

Who Owns Whom?

By Jan Verhelst, Belgium

In 1882, six years after the telephone patent was obtained by Alexander Graham Bell, a company called the “Bell Telephone Manufacturing Company” (BTMC) was founded in Belgium by two American companies and local businessmen. The American Companies were Western Electric and the International Bell Telephone Company (IBTC).

In 1890, Western Electric purchased all the shares of BTMC owned by IBTC, so the two IBTC representatives on the Board of Directors, the brothers De Groof, had to leave the Board. They in turn started a rival firm known as the Antwerp Telephone and Electric Works (ATEA).

In 1925 Western Electric sold BTMC to International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT).

ATEA was an artisanal company manufacturing distinctive telephones and telephone exchanges. In the 1920s telephone automation became popular, and ATEA was purchased in 1926 by the company that owned ATM Liverpool and Automatic Electric Chicago, resulting in the introduction of Strowger

technology into ATEA products.

In the 1950s ATEA and Automatic Electric became part of General Telephone and Electronics (GTE).

In 1986, BTMC became part of the French company Alcatel, and ATEA was sold by GTE to Siemens, a German company.

When I visited what used to be Automatic Electric in Northlake, Illinois, in 1989, there had also been some major changes.

GTE and their perpetual rival, American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T), had merged into a new company, ATT GTE Communication Systems (AGCS), and the former Automatic Electric factory in Northlake became part of the newly formed joint venture. “If you cannot beat them, join them.” Later, AGCS became part of Lucent.

In Europe, Alcatel was looking for a partner, and they merged with Lucent, to form Alcatel Lucent, a trans-atlantic giant in the telecom business.

ATEA had become a part of Siemens, but after 2000, Siemens wanted to leave the telecom business. Their public switching and mobile department moved to a joint

venture with Nokia in 2007 called Nokia Siemens Networks (NSN), and became a 100% Nokia division in 2013. About 130 former ATEA people now work for Nokia in Belgium.

Nokia, once the market leader in cellular phones (at least in Europe), sold their cellular phone division to Microsoft.

In the past couple of months, Nokia began the purchase of the Alcatel Lucent business.

In summary, ATEA’s former competitor, BTMC, merged into a company that included ATEA’s former owner, Automatic Electric now a part of Alcatel Lucent. But that company is now owned by Nokia, who already owns the Siemens public switching and mobile department. And, ATEA employees were involved in that group.

From one former ATEA employee’s point of view, everything seems to have merged into one single company. Who will own whom in the future?

Are you confused? Me too! ☎

New Zealand Signal Corp Phone

No, this is not an April Fool item! This is a Western Electric 302 Signal Corp set used during WWII in New Zealand with what is commonly referred to as the “Oslo Dial.” We have



never seen a Western Electric dial equipped with such a number plate and didn’t know such existed. It is in a New Zealand collection that was viewed recently by Wayne Merit and Gary Goff while visiting New Zealand. More photos of some of the beautiful telephone items they saw in Australia and New Zealand will appear in future issues of SW. ☎