

**A Southern Telephone Story
National Improved Telephone Company
New Orleans, Louisiana
1884 to 1888**

**Scandal, Greed, Politics, Corruption
By Tom Adams ATCA #213 June 2011**



The National Improved Telephone Co. began operation in the later part of 1884 in New Orleans Louisiana with Watson Van Benthuisen as President of the Company. They used instruments patented by Charles A. Randall, T. J. Perrin, J. Harris Rogers, others, and the McTighe receiver and for a switchboard used the Perrin multiple exchange system.

I received photos of this phone and a request for information about it in February of this year. The only information I could locate was a photo of one like it that belonged to Norm Mulvey. It was in Dooner's book "Telephones: Antique to Modern". I contacted Norm, who informed me he had sold it in his first collection and that it was the only one he was aware of. The original receiver was missing from both phones. I discovered an original receiver on eBay in March of 2014 with an exact matching serial number 2696 which I was lucky enough to win.

I started researching the US Patent Office for information and was able to locate several patents issued to the company or its inventors between 1884 and 1886. I then discovered an amazing story surrounding this Company, its President, Officers, and owners.

Watson Van Benthuisen was the Quartermaster of President Davis' convoy that fled Richmond in April 1865. CSA Captain W. Van Benthuisen had commanded the treasure train that was separated from the President's retreat carrying \$35,000 in gold sovereigns. None of this money ever reached the Davis' family. President Davis was furious and said Capt. Watson Van Benthuisen had acted dishonorably and he considered him unfaithful and deceitful. After the war, Van Benthuisen became a prominent New Orleans businessman."

One licensee of the National Improved Telephone Co. of Louisiana was The Western Pennsylvania Telephone and Telegraph Co. which entered into the telephone business in the later part of 1884 at Pittsburg, Pa. Suit was brought against this company by the American Bell Telephone and the Central District and Printing Telegraph companies for infringing the Bell patents in August 1885. Counsel for the defense had barely started his argument, when he was stopped by Judge McKennan, who ordered a preliminary injunction. The business of the company was brought to a standstill, and the instruments of the subscribers were removed.

This resulted in maneuvers in the South to involve the United States Government directly in a law suit against the monopoly of American Bell in the second half of 1885, and were facilitated by the rise to power of the Democratic Party (very strong in the South). In the administration of the new President, Stephen Grover Cleveland, were, among others, Gen. Augustus H. Garland, Attorney General,

and Lucius Q.C. Lamar, Secretary of the Interior, both stock holders in the Pan Electric Telephone Co of Tennessee which was later owned by National Improved Telephone Co. (J. K. Rogers invented the telephone upon which the Pan Electric Company was formed. It was such an infringement of existing telephones that it was never able to be put up in a single State; J. K. Rogers was a cousin of Casey Young Atkins, the Indian Commissioner, and of Senator Harris, all of Tennessee. The whole enterprise has the look of a grotesquely transparent scheme. There has never been anything done in the way of actual work beyond the mere printing of stock since the original company was formed. It is understood that the movement upon the part of the Pan Electric people against the Bell Telephone Co., was merely done to put off some of their extravagantly over issued stock upon the public.)

The person who started the fire was Van Benthuisen. On July 12, 1885 -- a few days following one of the many preliminary injunctions that American Bell obtained against National Improved -- Van Benthuisen wrote a letter to Attorney General Garland, inviting him to start a lawsuit on behalf of the Government with the purpose of annulling the two main patents of A.G. Bell on the telephone and, later, he drew up an affidavit in which he accused the presiding Court of collusion with American Bell.

Hon. Henry W. McCorry, United States District Attorney for Western Tennessee on September 9, 1885, filed the bill of complaint of the United States Government against American Bell.

Obviously, American Bell was not about to take lightly an attack so violent and dangerous. First of all, it unleashed a furious press campaign with articles on the *New York World* and the *New York Times* condemning the Justice Department and its decision to proceed against American Bell and accused Attorney General Garland of wanting to promote the interests of Companies of which he was a stockholder.

The Administration issued a press release, denying the accusations, but, at the same time, on October 9, 1885, ordered McCorry to suspend the legal action against American Bell and turn over the entire documentation in his possession to the Department of the Interior, in charge of awarding and controlling patents, for preliminary examination and recommendation.

At this point, other opponents of American Bell, such as the Globe Telephone Company, the Washington Telephone Company, the North American Telephone Company and others, came to the aid of National Improved filing with the Department of Justice petitions asking the Government to intervene for annulling Bell's patents.



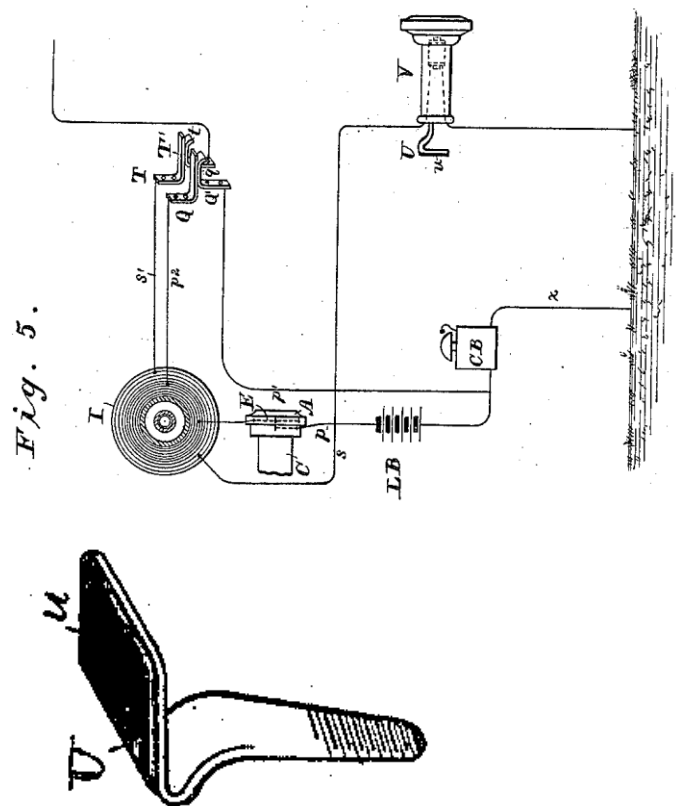
Telephonic Transmitter US Patent 295087 3-25-1884 Charles A. Randall – "In a telephonic transmitter, the combination, with the electrodes, of a confined body of mercury in contact with one of the electrodes, and devices for producing and regulating the pressure of said mercury upon said electrode and its supporting elastic plate."

Over the next three years there were many court hearings, arguments, accusations, and investigations

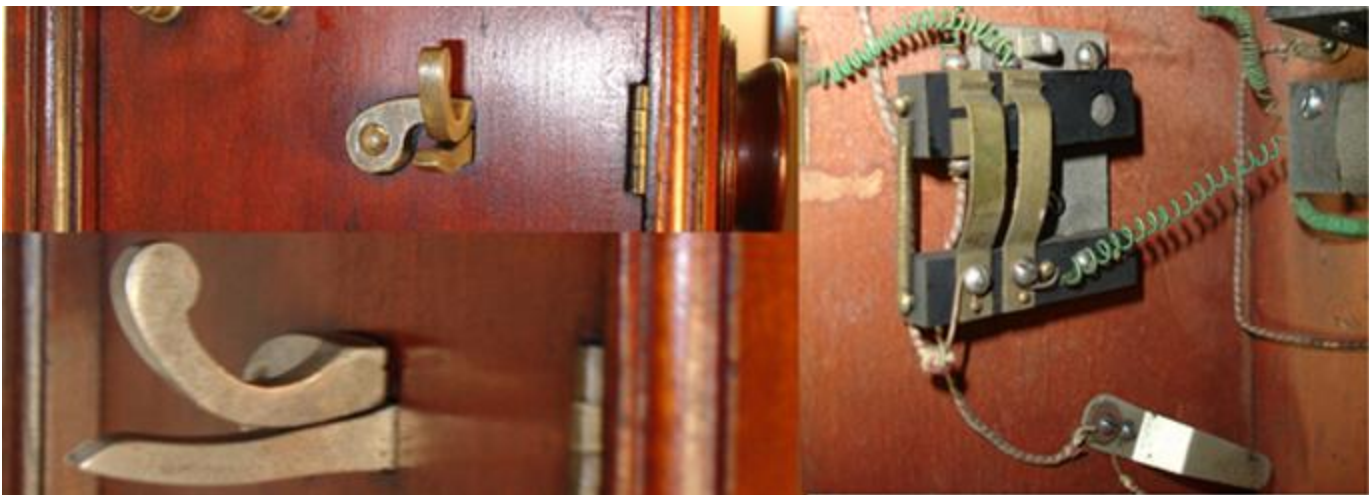
In June of 1888 Judge Don A. Pardee, of the United States Circuit Court, at New Orleans, rendered a decision on the final hearing in the case of the American Bell Telephone Co. et al., vs. the National Improved Telephone Co., in equity. The court decides that the telephones used by the defendants are an infringement on the Bell patents, and orders that all such instruments be delivered to the clerk of the court, subject to further orders, and gives the complainants judgment against the defendants for all costs, charges and disbursements in this suit.

A Telephone Auto-da-Fe.—A special dispatch from New Orleans of Dec. 12, 1888 states that Mr. F. B. Knight, special agent of the American Bell Telephone Company there, **burned** up in that city on the day named 950 infringing telephones which had belonged to the National Improved, Crescent City and New Orleans telephone companies, and which had been delivered up to the Bell Company by order of the court.

Sources: *The Electrician and Electrical Engineer*, *The Electrical World*, *The Electrical Engineer*, *The New York Times*, Excerpts from "Jefferson Davis, American By William J. Cooper", and "B. Catania, Il Governo degli Stati Uniti contro Alexander Graham Bell - Un importante riconoscimento per Antonio Meucci, AEI - Automazione, Energia, Informazione, Vol. 86, Supplement to No. 10, October 1999, pp. 1-12"]

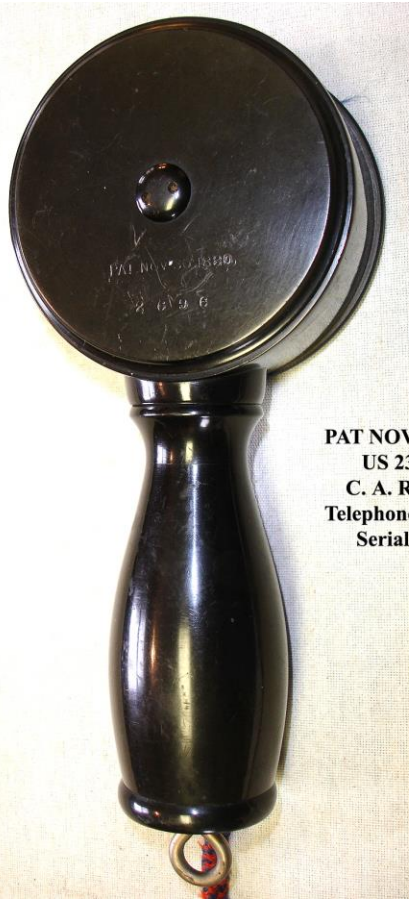


US309357_TELEPHONIC_APPARATUS-T.J. Perrin-National Improved Telephone Co.-12-16-1884

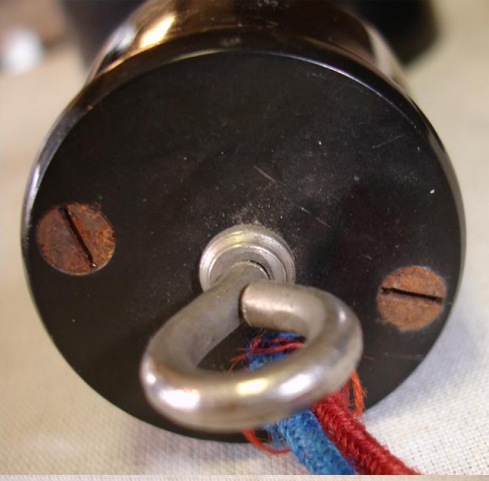


A few more of the many patents issued to National Improved Telephone Co.

US329772-INDUCTION COIL -11-3-1885; US324729-TELEPHONE TRANSMITTER-8-18-1885; US324728-TELEPHONE TRANSMITTER-8-18-1885; US324727-TELEPHONE TRANSMITTER-8-18-1885; US324726-TELEPHONE TRANSMITTER-8-18-1885; US322122-TELEPHONE SWITCH-7-14-1885; US316817-TELEPHONE RECEIVER-4-28-1885; US316817-INDUCTION COIL-4-28-1885; US316816-TELEPHONE RECEIVER-4-28-1885; US312896-TRANSMITTER-2-24-1885; US307728-TRANSMITTER-11-4-1884



PAT NOV 30, 1880
US 235,021
C. A. Randall
Telephone Receiver
Serial # 2696



US 235,021 PAT NOV 30, 1880 C. A. Randall
National Improved Telephone Co. Receiver

