

- *N.R. Kleinfield, in his New York Times coverage of the historic January 8, 1982, announcement in which AT&T agreed to a Justice Department proposal to modify the 1956 Consent Decree and divest itself of the 22 operating companies.*
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The Bell System: The Legacy and the Promise

By the stroke of a pen on the morning of January 8, 1982, the Bell System, the nation, and the world began crossing the threshold to a new age. Theodore Newton Vail's grand design had, in a sense, been completed; it was time to move on. "This is a major emotional thing for all of us here," said AT&T chairman C. L. Brown, reflecting on the impending separation. "We have operated for many decades on the basis of one Bell System. It just had to be changed, that's all."

It is fitting nevertheless to look back upon the way it was, and in so doing, mark the rite of passage. It is certainly not the last time the men and women of the Bell System will look back--to cherish their ideals, their memories, their sense of self—because such affectionate remembrances will help bridge their way into an exciting and awesome New Age.

Fittingly, Bell System men and women, who played so decisive a part in building the present enterprise, will have an important hand in shaping the new enterprises that will soon emerge.

"I expect over the next six months," said AT&T vice president Charles Marshall, "that we will all participate in this process. By 'we' I mean all of us--Bell System people in Utah, Illinois, Delaware, New York, and other states, who are going to pass ideas back and forth. We're honest with each other. Out of that honesty will come the right answers."

The right answers have always emerged, driven by the Bell System's ability to plan, to manage, to perform. But right answers also have very much to do with the willingness of Bell System people at every level throughout the nation to simply do a fine job for those they serve. A simple, rather humble aim. This sense of personal dedication--it came to be known as The Spirit of Service--is the element that perhaps comes closest to setting the enterprise apart: a company of individuals distinguished by their own qualities of character and concern. It is the element that has made an organization so complex work remarkably well.

And it is the element that will keep the new configuration of the world's mightiest communications system working well.

"I have great confidence in the ability of AT&T to thrive under this divestiture," chairman Brown wrote in letters to Bell System retirees and operating company directors. "In addition, I have no doubts about the ability of the Bell operating companies to do their job successfully with skill and _lan. They have the people, the morale, the market, and the necessary corporate strength. They provide modern, vital, growing, and improving services and have wide public support. Given reasonable regulatory treatment, which most of them have had in the past, they will do well by their customers and their share owners."

"The horizontally and vertically integrated Bell System has surely been our choice and has served the nation well for over a century. But it is clear that the times have changed and all of us must adapt to what the public, as represented by regulatory, legislative, and legal authorities, expects of us."

What the public expects is what Bell System employees have always provided--the best. The best of themselves, their talents, their determination, their dedication. How else could Vail's ideal have lasted so long? And how else can his ideal continue to give Americans the world's best telecommunications?

The images of the Bell System remain as an enduring part of the American landscape. The Bell flag flying over a telephone company building. An operator trudging through snow to get to "the board." An installer taking a child's cat out of a tree. A splicer beneath the city streets. A lineman silhouetted against the sky.

The telephone itself has gifted humankind with a remarkable power -- the power to communicate, one person with another, across a street, a town, a nation, the world, in an almost effortless twinkling.

That gift will not be rescinded. When the telephone was born, it was rightly perceived to be the cause of human betterment. Vail himself, who blended the qualities of futurist, dreamer, and hard-headed organizer, wrote in his annual report in 1908 that the telephone was "annihilating distance and bringing people closer to each other." More than a century later, his vision had been realized: Telephones had been brought to just about every neighborhood and home in the land.

And now, new work needs to be done. The modification of the 1956 Consent Decree means that AT&T can bring the fruits of its own technology even more to bear on the well-being of its customers, its share owners, its employees.

"Your work goes on," Brown said in a special message to all Bell System employees. "In time, it will be structured differently--under different umbrellas--but it will be the same work, and it will be done by the same people who are doing it now for some time to come."

The "real" Bell System, of course, has never been, and will never be, perceived in annual reports or financial statements, imposing and dutifully informative though such documents are. The true portrait exists in the minds and beliefs of the millions of Americans who, down through the years, have had dealings with the enterprise. But it is for Bell System employees that Alexander Graham Bell's perspective on his life holds special meaning: "I have worked for the result and not the glory."

As to what awaits, no one can be quite sure. But it is certain that the Bell System "ideal"--in the wider sense -- lives on. Employees will continue to work for the result and not the glory.

Thanks to them--and their quiet confidence and their achievements--stirs the promise of a new beginning.