: 278 subscribers, 3 operators, 8 pay stations, 265 party lines, 13 private lines and 87 miles of pole line with 12 miles of #10 Iron wire, 8 miles of #12 copper-weld, 2 miles of #17 2 parallel, 274 miles of #12 Iron wire. Revenue totaled $15,628 against $14,849 of expense. Gross income was $779 with deductions of $784, leaving a loss of $5.

## Disaster—And Change

Early in the morning on February 2, 1944, a major fire erupted in the Carl Long building that housed WFT's telephone switchboard. A fire had apparently occurred there the evening before, caused most likely by a box of ashes that had been carelessly set outside. The ashes were thought to have been extinguished, but they were somehow rekindled.

*Scenes of the February2, 1944 fire*

WFT lost its switchboard in the fire and needed to reestablish a connection to NET&T as soon as possible. NET&T loaned a switchboard to WFT that same day, which was placed in the Harry Belden building south of the Waitsfield Hotel on the same side of the road. This switchboard was an older model used by the army in the field, a small portable

unit with access for about twenty lines. Units could be stacked one on top of the other for whatever growth was required. Wires were reconnected to the newly installed switchboard, and the Valley was once again in touch with the outside world.

The switchboard did not stay in this building long. By early 1945 a larger switchboard had been installed across the street in the front room in Enos Brother's house, present site of Universal Micro Systems (4457 Main Street). This home would be the last for the switchboard that controlled the old magneto (crank) telephone system, remaining until 1961 when WFT made the conversion to dial.

## A Mom at Work

*Eunice at the home business office*

Eunice spent most of her waking hours running her business, often taking Eleanor along with her. One of the most common maintenance chores was to uncross lines that had been shorted together by winds, falling branches, and the like. To uncross lines, Eunice would park the truck under the wires at the base of the pole where a cross began, take a rope anchored by a battery, and throw it between the wires, towing the rope all the way to the next pole. Once Eunice felt Eleanor was old enough, she was taught how to perform this work as well as other field maintenance. When Eleanor got her driver's license she drove her mother around the network and performed whatever work was required.

*1947 Ford*

Though Eleanor was expected to help work, Eunice made sure there was time for fun—and that as mom she helped provide that fun. Eunice would load eight kids in her 1947 Ford sedan to drive to school sporting events, the girls sitting on the guys' laps. Eunice was very involved in the school. When the Farr house burned in 1948, the entire high

school emptied within seconds, the students racing toward the building and grabbing everything out of the house, placing the household goods with neighbors until the home could be repaired.

Children stopped by the office on their birthdays, shyly telling Eunice, "Farr, it's my birthday!" Eunice would give them a quarter. Sometimes, on a good day, Eunice would close the office to take the kids swimming, letting the telephone operator know where she was in case of an emergency.

## A Changing World

Eunice had lost her number-one helper when her daughter graduated from Waitsfield High School in 1950 and went to the University of Rochester in upstate New York to study music. Eleanor was as familiar as her mother with the telephone industry. She had helped with maintenance, but also spent time in the business office, sorting and billing. While in high school, she split the Sunday operator shift with Eunice so the other operators could have the day off. Years later, Eleanor would say that getting into the phone business was easy. She was born in it.

Although she returned home each summer to help her mother run the company, Eleanor's life seemed to be moving away from WFT. She had met the man she would eventually marry, Dana Haskin, when she took swimming lessons at the Montpelier Recreation Department while she was in high school.

Dana was born August 31, 1930, in Providence, Rhode Island. His family moved several times before settling in Montpelier in 1943 when Dana was thirteen years old. He started teaching swimming and water safety in Montpelier when he was sixteen, and continued in his summer job until 1949 when he graduated from Montpelier High School. Dana attended the University of Vermont from 1949 to 1950, then moved to Vermont Junior College until February 1951 when, during the Korean War, he enlisted in the U.S. Air Force.

*Dana Haskin as an enlisted airman*

On March 23, 1952, Dana L. Haskin and Eleanor Geraldine Farr were married in the Waitsfield

Federated Church. Dana left three months later for Okinawa, joining the 307th Bomb Wing as a left gunner in a B-29, flying missions over the Korean peninsula and earning an air medal. He remained in the Air Force until 1953, when he returned to join his wife in Waitsfield. His job? With the phone company, naturally.

He started attending the University of Vermont on the GI Bill, working part-time at WFT between 1954 and 1956. During that same period Eleanor brought in some extra income by teaching music in the rural schools of Moretown, Duxbury, Fayston, and Waitsfield.

*Eleanor's graduation picture*

Eleanor, who had dropped out of college when she married, returned to the University of Rochester in 1956 to complete her degree in music. Dana went with her and took employment with Taylor Instruments. Their daughter, Susan, born two years earlier in August 1954, stayed behind with her grandmother, this beginning a bond that would last until Eunice's death.

Eleanor graduated from the Eastman School of Music in May 1957 with a Bachelor of Music. After Eleanor's graduation, Dana returned to the USAF, where he became one of the few enlisted men toreceive a direct officer's commission. Eleanor felt it important to accompany her husband, so she packed up, bringing Susan with her, and followed Dana as he moved around the country.

## Alone, Again

Because of Eleanor's moves, Eunice was back handling the telephone company by herself. An article written on rural telephone companies in the Monsanto Magazine in March 1959 described Eunice as "energetic and likeable," and noted that she had been providing the Waitsfield telephone service virtually single-handedly since Alton's death.

The article explained that the dial system hadn't arrived in Waitsfield—and that if it was up to the folks in town, it never would. "Mrs. Farr's company, 375 subscribers strong, is such a flavorsome ingredient in this ski resort area's cup of charm that a noted author recently pleaded with her not to go dial and surrender the 'human touch.'"

Eunice's "human touch" was taking its toll, though.

*This switchboard replaced the temporary one used following the fire and was used until conversion to dial in 1961*

Changes were occurring in the Valley that affected Eunice and WFT dramatically—as dramatically as had the arrival of the very first telephone more than a half century earlier. The Mad River Glen ski resort arrived in 1948, bringing a new industry. By the late 1950s, Sugarbush and Glen Ellen ski areas reshaped the Valley, both economically and physically.

The WFT plant was in terrible shape by this time, with field wire being laid on the ground just to keep customers in service. Upwards of twenty-nine people were on a single party line. The ski business was growing, and the Valley businesses needed a more rapid and sophisticated means of communicating.

While charming, the old-fashioned telephone system was increasingly ill-suited to keep up with the Valley's growth. Resort visitors accustomed to city ways sometimes found the delays irritating, and they took their irritation out on the operators. There was little time for on-the-job training, which caused more irritation. Norm Neill remembers that his first assignment upon joining the company in 1958 was to install a new phone in Charlie Jones's home. Eunice handed him the phone, wire, batteries, and other pieces of equipment and told him to install it. Three days later, and after several visits from Eunice, he had the phone in; after that baptism by fire, Neill said he got the job down to a couple of hours of work.

By 1959, Eunice was considering selling the company. Her health wasn't good, and she was under endless pressure to sell.

Eleanor and Dana, stationed at James Connelly Air Force Base, Waco Texas, realized the company was at a critical juncture. In order to remain a viable business and stay within the family, they were going to have to take over WFT, which was a momentous decision for them. Dana returned to the Vermont Air National Guard (VTANG) as a navigator and radar intercept officer flying F-89s. He remained with VTANG until 1984, retiring at the rank of lieutenant colonel.

The move ushered in a new era of progress and leadership at WFT.

# 4
# *New Leadership, New Ways*

In the end, it all came down to family.

Dana and Eleanor realized that things had to change if the company was to survive. Eunice was ill with Parkinson's disease, the company was barely scraping by each year, and customers were demanding the same sort of telephone service they experienced in other parts of the country. In 1959 when Eunice asked for help from her only child and the son-in-law who called her "Mom," Eleanor and Dana never really hesitated. "We didn't even think of questioning my mother," remembers Eleanor. It was simply the pact that Eunice and Alton had first made to each other and the company, and which they passed on to their family—part of that old-fashioned word, heritage.

The family left Texas to return to the Mad River Valley.

The reality of the job ahead came painfully quick. Within days after taking over WFT, with Dana as manager and Eleanor as treasurer, they were met with a demand from Charles Ross, chairman of the Public Service Board (PSB), that they upgrade their network within one year or face losing WFT's franchise.

The PSB had had enough complaints from customers about the charming but outdated magneto crank telephone system. New arrivals in town said it was hard to start or run a proper business on a magneto system. Skiers coming up to visit, particularly to Sugarbush, didn't particularly like this "party-line" business. Sugarbush, responding to complaints from its own customers, put pressure on WFT to go dial.

Dana and Eleanor recognized the PSB was right and promised to replace the system within two years, if the agency would back off its one-year deadline. Making the promise and securing the financing to make it happen were gut-wrenching moves for Eunice and the young couple.

Eunice, who had managed the company on a shoestring for years, was so intent on turning over the business debt-free to her daughter and son-in-law that she had eaten peanut butter for months to pay off a $15,000 loan. Neither Eleanor nor Dana knew how to go about obtaining the kind of cash needed for the upgrade. Dana's telephony experience was on-the-job training. Eleanor, though born into the industry,

wasn't versed in either technical or financial matters; she was a music major, a pianist who taught children, not a financial wizard who read accounting books or juggled millions. Neither she nor Dana had ever managed more than Dana's salary and the money Eleanor made teaching music students.

Looking around hopefully to possible sources of cash, they first approached the National Life Insurance Company with a request to borrow $125,000, far more than the price of most homes in the Valley. "I don't know whether you could hear the laughter all the way down to the basement," recalls Dana. "I left sort of deflated."

Friends in the business suggested they go to a telephone convention in Maine to explore the chances of borrowing money from the Rural Electrification Administration (REA). The REA came into existence in 1936 as a government agency to provide funds for utility companies to bring electricity into the rural communities. Telephony was added to its coverage list in 1949. While the agency had loaned a lot of money over the years to independent telephone companies, the REA had earned only a checkered reputation. After long discussions, Dana and Eleanor made the tough decision to let an outsider into the back door of their family-owned company. They decided REA could supply both the money and the expertise that WFT didn't have and sorely needed. "We figured if we were going to continue the company, there was nothing else we could do," Dana says.

## An Expensive Leap of Faith

WFT met with the PSB in December 1959 to secure approval to borrow up to $400,000 from the REA to install a new dial telephone system. Then, in a breathtaking moment filled with trepidation and wonder, Dana and Eleanor signed a twenty-five-year loan with the REA for the entire amount.

With the PSB's approval and REA supplying the specifications and supervision, WFT obtained bids from prospective construction companies to install the newly proposed network. On April 25, 1961, about twenty suppliers and contractors

*Norm Neill working on the ITT Central office swith*

attended WFT's bid opening at the Library Hall in Waitsfield (now the town clerk's office). The entire cost of the project was $321,000, and the work was to start immediately.

For a time, while the conversion was taking place, subscribers had two phones in their homes—one dial, one crank. The dial phones were in ten "decorator" colors, with a variety of new sizes and shapes from which to choose, such as the standard desk model, wall phone, and new "spacemaker" wall model. Another new phone would be offered the next year, according to marketing information put out by WFT, the "small and attractive Starlite with lighted dial." The customers were so eager to try out the new phones prior to the official conversion day that they began calling each other, creating a problem for the construction crews trying to finish their work in the dial office. The system had to be turned off to prevent early use.

Before the conversion there had been as many as twenty-seven subscribers on a line. With the new dial system, the maximum was eight. Now, only one phone rang at a time, and unless someone accidentally picked up the phone and heard someone speaking, no one could know the phone was busy.

On November 28, 1961, seven-year-old Susan Haskin, the oldest of the Haskin children, pulled the switch under the supervision of her parents and grandmother, officially converting the system to dial. WFT held an open house at the dial office in Waitsfield village after the conversion was complete. More than 150 people came to view the new dial telephone switching system and to ask questions.

WFT was now the most modern independent telephone system in Vermont. While operators were still required for long distance calling, a task handled by NET&T personnel, operators were no longer needed to set up local phone calls, and WFT went forward after that November with five employees—three of them family members.

## Family Business, Family Needs

At ages thirty-one and thirty, respectively, Dana and Eleanor now found themselves business owners, debtors, and parents to two (soon to be three) children, living with a frail Eunice in a too-small house that still had the phone company's office in the living room.

If they hadn't hesitated for a moment in their decision to move back from Texas and take over the company, Eleanor and Dana now had to carefully plan how the family, the

marriage, and the company would be able to survive under their stewardship.

Dana was a military man, gruff and used to getting things done. Years later, he would ruefully acknowledge that his "DSS" mode of operating ("Dana Says So") would sometimes get in the way of staff autonomy. Eleanor was quieter, a lover of music and peace, yet equally determined to succeed: she was the one who had made the decision years earlier to leave two-year-old Susan with her mother in Waitsfield while she returned to college to earn her music degree, a decision she says was one of the toughest she'd ever made. Since then, she'd been a dutiful wife, following her husband all over the country as the military moved him around, setting up house, and making a life in disparate places where she often found little resonance in her own life.

Yet they were united in their efforts to keep the company afloat, united in their belief that heritage, and the obligations that it brought, should be foremost in running WFT and their personal lives.

After Eunice's death in 1965, Dana became president and Eleanor vice president, filling multiple positions in the daily operation of the business. In addition to serving as president, Dana was also the company's general manager, but performed telephone installations and plant maintenance on a daily basis.


*TANE members congratulating Dana Haskin for becoming president of TANE*

Eleanor's role since her return to WFT in 1959 was bookkeeper, billing clerk, secretary, customer representative, and taking on whatever other duties might be tossed in her direction. She also worked full-time as a mother. Gregg Haskin, Eleanor and Dana's third child, was born on May 15, 1964, joining nine-year-old Susan and four-year-old Eric.

Each of them saw that they had their jobs to do; each of them believed that job was important. "My wife and I have been partners in life," says Dana. "I think maybe more than partners . . . the company was our life, is our life." Eleanor's model for this partnership had been developed literally on her parents' knees. She grew up knowing the company was more than a business. It was an obligation and a privilege. She remembers

begging to go to a movie in Montpelier when she was a child, and her mother and father telling her to take a nap, that then they'd take her. On the way to the movie, her father was flagged down, told there was trouble on the line. Eleanor never saw the movie, but she saw a little more of the relationship between a family and its company.

Now, all these years later, she and Dana began to rebuild the company and to grow personally in ways that would surprise each other and themselves.

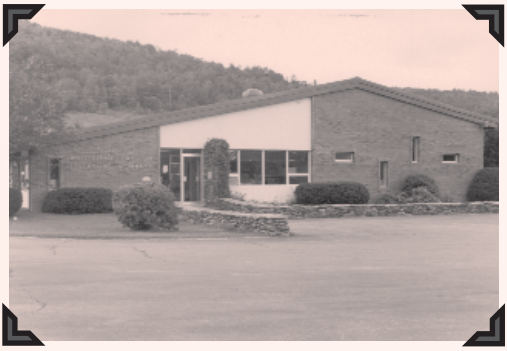
## Getting Down to Business

As the company grew, in 1961 the business office moved from the living room to the newly remodeled back porch. Some years later Gene Rayburn, most notable for hosting game shows on television, came to the Mad River Valley. Seeing the location and operation of WFT's business office, he warmly dubbed it "the back-porch telephone company."

If Eleanor thought about it, she realized her own children were growing up in telephony, just as she had—coming home from school to find parents at home and at work, at the same place. Susan, who until her death from breast cancer in 2003 was intimately involved with the company, remembered coming home from school to the brick house on Bridge Street and immediately rushing back to visit her father on the back porch. Dana's desk, the only piece of expensive office furniture, sat amid homemade bookcases and file cabinets; Dana still uses the desk today.

While Dana and Eleanor loved the convenience and the quaintness of the back-porch operation, by 1965 the company obviously needed a larger and more modern facility to conduct business effectively. A year earlier, WFT upgraded its plant and central office from an eight to a four-party service to accommodate the Valley's growth. Customers on eight-party lines would now have less delay from busy conditions. The rates for the four-party services were set at $5.50 for residence and $7.25 for

*New business office under construction*



*The new completed business office*

business. WFT now had six full-time employees.

Dana and Eleanor agreed on a site for the new office that was north of County Road on Route 100 in Waitsfield. They purchased this property on February 23, 1965, and broke ground in 1966.

That same year, Dana closed out all outstanding stock in the company, making the Haskin family owners of 100 percent of the company. That full ownership continues today.

## A Whirlwind of Change

The years from 1966 to 1968 would see a whirlwind of change at WFT brought on in large part by the tremendous growth associated with the Valley ski business. The implementation of Direct Distance Dialing (DDD) was a part of that growth. WFT was still operating with four-party service. As a result, WFT customers had to dial two digits to access the toll network. The first digit was always 1, and the second digit identified which phone on a party line was making the call.

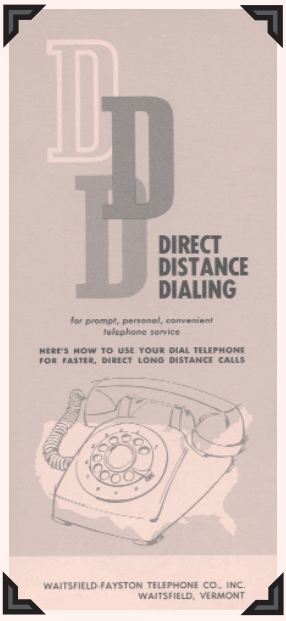
Waitsfield's DDD network included an automated toll ticketing system. This electromechanical marvel sent all toll call data to paper tape punch machines. Until the latter part of 1968, the process for producing a toll statement from the paper tapes was completely outsourced. Then WFT leased its first IBM computer to handle most of this process. The computer's primary function was the printing of toll statements for customer billing. All other business applications remained manual with paper records.

In spite of party-line customers having to dial an extra digit to access the toll network, DDD gave subscribers the ability to place toll calls without operator assistance, saving the customer time as well as money.

Early in 1967, a $640,000 REA loan for single-party conversion was approved, and construction finished in November. By the end of March 1968 the single-party service conversion was complete, and WFT became the first telephone company in Vermont

with all private lines. The company could now eliminate its two-digit DDD access and go to the simple and commonly understood digit 1. The new private line rates were set at $7 for residences and $14 for businesses.

Because the ski areas were constantly growing, particularly Sugarbush (Glen Ellen in Fayston was still a separately owned business), WFT had to decide to expand its 496 exchange to Sugarbush or build a new dial office near the base of the ski area. Economies of scale dictated the latter. In 1973 the 583 exchange was built on the Sugarbush Access Road as a separate exchange with its own toll ticketing and connections to NET&T. Traffic between 496 and 583 was routed via interoffice trunks. WFT published a new telephone directory to reflect the telephone numbers changed as a result of the upgrade. WFT now had a facility that met the needs of Sugarbush and could easily match any further expansion in the area.




*Direct Dialing flyer*

The Valley continued growing throughout the 1970s, and by the end of the decade WFT knew it had to either expand its facilities or install an electronic switching system, far superior in size, expandability, versatility, and programmability.

The introduction of more sophisticated subscriber carrier devices gave telephone companies a new engineering option, the "carrier service area." WFT planned to create its own carrier service areas to shorten the distance between central office and subscriber. Transmission quality would improve, and special features could be brought to customers; WFT would become the first company to use this technology in Vermont.

Everything about the company was on the upswing, including its business office, which had been expanded to accommodate growth in a variety of areas. A four-bay garage and mezzanine were constructed on the west wall of the business office, and the old garage area was remodeled.

## A Visionary Emerges

Eleanor had changed a great deal in the years since she and her husband had come back to the Valley. She began to realize she had interests beyond her hometown and an ability to embrace change and sense when technology was both necessary and a solid investment in the future.

Eleanor calls it vision—an exalted, big-sounding word to come from such a modest woman. "I don't know where it comes from or why I was blessed with it," she admits, but she has come to believe it has been her guiding light for years. That she can use it at all is a testament to what that vision has produced: She has consistently been one of the leaders in technology in the field of telecommunications, the first woman in any leadership role among independent telecommunication companies, ahead of her time in the use of computers and in embracing state-of-the-art services for her company.

Her transformation from small-town business owner to national industry leader solidified in the mid-1970s, when she began to feel the pull of a larger audience. She became active in state, regional, and national organizations in the independent telephone industry, becoming the first woman president of the Telephone Association of New England (TANE), and the first woman inducted into the TANE hall of fame.

*Glen Burglen and Eleanor Haskin in Washington for a OPASTCO Convention*

At the same time, her voice was being heard on the national level through the Organization for the Preservation and Advancement of Small Telephone Companies (OPASTCO), which today represents five hundred of the twelve hundred independent telecommunications companies in the United States. In 1980 she was elected its

president, the first woman chosen to lead a national telephone industry association. Years later, she was again the first woman to receive the OPASTCO President's Award, a prestigious honor given to individuals who have made a significant contribution to the independent telephone industry.

Those years were filled with momentous moments and many hours of hard work. During her OPASTCO presidency, she earned the reputation for "having a meeting every time we sat down to eat." The access to people and information was heady. "It was a privilege to be with those people; I was like a sponge," she remembers.

The contacts and knowledge gained from her affiliations were helping to propel WFT into new areas. "We were involved in computers in a way that other companies weren't," she says, and she lectured all over the country to other independents who wanted to computerize. Eleanor was able to help WFT investigate each new and interesting technological offering—at a time when each piece of that information was like a nugget of gold—and she and Dana seemed to have an instinct for what would work for their company.

## POTS Wasn't Enough

All this activity was teaching the duo one thing: While plain old telephone service (known in the industry as POTS) was important, the future of their company relied on more than the next dial tone.

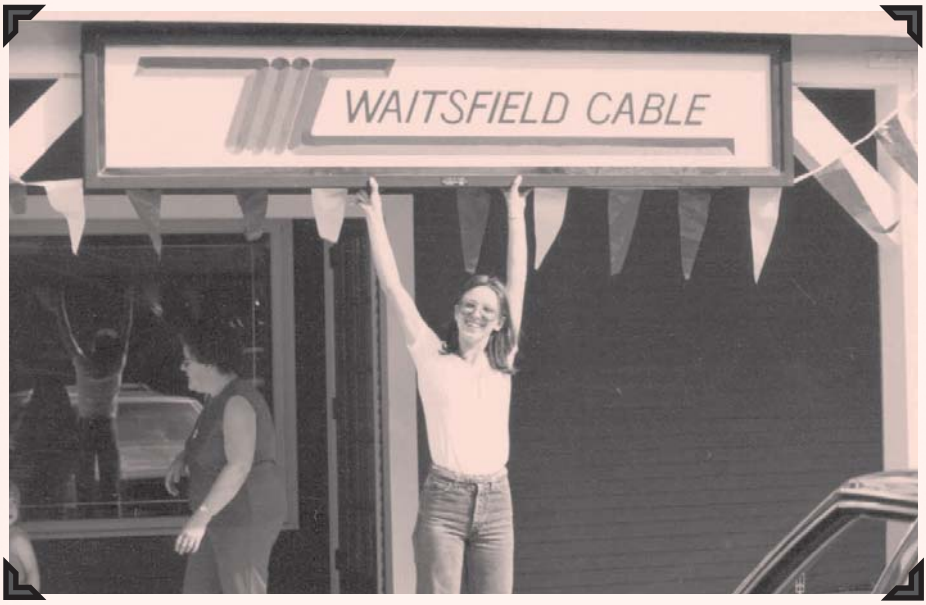
At the same time that WFT was gaining in the telecommunications area, another opportunity appeared: cable television service (CATV) in the Valley. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) prohibited most telephone companies from owning and/or operating a CATV business, but WFT received an FCC waiver because of the company's rural exemption status. The PSB granted Waitsfield its CATV franchise.

In 1982 Waitsfield Cable (WC) was established and began its CATV system installation. WC planned for a five-year phase-in for service areas, but the five-year plan was accelerated and 1986 saw completion of construction.

WC started out with thirty-six channels and has grown over the years to improve its product and increase programming. The service improvements culminated in the launch of digital CATV in 2000. When the Internet started taking off, WC provided CATV modem access, which also proved to be an interim defense mechanism against competitors until WFT launched its own high-speed Internet access.

## The Breakup of the Bell System

In 1984 the telecommunications industry endured the largest change in its 108-year history. Though the U.S. Justice Department had been trying to break up AT&T's Bell System for decades by applying the Sherman Act (which covers antitrust matters), the effort hadn't been successful. In November 1974 the Justice Department once again filed suit against the Bell System, alleging that AT&T was using its government-protected local phone monopolies to frustrate competitors' entry into the long-distance and equipment-manufacturing businesses.




*Debbie (Graves) Jones at the grand opening of Waitsfiled Cable*

On January 8, 1982, AT&T agreed to break up its $136 billion empire. AT&T would divest the local parts of the Bell Operating Companies (BOCs), but keep its manufacturing facilities and long-distance network. Two years later, the Bell System, as it was once known, ceased to exist. The twenty-two BOCs were merged into seven Regional Bell Operating Companies (RBOCs). By 2003 these seven RBOCs were reduced to four through mergers and sellouts, leaving BellSouth, Qwest, SBC Corp., and Verizon.

The breakup gave other long distance carriers the right to compete with AT&T. As a result, hundreds of companies emerged to compete for the new long distance market. MCI and Sprint are among the best known, but many others attained various levels of success.

Although opened to competition, the 1980s' long distance market remained heavily tilted in favor of AT&T. AT&T had a high-quality network in place to carry long distance calls, while most other firms relied on patched-together networks that provided lower-quality voice transmission sound and much-decreased reliability.

By late in the decade, however, the situation began to change. Sprint, MCI, and a few other firms installed fiber optic networks that equaled AT&T's in terms of quality and reliability. In addition, legislative changes made it possible for anyone to use alternative carriers without requiring users to first dial a long string of access numbers. In other words, the digit "1" became the access digit for any long distance carrier. This ease of use leveled the playing field and brought true equal-access competition to the long distance market.

Convincing the Local Exchange Companies (LECs) to convert their switches so they could technically offer equal access was a challenge. WFT took until 1990 to upgrade to the software revision that included equal access.

WFT was as sophisticated as any of the bigger companies in dealing with these challenges. Although the company was at the top of its game as the 1990s started—charismatic leadership, an excellent support team, the best of technology—Eleanor and Dana were also aware of the fleeting nature of success, and were determined to make it last, even if it meant taking a chance with a move, that sources told them would bankrupt their company.

# 5

# The Little Company Grows Up

For a fleeting moment, they owned it all, the whole multimillion-dollar network with its thirty-five thousand New England customers. In that tiny span of time, both Dana and Eleanor had just enough presence of mind to realize what they had accomplished: From a tiny corner of Vermont, the WFT family had just made telecommunications history.

The Bell System had years before recognized the danger of independent companies when Bell tried to retain control over all telephone access. A hundred years later, Eleanor and the owners of two other companies in two states had just proven how right Bell had been.

Continental Telephone Company (Contel), a multibillion-dollar telecommunications giant, operated in New England for twenty years before it merged with GTE in 1990. At the time, Contel was the nation's second-largest cellular phone provider, and GTE had been most interested in acquiring that piece of the company. The rumors started early that GTE wanted to sell off other pieces of the company, including the parts that provided phone service in New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont.


*Eleanor and Dana Haskin at the Hinesburg central office after the purchase of the GTE territory*

The rumors, which Eleanor heard on a boat during a telephone convention, set her imagination running wild. She had occasionally run into GTE people during her lobbying work for the independent phone companies, and she would always remind them that she was interested in purchasing anything they might ever sell off in Vermont. She and Dana had the feeling that the enormous company didn't take WFT, with its five thousand subscribers, very seriously.

As it became more obvious that the properties would go up for sale, Eleanor became determined that her company would shake off the condescending attitude and shake up the industry.

She knew she couldn't afford the price or handle the total subscriber base that would accompany the sale, but in 1990, she began to contact others to see if they would join her in the deal. Because GTE wanted to deal with only one entity in each state when it sold, Eleanor and WFT, now known as Waitsfield Telecom (WT), Paul Violette of Contoocook Valley Telephone in New Hampshire, and Shirley Manning of Lincolnville Telephone Company in Maine decided to join together and seek out other potential buyers to form the New England Independent Group (NEIG).

In a humorous understatement, Eleanor told Dana she was buying him another company.

## "The Dark Suits Didn't Scare Us"

*Eleanor and Margie Montgomery, Esq.*

Eleanor and Dana saw the purchase as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to expand the company's economic base. Changes in the Valley were forcing some deep thinking for the company. After years of tremendous growth, Mad River Valley leaders looked around and began to notice things they didn't like; for example, explosive development was threatening to destroy the fragile beauty of the mountain retreat. Recognizing that the impact of unchecked growth might be devastating, they put in place protections that would inhibit potentially harmful growth.

The sudden braking—which had ramifications for industries and businesses throughout the area—forced Eleanor and Dana to think, again, about how to keep growing. Acquiring the GTE properties seemed made to order.

The fact that they had no experience with the economies of scale the deal entailed—much as they had known nothing in 1960 when they tried to borrow the $125,000 they thought they needed to upgrade the company from crank to dial—was little more than a blip on their screens. That other, much bigger companies were finding it a little hard to believe the properties were being swiped out from under them by these tiny independents was even less of interest to Eleanor. "We started out like we knew what we were doing," Eleanor remembers with amusement. "The dark suits didn't scare us."

Because GTE wanted only one bidder per state to purchase the stock, each of the three companies that made up NEIG formed an acquisition company. Vermont was directed by the team at WT, which invested hundreds of hours in the deal. Eleanor, who was the point person for the team, fell asleep during one long conference call, head down on the table amid the papers detailing another complicated phase of the negotiations. "I never knew if they heard me snoring."

NEIG and GTE reached a definitive agreement on November 12, 1993, in Boston. "We never wavered. We captured [GTE's] imagination, and we kept it," she says.

For seconds, until all the Vermont properties were legally divvied up, everything belonged to the Haskins, a moment almost too short for Dana and Eleanor to savor. When those seconds ended and all the papers were signed, the company had a 20 percent equity in the thirty-five thousand lines GTE had owned in Vermont.

Yet now they had all the time in the world to savor what they'd done: Their acquisition quadrupled the customer base, spreading out 551 square miles over the Appalachian Gap into the Champlain Valley and extending to the New York state line. The transaction doubled their work force by adding thirty-seven new employees.

The switchover was instantaneous; the plan was a complete cut-over, with GTE providing no transitional services after the closing. A semi-truck load of records had already been delivered to the warehouse behind WT's brick office in Waitsfield—inspiring awe in a most tangible way for what the company's future held.

Then, Dana says, "We had a ball."

## A Forced Marriage

The customers on the Champlain Valley side of the Champlain Valley Telecom, which would officially merge with WT in 1998 into Waitsfield & Champlain Valley Telecom (WCVT), hardly knew what to think. Although they were an amalgam of several different independent companies that reach all the way back to 1896, they had had three telephone companies in six years, and service was erratic at best. Contel had never provided good customer service. GTE had been almost totally uninterested in the Champlain Valley; the whole point of the Contel purchase had been for wireless rights, not ground lines, so GTE hadn't spent any money on local offices.

Now, customers in Bristol, Lincoln, Richmond, Hinesburg, Charlotte,

Weybridge, Bridport, Addison, and Panton were skeptical of a tiny company from the other side of the mountain. When Kurt J. Gruendling, vice president of marketing and business development for WCVT, arrived in 1996, two years after the merger, his first job was to try to hear what the customers on the Champlain side were thinking.

"The Waitsfield customers knew what a good company this was, how forward-thinking and ethical. But the Champlain Valley properties were separated by a mountain range. They didn't have a local business office. They knew almost nothing about us."

Gruendling began a massive outreach program to teach the fourteen thousand new customers about their new telephone provider, to welcome them into the family.

## Not Just a Business

Four big Vermont dogs roam the offices of WCVT, watching over employees, inspecting new visitors. The staff calls one, Sheena, the CED (Chief Executive Dog). She jumps into a chair at the conference table and sits perfectly still, waiting to weigh in on the day's issues.

If ever anything tells you this is a different place to work, and a different company with which to do business, those dogs do the job. "We feel the company is a family," Eleanor says, using a phrase that, in many other places, would be little more than an overused slogan.

*Sheena the CED*

That family observation is both literally and figuratively true.

Although the Haskin children were not required to come into the business, all four of them gravitated in that direction, two after first having careers in other fields.

Eric, the middle child, began working part-time for WFT in 1978. He was still attending school and worked during the summer, and had an installer's van in his last two years of high school so he could take troubles after school. Eric graduated from Harwood

Union High School in 1979 and worked for the company until November when he entered the United States Navy. In November 1982 Eric began full-time employment with WFT as an installer, moving later to a lineman position. He joined the engineering staff in 1987 and eventually moved into cable splicing. Eric went back to the lineman position in 1991 for one year, and then moved on to his current position as field engineer.

Gregg worked part-time for WFT for six years while he finished high school and attended college. During that time, he held every position except line construction. Like his mother, he describes himself as "born into the industry" and remembers all the "funny sounds" coming out of the central office where the switching stations were located. Gregg began full-time employment with the accounting department in 1986. He has been a manager and vice president of the accounting department and today serves as WCVT's chief financial officer.

Scott joined the Haskin family in 1982 at the age of two. He experienced telephony as he grew up and graduated from Essex Technical School in telecommunications. He completed a trainee program at WCVT and is currently an installer/repairman.

Susan, the oldest, seemed the least likely to join the company. She graduated in 1972 from Harwood Union High School, and enrolled at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. She graduated in 1976 with a degree in geology, then moved west and worked for oil firms in Colorado and Wyoming, where she married and worked for the next ten years as a geophysicist.

Living in Colorado in 1983 but missing home and Vermont, Susan returned that year and began working on a computerized mapping system in WCVT's customer service department, soon taking over its leadership. She introduced policies and procedures for the customer service representatives that streamlined operations and improved customer service. Shortly after returning to Vermont, Sue adopted the first of her three children. Even after her diagnosis of breast cancer, she worked as an adoption advocate and as an instructor for Social Rehabilitative Services.

Susan died in July 2003, a bright light gone out. For her funeral, employees gathered hundreds of daisies from a meadow below a favorite spot of Susan's. "She loved the colors," Tammy, Administrative Services Supervisor, explains.

Only a family member would know that.

## Enter the Internet

The care and devotion employees give each other is reflective of the service they provide, and the concern they give to offering customers the best and the newest. "We value the people we serve because they are our friends, neighbors, and fellow business owners," Eleanor points out.

That feeling, and the company's willingness to try to be ahead of technological changes, made them ready for the Internet explosion in the mid-1990s, when everyone wanted access. Internet service providers (ISPs) were springing up everywhere. WCVT quickly realized the Internet could become a viable competitor and revenue producer.

The move to providing Internet service was a drastic switch for WCVT, as it was for other companies. "We were in the telephone business, and then we were in the telecommunications business," Eleanor says. "It was a big shift."

Green Mountain Access (GMA) launched in 1997. Internet access was initially offered via dial-up connection, because high-speed access was expensive and limited to those who could afford wide bandwidth. When digital subscriber line (DSL) technology became available, subscribers eagerly signed up, with the company listing its first five "beta" customers over the December holidays of 2000. DSL not only provided speedier access but also worked within a separate envelope over the subscriber's telephone line. Voice calls (inbound or outbound) were now independent of the Internet connection.

In theory this step forward was an excellent one, but the service was distance-sensitive and wouldn't work well—or at all—beyond eighteen thousand feet from the central office. WCVT, in harmony with GMA, set out to make DSL 100 percent available throughout its service area.

GREEN MOUNTAIN ACCESS
INTERNET SERVICES BY
WAITSFIELD/CHAMPLAIN VALLEY TELECOM

DSL penetration became part of the company's annual goals, and today WCVT's plant has 98 percent DSL availability and more than 4,000 DSL customers. The DSL penetration factor is exceptional compared to the national average—service to areas that, if you looked just at dollars and cents, probably shouldn't be served, says Gruendling. Increased DSL sales are integral to the company's long-range strategic plan.

Recognizing that changes in the business that provided the 1992 equal access also introduced shortcomings in the service area, WCVT in 1997 formed its own long distance company, Green Mountain Long Distance (GMLD).

"We may appear to be a small telecommunications company, but we're really not," says Gregg Haskin. "We're a big player. We know what we're doing, and we do it well."

Its attitude makes the company even more sensitive to the need to provide quality service with all the finest features. And, while WCVT's leaders were spending a lot of time thinking about all that, they were also facing a few years of intense pressure from other outside forces—like Mother Nature.

## A Year of Disasters

When you run a telecommunications company, you expect natural disasters, and you prepare for them. You just don't expect two in one year.

Eleanor and Dana had already decided that 1998 would be the year of a tremendous alteration in the business's structure. All the changes they had gone through since the GTE merger had forced them to reexamine their company; they were both nearing seventy and needed to begin thinking about how to prepare WCVT for the future. They planned to overhaul the company's management practices by teaming up with the Vermont Council for Quality (VCQ) and the well known Baldrige National Quality Program. The Baldrige criterion provides a tried and proven roadmap for businesses to continually improve their entire operation and strive for excellence.

Before implementing these planned overhauls, though, January 1998 arrived with a snap, crackle, and pop: three inches of ice coating the Champlain Valley. On January 8, a devastating ice storm swept across New England and southeastern Canada. Six Vermont counties were declared federal disaster areas, and over seven hundred thousand acres of forestland were damaged by the storm. The ice knocked down lines and snapped telephone poles, interrupting electricity and telephone service for

thousands. Champlain Valley residents awoke that morning to dark, cold, and an eerie silence broken only by the sound of a distant chainsaw or the ominous snapping of tree limbs breaking from the weight of the ice.

*January 1998 ice storm*

At its peak, there were approximately five hundred WCVT customers cut off from the world, as WCVT employees—many themselves without power or phones—worked their ways around fallen trees to repair lines, office personnel came in to answer customer service calls and help in the recovery effort. Falling temperatures kept the icy coating intact and made the line work brutal. Many times, WCVT employees were working right alongside the Vermont National Guardsmen brought in to help assist citizens and support the clean-up effort.

The ice storm was hardly forgotten when summer brought its own pestilence to the WCVT counties. A July flood again forced officials to declare a national disaster area in eight counties. In addition to all the other damage, the New Haven River completely destroyed the town library in Lincoln except for a few books, and brought WCVT pouring into the area to restore phone lines. The Mad River lived up to its name again, as it had in 1927 when Eleanor's father had serviced his customers from a canoe. Warren village was completely under water, many towns were flooded, and major roads throughout the area were submerged as well.

*Bristol Flood July 1998*

Looking around that day, one young woman summed it up: "There's no sense in crying. You just have to keep going."

WCVT did, sending out its best to bring its subscribers back into the world.

## A Year of Honors

Figuring if they could survive that year they could survive anything, WCVT pursued its new management plans. Partly as the result of the Baldrige principles, WCVT in 2000 acquired a branch office in Hinesburg to provide a personal presence in the heart of the CVT serving area. GMA moved its operations to Hinesburg at the same time, a move that gave the new company the room and geographical access it needed to maximize its efforts.

At about the same time, the Waitsfield Cable office at the Mad River Green complex was converted to a multi-service point of business so that customers would have easy access to all services.

The changes paid off. In 1998 and 1999 VCQ recognized WCVT's hard work and success story with its annual Achievement Award, and in 2000, WCVT won the prestigious Deane C. Davis Outstanding Vermont Business Award. In addition to the Deane C. Davis award, WCVT was also presented with a U.S. Senate award, For Outstanding Achievement of Economic Productivity.

*Governor Howard Dean and Eleanor Haskin with the U.S. Senate "Award of Outstanding Achievement of Economic Productivity"*

## A Future Awaiting Definition

Death and taxes have a way of humbling us all.

For Dana and Eleanor, death, taxes, and a regulatory atmosphere that seems murky at best have left them unsure about where their company will go in its third generation.

Strangely, the uncertainty has an invigorating effect, not a gloomy one. "I like change," Eleanor, now 72 years old in this 128th year of telephony. "I love new things. I love to get into computer software and figure it out without the use of a book."

For her, figuring out the future is akin to learning software without a book—a challenge, certainly, but not a frightening one. She and Dana have no roadmap for the

future, but they do have one from the past, one Eleanor says she learned when she was a piano student at the Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester, toiling under a professor who demanded more than she at first thought she had. "You keep working for perfection. You stick with it until it's done. That's what I brought to this business."

That determination is what she and Dana will leave behind, too.

*The Haskin family photo taken in December 2002. Back row: Eric, Dana, Scott, Gregg, Michael, Samantha Front row: Anna, Lisa, Kianna, Eleanor, Derrick (infant), Roberta, Shannon and Susan*