# First Official Transatlantic Telephone Call (January 7, 1927)

**Named to the National Registry: 2005**
**Essay by Cary O'Dell**


*Bell System logo, c. 1927*


*W.S. Gifford*

"How's the weather over in London?" Never before had such small talk been so weighted with such import.

Though extremely, extraordinarily commonplace now, the concept of communicating across the oceans, halfway around the world, was, in 1927, far more the purview of Jules Verne than any known reality. That changed though on January 6 and 7, 1927 in two simple, static-heavy conversations between the United States and London. (And for the record, it was drizzling in London town; sun shinny in New York.)

Telephony technology dates back to the 1860s; it was first patented in the US, by Alexander Graham Bell, in 1876. The US' first telephone exchange was established in Hartford, Connecticut in 1877. The first exchange between two major US cities—New York and Boston—was set up in 1883. The first pay phone came into being in 1889.

But despite this flurry of activity and progress, telephone communication in the US at this time remained something of a one-sided, or Stateside-ed, affair. Telephonic attempts to span the oceans were intermediate, brief, and experimental. Though one-way voices were shot between the state of Virginia and Paris, France, briefly in 1915, and ship-to-shore communication, to a vessel in the Atlantic, was achieved in 1916, it was not until 1926 that the world's first two-way conversation across the ocean took place. But, even then, the '26 event was the action of a special Bell (now AT&T) corporate endeavor, not a system available commercially or to the "average" citizen. The first commercially available system arrived the following year and was inaugurated, officially, on January 7, 1927 with an international call, a recording of which was named to the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry in 2005.

However, interestingly, one day prior to that ceremonial opening, an across-the-ocean "test" conversation was also convened and also recorded for the purposes of history. That call commenced at 9:35am New York time (2:35am in London) from the 26th floor of the Bell building overlooking the East River. It traveled over 3,000 miles, via radio waves--not wires--eventually reaching England. As it was a "test" and far from an "official" anything, the morning's conversation began inauspiciously. An unidentified male voice, crystal clear and American accented, begins with a variation of that time-honored telephone question, "Can you hear me now?" He says, "I'm talking a little farther away from my transmitter… do you notice any difference now?" An unidentified British voice, also male, responds affirmatively.

Subsequent discussion between these two men--whose identities have seen been lost to history--

is, for the most part, remarkably innocuous. It touches on the aforementioned weather, the distance from England to India (a five day trip in those days), and the distance from New York to San Francisco. At one point, a prophetic, if slightly rueful, cord is struck when the American speaker states, "Distance doesn't mean anything anymore. We are on the verge of a very high-speed world….people will use up their lives in a much shorter time, they won't have to live so long."

Discussion is much more formal and practiced the next day, January 7, 1927, in the transatlantic line's first "official" conversation. It's held between W.S. Gifford, President of America's AT&T company and Sir Evelyn P. Murray, head of the British General Post Office. When each takes to the line, the magnitude of the occasion takes hold. Both gentlemen read prepared statements regarding the day's significance. Gifford states:

> Today is the result of many years of research and experimentation. We open a telephonic path of speech between New York and London…. That the people of these great cities will be brought within speaking distance to exchange views and facts as if they were face to face…. No one can foresee the ultimate significance of this latest achievement of science and organization.

After also noting this new processes' unparalleled ability to facilitate business, to be a "convenience and comfort" and to foster "better understanding … and friendship" ("neighbors in a real sense"), Gifford turns the proceedings over to Murray.

Murray then offers his own gracious, though static-laden, sentiments, both lofty and practical and with an eye (and ear) towards history. He heralds a "new epoch" of communication just before he declares the new transatlantic service "open" to "every telephone subscriber."

It was no mere conjecture on his part. Before the day was done, a fury of personal and business-related calls, by a host of bankers, businessmen, and the curious, kept the new line of communication constantly busy. Before all was said and done, over $6 million worth of new business had been transacted and a news agency had already sent its first dispatch from Europe to America.

Today, via even cell phones, calls to far off places--London, Japan, Australia, South America, even Antarctica--can be immediately, easily and even inexpensively made. Casual chatting spanning the globe is now as every day as conversing over the backyard fence. It is an occurrence that belies the truly momentous nature of this act--how it shrinks the planet and defies the general laws of distance, physics and proximity. It is a phenomenon that these recordings of 1927 still exist in order to remind us of.

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