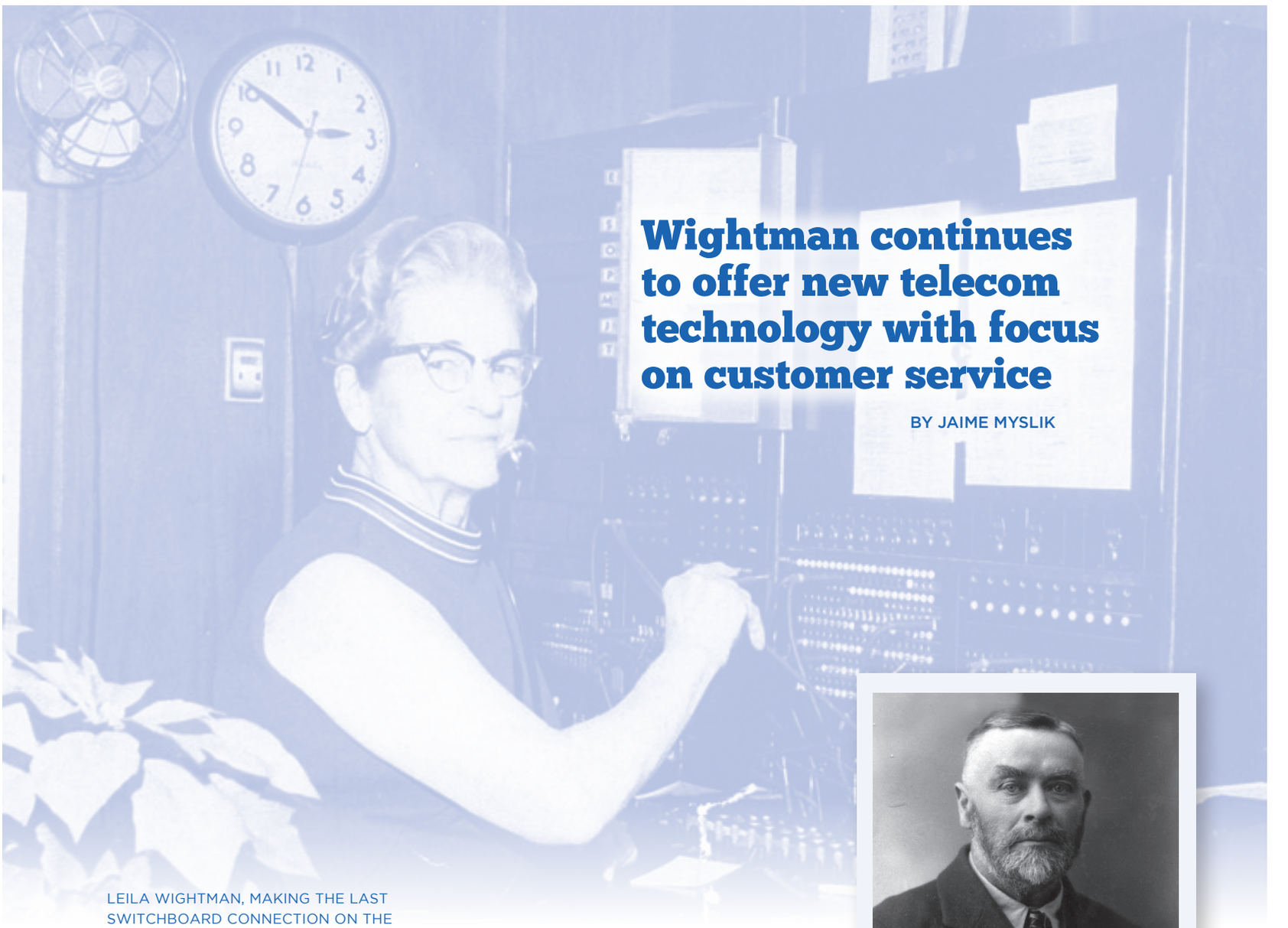
Wightman continues to offer new telecom technology with focus on customer service

BY JAIME MYSLIK



LEILA WIGHTMAN, MAKING THE LAST SWITCHBOARD CONNECTION ON THE CLIFFORD EXCHANGE, DEC. 21, 1971

CLIFFORD – Wellington County is home to one of the only remaining family-owned and operated telecom companies in Canada.

Clifford-based Wightman Telecom has been in the county for more than a century. Now owned by Paul and Blair Wightman, over the years the company has experienced a number of ups and downs, as well as numerous technological advancements in the telecom industry.

"After the last war and in the 1950s there was several hundred small phone companies in Ontario and they all sort of met their demise when they couldn't get over the high cost of upgrading and technology changes and that sort of thing," said co-owner Paul Wightman.

"We've always been able to sort of get ... over that hurdle."

Over the last decade the company has focused on bringing fibre optic lines to customers throughout Wellington County and beyond. Wightman currently provides service to about 20 communities.

The company is now working to bring fibre optic service to Centre Wellington, with the goal of having Elora completely retrofitted by mid- to late-2018. This spring Wightman will bring the service to Stratford.

Paul said fibre optic lines have the capability to deliver an unlimited volume of bandwidth.

"Everything is brand new, latest technology and designed for maximum throughput," he said.

The first customer to receive the service in Elora was Gerrie's Garden Centre and Farm Market.

"What we notice is a little higher internet speed," Tim Gerrie said. "We don't do a lot of uploads and downloads, whereas somebody who's doing large uploads and downloads could see the huge difference.

"It's probably five times as fast [as] it was with the traditional ... line."

However, Elora is not the first area to receive the fibre optic upgrade by Wightman.

For decades, Paul said, Wightman would often wait to see how new technology would unfold in Toronto or Kitchener or Guelph before developing a business plan to offer the same services to the company's rural base.

ROBERT WIGHTMAN
FOUNDER
WIGHTMAN TELECOM

In the early 1900s, Robert Wightman, a Howick Township farmer, was told he would not be receiving phone service, so he began his own phone company. He strung lines between 60 of his neighbours' houses throughout the township. In 1911 he connected to Bell's long distance lines at Clifford. In 1928, he handed over Robert Wightman Telephone Company to his son, Ben.

However, about 25 years ago Paul said the company realized it could actually move ahead of the competition when it heard a large competitor told the CRTC (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission) it could be decades before Hanover received DSL (digital subscriber line.)

"We said, 'Hey that's lovely. We'll be there

Ben Wightman,
climbing a telephone pole





LEILA WIGHTMAN
OWNER
WIGHTMAN TELECOM
FROM 1947 TO 1975

Leila Schnurr married Ben Wightman in 1925. In 1928, Ben purchased the Clifford, Ayton and Neustadt exchanges. Leila was the company's lead operator and office administrator until Ben's death in 1948.

Leila became one of Canada's first female telephone operators. With her son Ray, she purchased automated dial technology for Wightman. This effectively ended the era of the switchboard operator.

In 1954, an ice storm destroyed the company's phone lines, which led to the installation of underground cabling.

Leila was inducted into Canada's Telecommunications Hall of Fame in 2006 for her leadership during the post-Second World War period. She was also chosen to demonstrate the role small businesses have played in Canadian telecommunications.

next week,'" Paul said. "So, we filed all the paperwork to do it; we went and did it.

"Who do think was number two on our heels?"

It was the same corporation that had stated it would take a decade to do it.

Now most homes in Hanover have Wightman's fibre optic service.

"You see what happens when you assume you know what the customer wants?" Paul said.

"So (we) changed our perspective and said 'No, we can't wait until we see what [others are] doing in Toronto, Kitchener or Guelph.'

"We're going to be ahead of them in this rural area in the middle of mid-western Ontario."

Paul said Harriston received a lot of attention in 2008 when Wightman first installed fibre optic lines in the town because it had the highest internet speeds in Canada.

While fibre optic lines are primarily being installed in villages and towns with a higher urban density, Paul said whenever repairs are made to aging lines the company is keeping up to date.

"We're not buying traditional copper cable like (we) used to 20 years ago. We're replacing it all with fibre and glass and electronics to new technology," he said.

Paul attributes much of the company's ability to make innovative decisions to being family-run, as well as having a leadership team he trusts.

"We can make decisions very quickly and we can decide to do things that big companies or big boards can't decide," he said.

"They look at their investment and they think they'd be better to put their money elsewhere. They see all kinds of threats on the horizon, so they bail ...

"The family can look at it say, 'Okay no problem, we can wade our way through some of these things and carry on.'"

Paul also said he and Blair have an intuitive business sense.

"We say it's in our DNA that we just know what is the next right decision and the timing and quite literally we can make those decisions on the spur of the moment and go forward," he said.

PHOTOS: SUBMITTED



"We provide local service, we have real humans here that answer the phones ... they're not sitting on another continent halfway around the world."

- PAUL WIGHTMAN, CO-OWNER, WIGHTMAN TELECOM



AT THE INDUCTION OF LEILA WIGHTMAN INTO CANADA'S TELECOMMUNICATIONS HALL OF FAME, 2006, TORONTO. (L-R) HALL OF FAME FOUNDER LORNE ABUGOV, PAUL WIGHTMAN, BLAIR WIGHTMAN AND HALL OF FAME MEMBER LIS ANGUS.

However, they no longer do it all alone.

The century-old company has been passed down generation to generation, from Robert Wightman in 1911 to his son Ben Wightman in 1928, to Ben's wife Leila in 1948, to their son Ray Wightman in 1976, and to Ray's sons Paul and Blair in 1987.

However, about 10 to 15 years ago the brothers decided to bring in outside talent.

"My brother and I sat back and said if we really want to win this game we've got to bring in some talented management people, which we did," said Paul.

"And so for the first time in a hundred years, we brought in people from outside the family to help us run and grow the business because ... there are times when the task ... is more than one or two can manage.

"You've got to bring in help to help manage those things and that decision to evolve ... the business has been very, very rewarding."

Before hiring the leadership team of managers who make day-to-day decisions, the business didn't have a board of directors.

"My brother and I were the board," Paul said. "We'd meet in the hall and say, 'What do you think about doing this or that,' and we'd make decisions.

"Now we have a board, we have a board of advisors, we bring the family and involve them in those board discussions and meetings and it's been a process that's worked and been very positive."

Despite all the business and technological changes over the years, one factor has remained constant: Wightman is people-centred.

"Our motto for many, many years ... literally decades, is we simply put people first and I think we've always looked at the customer as the primary reason we're doing things," Paul said.

"At the end of the day we're not there to make computers fast, we're there to make customers happy by making their computers work fast.

"We're not happy until the customer's happy and so that's been our target."

The company also prides itself on being local.

"We provide local service, we have real humans here that answer the phones ... they're not sitting on another continent halfway around the world," said Paul.

All the customer service representatives either work at the main office in Clifford or at satellite offices in Hanover and Fergus, and they have the authority to solve customers' problems.

"We've ... empowered those service representatives to actually pick up the file

"We are a family of great people who want to deliver 'wow' experiences each and every day."

- MISSION STATEMENT, WIGHTMAN TELECOM

and go to the person and ... solve a problem," said Paul.

"It doesn't get lost in a maze of a hierarchy."

Gerrie said he experienced this firsthand.

Within a week after the business had connected to the new fibre optic network, there was trouble with his business' debit machine.

"The phone and internet worked, but the debit machine for some reason wasn't reading the codes," he said. "So they changed something on their end, came back, got (it) working, and no problems.

"Service has been excellent. Like you call them up, they're here."

Paul said because he and Blair were raised in the small town of Clifford they made the choice to stay out of big cities.

"We thought there is a market in small-town rural Ontario, we're going to treat people like they treat us." BL

RAY WIGHTMAN
OWNER
WIGHTMAN TELECOM
FROM 1976 TO 1987



Ray Wightman worked closely with Leila at Wightman Telecom after his father died in 1948. He helped to bring the company into the modern telecom era.

When Leila passed away in 1976, Ray took over until his retirement in 1987. During his time as the lead of Wightman Telecom, Ray saw the deregulation of phone sets, the introduction of cell phones and the incorporation of Wightman Contracting.

In 1965, Ray became the founding director of the Ontario Telephone Association (later the Ontario Telecommunications Association). The organization consists of independent telephone companies in Ontario that lobbied the federal and provincial government for necessary improvements to the telephone services across the province.

In 1995, Ray was given a life membership by the Ontario Telephone Association and, in 2007, he was inducted into the Ontario Agricultural Hall of Fame. In 2012, Ray received a Diamond Jubilee medal to recognize his commitment to public service and community involvement, and for modernizing communication services in Wellington County.

Ray was also heavily involved in the Clifford community. He was a director and lifelong member of the Clifford Rotary Club and he served for 37 years on the Clifford volunteer fire department. Ray was also involved in the construction of the Minto-Clifford school in Harriston while he was on the Clifford Public School Board from 1963 to 1964. Ray was also on the Clifford municipal council for 11 years, including two terms as reeve and two terms on Wellington County council.

Ray passed away in 2017.

PHOTOS: SUBMITTED

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