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Bringing Service to Unserved Households

During the 1940's and early 1950's, adequate telephone service in most rural areas of Northwest Kansas was nonexistent. Upon learning the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) would provide not only financial loans, but also engineering assistance, a group of farmers and businessmen interested in obtaining better telephone service began to hold meetings in order to inform the public, and to investigate the possibility of forming a cooperative telephone company. The area involved included six counties - Decatur, Norton, Phillips, Sheridan, Graham and Rooks. It was estimated that there were at least 5,000 potential telephone patrons within this area. An organizing committee for the proposed six counties, Rural Telephone Association, was formed under the direction of Lorenz Wegener of Norton, Kansas. Members of this committee were volunteers from each of the six counties. In April of 1950, the group decided to start proceedings to acquire a \$500,000 loan from REA, with which they would incorporate a company to be known as the Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc., and also to acquire available telephone properties, which would be rebuilt with modern dial telephone service and provide service to unserved rural households. A goal of \$30,000 in equity and membership pledges was set, with volunteers canvassing the rural areas and towns in search of members. This was not an easy task. Because of the newness of the program and the scarcity of information, it was difficult to sell membership and equity in an enterprise where the end results were unknown.



The Primary Goal Was Better Service

But the desire for better telephone service remained the primary goal. The areas to be considered in the first project were Logan, Damar, and Edmond. The Association proposed to acquire the Logan Telephone Company, the Damar Union Telephone Company, and the Solomon Valley Telephone Company. The plans were to improve the service in these areas and provide service to unserved subscribers by building 416 miles of new line. Service would be provided to 1,439 subscribers. The Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. was then incorporated on February 13, 1951. The Incorporators and first Board of Directors were: Lorenz Wegener, President, Norton County; Paul Mills, Vice-President, Sheridan County; Carroll Nelson, Secretary-Treasurer, Norton County; Edward J. Zohner, Graham County; Armond Benoit, Rooks County; Ernest Halderman, Phillips County; Myron Johnson, Decatur County.



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Engineering Work Begins

The office was initially located in the Carter Building, Norton,



Kansas. William B. Ryan, Norton Attorney, was named as legal adviser, and Raymond Reed Engineering Company of Columbus, Nebraska, was named as the firm's engineering consultant. Final approval was granted to purchase the Damar Union Telephone Company of Damar, Kansas, for \$900, and the Solomon Valley Telephone Company of Edmond, Kansas, for \$2,000, provided that a government loan could be obtained, and also approval be granted by the Kansas Corporation Commission. H. R. Woolie, REA representative for area seven advised the Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. Board of the steps to be taken in securing a federal loan for the proposed project. The engineering work necessary for planning allocation of money and materials began.

Increased Equity Equals Expansion

Membership in the company was increasing steadily. The equity requirements were being met and preparations were being made to appear before the Kansas Corporation Commission, where territory assignments would be requested. In the meantime, Lee Travers, owner and operator of the Logan Telephone Company, had been contacted and had tentatively agreed to sell his telephone company to Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. for \$50,000. In August of 1952, REA approved a loan of \$602,000 to Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. for the expansion and improvement of telephone service within the designated six county area. The first project would involve the Edmond, Damar, and Logan exchanges. The rural communities of Densmore, Webster, and Nicodemus would also be included in this project. The company proposed to provide dial telephone service to 1,439 subscribers by building 416 miles of new line, and rebuilding 186 miles of existing line.

Putting Down Roots in Lenora

In October of 1953, Leland Archer of Densmore, became the company's second president and six months later, April 1954, C. K. Nelson of Edmond was hired as the first manager of Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. At this time, thought was given to moving the business office into what was hoped would become its own certified service



area. Logan was the first choice of location for the headquarters office, but due to much opposition to the acquisition of the Logan Telephone Company, other possibilities were investigated. In August of 1954, the System Design Plan for the "A" section was approved by REA, and the loan was reduced to \$516,000 along with \$35,000 in Membership and

Equity Funds. On December 8 of that same year, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. appeared before the Kansas Corporation Commission asking for authority to purchase, rebuild, and operate the telephone company within the Logan, Edmond, and Damar exchanges. Due to stiff opposition from a group of Logan businessmen, the request was denied in December 1954. In February of 1955, with the help of the Lenora businesses led by Carl Georgeson, the United Telephone Company of Kansas agreed to sell the Lenora and Morland Telephone exchanges to Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. A month later, the headquarters office for Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. was moved from Norton to Lenora, where it rented office space in the west room of the Exchange Bank Building. The company later purchased the Eldridge Building in Lenora, where after extensive remodeling and expansion through the years, it still remains.

KCC Approves Application

On July 26, 1955, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. appeared before the Kansas Corporation Commission again asking for authority to purchase, rebuild, and operate the exchanges of Logan, Edmond, and Damar. On August 4, 1955, the Kansas Corporation Commission approved the application and authorized the company, Inc. to borrow money from the federal government to purchase, rebuild, and provide telephone service in the Logan, Edmond, and Damar exchanges. At this time \$457,000 was borrowed from REA, while \$24,279 was raised locally through membership and equity certificates.

Operations Begin in Three Exchanges

On October 18, 1955, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. finally acquired title to the Logan, Edmond, and Damar telephone exchanges, beginning operation and maintaining service with the existing equipment until new lines, phones, and central office equipment could be installed. While dial service existed in Logan, the areas of Edmond and Damar had ten-party service over aerial wires and magneto switchboards. The operator service would be replaced with dial equipment and tied to Southwestern Bell for toll service. Logan was acquired for \$50,000 and had 413 subscribers; Edmond \$2,000 with 97 subscribers; and Damar \$900 with 14 subscribers. It was at this time, in October 1955, that Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. hired its first servicemen, Henry J. "Hank" Austerman of Logan, and Floyd Farwell of Wisner, Nebraska, and purchased its first maintenance vehicle. Austerman had worked for Southwestern Bell, and Farwell had 25 years of dial telephone experience.

Cutover at Damar

With the first section now underway, on July 11, 1956, REA approved the second loan, "B" section, in the amount of \$471,000. This loan was to purchase, rebuild, and operate telephone exchanges in the Lenora and Morland area, building 380 miles of line to serve 520 subscribers. On September 1, 1956, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. finalized the purchase of the Lenora and Morland telephone exchanges from United Telephone Company of Kansas for \$48,700. The rural communities of



New Almelo, Studley, and St. Peter would be included in the new construction, bringing the total number of subscribers to 751. In February of 1957, the newly rebuilt telephone exchanges at Edmond, Damar, and Logan were cut into operation providing eight, four, and one-party dial service to 750 subscribers. Lloyd Shank, Chief Engineer for the Kansas Corporation Commission, formally put the Damar exchange into service. Leland Archer of Densmore, President of Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. and Waymen Delp of Edmond, Secretary, carried out the ceremony by putting the Edmond exchange into service. REA was represented by Earl J. Smith, Loans Representative, of Kearney, Nebraska; Ed Radin, REA Equipment Supervisor, Washington, D. C.; William Bird, REA Engineer, Washington, D. C.; and William R. Luck, REA Field Engineer for this area. Also present was C. F. Veach of Reed Engineering Company, Columbus, Nebraska. Rural Telephone was on its way!

Rural Telephone Becomes a Reality

After almost ten years of planning, hard work, and much effort provided by a few dedicated individuals throughout the original six county area, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. had now become a reality. But this was only the beginning. On February 1, 1957, Rural Telephone Service Company acquired the Palco exchange for \$17,500 from Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert McNeal. Palco served 270 patrons. The company immediately began plans for a third loan to install new equipment, and bring modern service to a potential 320 subscribers. On February 24, 1958, the exchange was converted to dial operation. In June 1957 Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. signed an agreement with United Telephone Company of Kansas, to acquire the exchanges of Selden and Rexford for \$70,000. The actual transfer was effective January 21, 1959. In the interim, October 1958, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. received approval to purchase the Zurich Telephone Company and convert it to dial operation. On January 12, 1961, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. announced that it was leasing the telephone facilities at Jennings, Kanona, and Lund from the Farmers Cooperative Telephone Association of Decatur County. The areas were later known as the Jennings exchange.

Jennings Cutover in October, 1962

The system was cut to dial in October 1962. This exchange was also to be the first underground rural plant to be installed. At this time in history, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. now served 2,808 subscribers in ten exchanges, and had signed contracts to purchase Natoma, Victoria, Olmitz, and Galatia exchanges from Gorham Telephone Company. This would bring the total number of subscribers to 3,959. Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. employed ten people. In March 1963, REA approved a \$330,000 loan to improve the facilities. In May 1963, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. purchased the exchange of Agra from the Peoples Telephone Company of Agra. Mr. L. E. Wormer, Manager and Secretary of the Agra Company, completed the transaction, indicating he had been in the telephone business for 50 years, and it was time to slow down a little. Agra had been in continuous operation



since 1904. Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. converted Agra to dial operation on March 19, 1964. In 1965, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. completed a deal to take over the Kensington exchange. It used a \$300,000 loan from REA to improve and provide dial service in Kensington .

Rural Delivers Mobile Service

In May 1965, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. announced it was now ready to offer a new service called Mobile Telephone Service. The tower would be operated from Lenora, and anyone within a 50-mile radius could receive such service. From 1965 through 1970, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. acquired the exchanges of Athol, Alton, Woodston, Collyer, Gaylord, and Prairie View. Not only did it finance the improvement to dial service for these exchanges, but in 1973, it launched a program to place all overhead facilities underground. It received a \$3.3 million loan from REA to accomplish this. On July 1, 1974, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. purchased the exchanges of Grainfield, Gove, and Park from the Grainfield Telephone Company. This brought the number of exchanges operated by the company to 24.



Austerman succeeds Nelson as G.M.

On July 8, 1974, tragedy struck Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. The company's Manager, C. K. Nelson, died at his home in Lenora, Kansas, at the age of 53. Mr. Nelson had been reared in the Edmond community, where he operated a grain business until April of 1954, when he was appointed Manager of Rural Telephone. On July 9, at a special board meeting, Hank Austerman, the Assistant Manager, was named Manager. Mr. Austerman started with the company in 1955, and had been named Assistant Manager in 1968.



First Independent to Own Toll Facilities

In December 1975, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. signed an agreement to purchase the exchanges of Long Island and Woodruff. These exchanges were purchased from General Telephone Company of the Midwest, headquartered in Grinnell, Iowa. Beginning with these exchanges, as well as Grainfield, Gove, and Park, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. now launched a program toward an all one-party buried system. Again it turned to REA for assistance and received help for its upgrading program. It completed this program with all one-party buried plant in 1985. There were many firsts for Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. In 1975, after three and one-half years of negotiations, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. became the first Independent Telephone Company in Kansas to own its own toll facilities. On September 10, 1975, it began purchasing toll equipment and cable owned by Southwestern Bell Telephone Co. for the exchanges of Morland, Damar, Logan, Prairie View, Victoria, Gaylord and Zurich. Another milestone was reached, when it began plowing its first toll

cable, from Lenora to Edmond to Logan.

Sevier Named GM in 1986

In January 1986, upon the retirement of Hank Austerman, the Board of Directors announced the hiring of Larry Sevier as its third General Manager. Larry, a Kansas native, graduated with a Business Management Degree from Emporia State University in 1967. He began his telecommunications career immediately with the REA, where he worked in various positions for 18-1/2 years before joining Rural Telephone. Under new management, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. directed its efforts toward improving the service to its members and bringing the latest in technology to rural Northwest Kansas. The company immediately began a program of replacing its 26 step switches with digital central office equipment. The company also began negotiations to tie all of its exchanges together, which enabled it to provide the ticketing and switching of its toll traffic, before handing the traffic to the toll network.



First to Provide Fiber-Optic Service

This was accomplished in 1987, as Rural Telephone Company, Inc. connected its exchanges into two ticketing and switching points. This project was also to involve another first, as Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. became the first company in Northwest Kansas to provide service over fiber optic cable. Today, Rural Telephone Service Company, Inc. has over 650 miles of fiber cable in operation.

Service is Our Priority

Believing service is the top priority and that public relations is a people process that starts at home, Rural Telephone began publishing a newsletter for its subscribers and created a Public Relations/Marketing department in 1989. Rural Telephone and its employees are dedicated to working with town leaders to improve community economy. Many of the employees serve in a leadership capacity on various city and county boards, and volunteer for service to fire departments, PRIDE and other organizations.

Scholarship Fund Created

In 1990, Rural Telephone created a scholarship program to assist area seniors in obtaining the goal of higher education. Seniors enter paintings to compete for \$1,000, \$500 and \$250 scholarships. In addition, the top scholarship winner receives the honor of having his/her painting displayed on the cover of the Six Lakes Directory. Rural Telephone to date has awarded \$7,000 in scholarship funds to area high school seniors.

Creating Jobs in Victoria

While the 1980's represented a period of prosperity for much of the nation, the region's two primary industries, agriculture and oil production were devastated by low prices and high



interest rates. Unemployment was rising and outmigration became a viable concern. Something had to be done to create new jobs for the region. Rural Telephone's General Manager Larry Sevier and Marketing Manager Rod Wallgren began working with the City of Victoria to establish a telemarketing center in the community. The Mayor of Victoria, Ellis County Commissioners, Job Service Center personnel, and regional and state representatives were asked to join together to make this project a reality. Through community planning and leadership, a joint venture between Rural Telephone and IntelliSell began on June 14, 1990, to construct a telemarketing facility in Victoria. The 7,500 square foot building was completed November 12, 1990, at a construction cost of \$350,000, and telemarketing operations began on November 13, 1990. IntelliSell has helped stabilize the community's tax base and has created many needed jobs. IntelliSell currently has 85 employees.

Rural Telephone Provides 911

In the fall of 1990, Decatur County Commissioners contacted Rural Telephone's COE Supervisor Jerry Kessler to assist them with their 911 Emergency Service needs. Decatur County already had 911 service, but the revenue sharing windfall they used to pay for the service was no longer available; therefore, the county could no longer afford the high-cost 911 system. Rural Telephone decided it was time to develop a 911 plan for rural Kansas counties that would be cost-effective. After considerable research and several planning sessions with county commissioners, emergency personnel and sheriffs' departments, a cost-effective plan was designed that would make 911 emergency service available to rural counties. Decatur County took the lead with this model 911 system, and since, four other counties have installed 911 systems. This provided a service to communities at an affordable rate.

Bounty For Books

As communities have become more involved in preserving natural resources, recycling has become a household name. In 1991, Rural Telephone created the Bounty For Books directory recycling campaign which continues to be a great success. Various school organizations in Rural Telephone's directory distribution area are offered a bounty of 25 cents for every outdated Rural Telephone directory recaptured for recycling. As a result, the program has recycled 83 tons of paper, saved 1415 trees and provided a financial reward of \$28,663.50 in the six years the program has been in existence. Bounty for Books gives students an opportunity to get involved in conservation through recycling, while saving valuable landfill space.

Interactive Television

In January of 1990, school officials from Agra, Jennings, Kensington, Lenora, Logan, Natoma, Palco and Victoria met and expressed interest in developing an interactive television (ITV) cluster utilizing Rural's fiber optic facilities. On February 7, 1990, Rural conducted the first-ever live ITV demonstration in Northwest Kansas. Temporary ITV studios were set-up in Rural's headquarters in Lenora, the Logan Manor in Logan, and Rural's central office in Edmond. Seventy-four interested school officials from 15 school districts attended the demonstration. School officials watched in amazement as all three

locations were united with full-motion video and audio communication via microphones, video cameras, and television monitors over fiber optic cable. In 1991, RTSC actively participated in the creation of an Interactive Consortium Academic Network (I-CAN), with 7 school districts. In Kansas, state funding for education is distributed to the local school districts based on district enrollment. Therefore, a decreasing enrollment meant less state dollars for the local school district's operating funds. Small school districts, such as those located in the Rural exchange communities, were distressed as a result of lower enrollments and a shrinking property tax base. The extremely tight budgets made it difficult for schools to attract and retain quality staff. Administrators concentrated on maintaining core curriculums and keeping the school doors open. Students were given little opportunity for elective class options. Since 1991, additional schools have joined the network, and ITV continues to increase course offerings to students. In addition to high school classes, evening and Saturday classes from Fort Hays State and Colby Community College are being conducted over the I-CAN Network.

Rural Helps Smith Center Recruit Business

Rural was contacted in the fall of 1995 for funding a project in Smith Center. Rural aided in purchasing property and recruiting a business to replace 40 jobs lost to the closing of Flemming Incorporated, a nationwide food distributor. In July of 1994, Fleming Incorporated, a nationwide food distributor, purchased and acquired Scrivner-Boogarts Grocery Warehouse in Smith Center, Kansas. Within a year, Fleming began to combine its operations and closed the Smith Center and Concordia warehouse facilities on June 30, 1995. The City of Smith Center was devastated when the company decided to leave the community, resulting in the loss of 40 employees and a \$1.3 million dollar payroll. Fleming required its two facilities, over 70 miles apart, to be sold as a single package. International Holdings, Inc. contracted to purchase the two facilities with the intention of utilizing the Concordia facility and marketing the Smith Center property to any prospective buyer. The City of Smith Center felt it was important to acquire the vacant property and pursue a business to occupy the property and replace lost jobs. The city was concerned with finding a suitable company that shared the same interests as the community to occupy the property; therefore, it was important for Smith Center to gain control of the facility. This meant acquiring the property at reasonable terms so they could offer favorable lease terms to new business prospects. The city needed \$300,000 to purchase the 62,000 square foot building in Smith Center from the IHC Holding Company. Rural was contacted to prepare an RUS/RBS grant application. On September 27, 1996, Rural received word that the application had been selected for funding. With the award of this grant, Rural had to commit \$60,000 dollars to a Revolving Loan Fund account. The initial \$300,000 will be loaned to the city at zero interest and, upon repayment, the funds will be funneled into the RLF. Rural's efforts are to create a self supportive RLF fund to re-lend to community and business development projects. The Rural Business Cooperative and Development Services (RBCDS) funds enhanced Smith Center's ability to obtain the building which was needed to attract the prospect, BIOFOAM, d.b.a. Heartland Project. The locating of Biofoam in Smith Center will provide job opportunities and an alternative market for locally grown grain. The company will contract for the purchase of grain and/or on-farm storage

of this grain which will enhance the overall rural economy of north central Kansas and south central Nebraska.

Alternative Financing for Assisted Living

In 1996, a project was spearheaded by the community of Logan's Retirement Center and members of the local Economic Development Organization. Rural's Economic Development Specialist was contacted to work with the community on alternative financing for an assisted living center.



The project was in need of an additional \$400,000. Upon evaluation of the project, a grant application was submitted to RUS/RBS. The project was selected and funding was awarded in April of 1996. This allowed Rural to make a zero interest loan to the community and also create an in-house RLF account. Rural was required to contribute a 20% match or (\$80,000) to establish the fund. Upon repayment of the \$400,000 to the telco, the RLF fund would have a value of \$480,000. With the establishment of the RLF fund, Rural will promote other economic development. The ALC project consisted of constructing an approximately 11,000 square foot facility in Logan. It is an expansion to Logan Manor Community Health Services, a full care medical facility with 50 rooms and 53 employees.

Revolving Loan Fund Created

It was the intent of Rural, with its creation of the Economic Development Department in 1993, to create a Revolving Loan Fund (RLF). With the success of two grants from RUS in the amount of \$700,000 for the Logan Assisted Living project and the Smith Center project, and the commitment of Rural's Board of Directors in the amount of \$140,000, the region will have access to a \$840,000 RLF. Rural hired a second Economic Development Specialist in December of 1996 to further its economic development efforts, market the RLF and administer all loans. The fund will be an ongoing, self sufficient fund not relying on state or federal assistance. Rural has finalized the RLF Plan and received plan approval from RUS and Rural's Board of Directors. It is anticipated that the current \$140,000 in the RLF account will be loaned out quickly. The impact will be ongoing to rural communities. Reliable business ventures will keep the RLF fund active and new loans will improve the local economy.

Emergency Medical Care Comes to Victoria

In recent months, the City of Victoria has worked diligently to bring a medical clinic and emergency medical care to Victoria. The facility is vital to the health and safety of the residents and the entire eastern 1/3 of Ellis County. Rural's Economic Development Specialist was contacted to work with the City of Victoria in preparing an application to the State of Kansas Community Service Program. This grant would allow qualifying entities and individuals to contribute to a worthy cause and receive a tax credit to apply to their Kansas tax bill equal to 70% of their contribution. The city entered into a memorandum of understanding that brought the public, private, and non-profit sectors together for the first time to work for the betterment of the community.

The City of Victoria, Ellis County Commissioners, the Ellis County Coalition for Economic Development, Ellis County Emergency Medical Services, Hays Medical Center and the State of Kansas each made a financial commitment to the project. The grant from the state of Kansas was approved in August of 1997 and allows for \$250,000 in tax credits. Until now, the community of Victoria has been without health care services either in the form of a clinical setting or in emergency medical treatment services. The impact has been substantial to the community. The concept of a health care services facility combining both the clinical setting and emergency medical staff makes huge strides in addressing the health concerns of the community.

Hill City/Bogue Cut Over Completed

After months of waiting, engineering and construction, Rural Telephone began providing telephone service to residences and businesses in Hill City, Bogue, Penokee and the surrounding rural area. Technicians began switching customers to the new state-of-the-art seven million dollar telecommunication system



Monday, September 16, 1996. An official "Cut over Celebration" took place Thursday, October 10, 1996. General Manager Larry Sevier said the technology used in the engineering and construction of this new communications network will serve Bogue, Hill City and the surrounding rural area with all the enhanced calling features and services available to date. "This fiber-to-the-home system is one of only a few of its kind nationwide, and certainly the first to be built in a non-metropolitan area," Sevier said. "This robust system sports a 100 percent, digitally-switched network with the capability of providing not only voice, but data and video at lightning speed." "Rural Telephone is very pleased with the addition of Bogue, Hill City and Penokee to its other 26 telephone exchanges and 23 cable television systems," Sevier said. "Rural Telephone takes great pride in remaining on the leading edge of technology, while providing all our member/owners the highest quality service at an affordable price," Sevier added. "We welcome Hill City, Bogue and Penokee, to our family of member/owners." "We look forward to providing our newest member/owners the same unparalleled service that our other 6,400 member/owners have enjoyed since 1951." Sevier concluded.

WaKeeney & Quinter Get New Telephone Company

Rural Telephone General Manager Larry Sevier announced the completion of the purchase of the two exchanges from Sprint/United, effective November 1, 1997. "We are pleased to welcome WaKeeney and Quinter area subscribers as the newest member/owners of Rural Telephone Service Company," Sevier said. "Construction of a new state-of-the-art, storm-proof system is scheduled to be completed in December 1998." Sevier said the technology utilized in the design and engineering of the new system will provide WaKeeney and Quinter with the latest enhanced calling features and services well into the 21st Century. "We are delighted to have the opportunity to serve the area."

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