

June Newsletter



Overland Telegraph
150th Anniversary
1872-2022

As advised in an earlier email, OT-150 (Overland Telegraph Line Sesquicentennial) will be emailing you at the beginning of each month until August

If you wish to withdraw from this email list, please advise by return email... thank-you

www.ot150.net

On this Day in June

In the ot150.net Library – Key dates – June: On Thursday night, 20 June, the Chief Secretary in Adelaide receives a telegram from Charles Todd in Port Darwin – the first message to be sent directly from north to south. But it has taken 29 days to arrive. First, it is telegraphed about 300 miles to the end of the Northern Section of the OTL where it is written out and handed to Dick Knuckey. Knuckey then has to find his own way through rough country to Tennant Creek, the northern-most point of the Southern Section. Now the message can again be telegraphed down the Line. (*Richard Venus*)



*Tennant Creek Telegraph Station, 1939
[SLSA B54732]*

In the press

The initial international telegraph rates were extraordinarily expensive. This December 1872 advertisement shows that a 20 word birthday telegram to your Aunty in the United Kingdom would cost £12 10s which in today's money is \$1,700! (*calculated using the [Reserve Bank's pre-decimal inflation calculator](#)*)

GREVILLE'S TELEGRAM COMPANY (REUTER'S AGENCY).

Telegrams forwarded three times a day to all parts of the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States, and Canada.

TARRIF.

United Kingdom, first two words .. £2 10 0
Each additional word, .. 0 10 0

The following rates will be charged for telegrams to the United States and Canada, in addition to the above :-

New York
Boston First word .. £0 12 0
Philadelphia
Each additional word .. 0 4 0
Other places in America, first word .. 1 0 0
Each additional word .. 0 5 0

Special arrangements have been made in London for re-transmitting messages to and from American firms under the same indicators as will be used for such firms between Australia and London.

It is quite unnecessary to say that no charge will be made for getting mutilated messages repeated, inasmuch as the British and Australian Company repeat all such messages, when requested to do so, free of cost.

Passenger's tickets £1 10s each.

These tickets enable travellers to telegraph their arrival in England to their friends in Australia, immediately on arrival.

No fees charged

In consequence of the large number of messages sent through us, we are prepared to offer greater facilities to the public than any other company.

GREVILLE'S TELEGRAM COMPANY,
Greville's Rooms, Sydney and
at Melbourne, Adelaide, and Brisbane

Todd Corner

At the end of 1869, Todd had only a small staff at the Observatory (the Gazette suggests about 4), and with them he was running a weather service, including the lighthouses (with detailed records Colony wide), astronomical observations, a time service, experimentation in electricity and championing STEM whenever he had the chance (I don't think surveying was time consuming at that point). In addition to that he was running the telegraphic service, though I presume most of the operators may have been postal employees trained as telegraphers.

Then, in January 1870 he was appointed as the Postmaster General for South Australia which made him responsible for the work of upwards of 450 personnel. Then 6 months later he took charge of building the Overland Telegraph Line which added another 600 workers to his responsibilities. Quite the jump for this 45 year old.

OT1-150 Events

Northern Territory:

It was recently announced that Alice Springs Telegraph Station will have a hands-on telegraph demonstration. Presented by the Morsecodians, visitors will be able to get involved in the transmission and receipt of messages signalled by Morse Code. This announcement is well before the event to allow you to plan your travel if this interests you. It is scheduled for Friday 19-27 and is sponsored by N.T. Parks & Wildlife.

While in the Territory, you may want to do a short 3hour drive north to the Barrow Creek Telegraph Station which is planning to have a historic talk building display on 16 August 2022 10am-3pm, also sponsored by N.T. Parks and Wildlife

South Australia:

The Overland Telegraph: A 21st Century Planning Perspective. A lecture by Susie Herzberg OAM, sponsored by the Geographical Society of South Australia is scheduled for June 16 2022 at 5.00 pm in the Mortlock Wing of the State Library of South Australia. [<CLICK here>](#) for details

On the OT-150 Website

In his OT-150 website Library- [Telegram 7](#), Andrew Crouch explains the building process. Many of us believe that the job of a “Repeater Station” was to re-key every message coming down the line. Not necessarily explains Andrew:

“At the time, telegraph technology on overhead land lines required a facility to regenerate or boost the signal at about 300 kilometre intervals. This was not always necessary and, in fact, if the conditions were good along the full length of the line from Port Darwin to Adelaide, it was possible to transmit end-to-end without any delay or boosting. When boosting was necessary, it was achieved by telegraph operators at one or more intermediate points manually reading the weak signal and repeat transmitting the message in turn. Repeating was typically needed when signal strength deteriorated due to leakage of current from the wire across the insulators to the poles and ground. There were various contributors to leakage, including dust and spider webs which when moistened by rain formed an electrically conducting path. Occasionally lightning would cause fine cracks in an insulator which also accumulated dust and moisture.”

Keep in mind that all telegrams to Europe went through long lengths of undersea cables without being rekeyed. Derek also explains that the ‘locals’ also contributed to transmission problems:

“Aboriginal people played a hand as well in some areas – usually with the aim of breaking and retrieving the insulator shards for spear tips and the like. They also found the cast iron footplates for the iron poles useful for making tomahawks, and the binding wire for crafting fishhooks. Within a few years it had dawned on the OTL staff that distributing “whitefella” tomahawks and fish hooks judiciously to friendly Aboriginal people might be advantageous to both parties, and after that wilful injury to the line [became] a rare occurrence.

Featured Images

The first image is an example of a ceramic insulator, favoured by Aboriginals, that held the wire atop each. The second image is an example of the wooden pins that slotted into the poles and allowed the insulator to be screwed on. The OT Line used about 36,000 of each of these, with the insulators sourced from Germany, despite the fact that the Franco-Prussian War was in progress at the time. The pins were made locally



*Insulator, Koster Pottery U-1156, ceramic/metal/wood, Koster Pottery, Adelaide.
Courtesy of the Powerhouse Museum*



Courtesy of [Jill O'Connell](#) on Pinterest

Do you realise

Despite the completion of the OT Line, there was still one vital telegraphic connection to be completed. It was the line across the Nullarbor to Western Australia which finalised a continent-wide telegraph network. The lack of water and the long distances were grave obstacles in its construction and it took almost 27 months to complete, the same amount of time it took to build the OT Line. One of the three sections was supervised by Richard Knuckey who oversaw work on the OT Line. Knuckey went on to serve as the Chief Officer at the Electric Telegraph Department in Adelaide.

The WA line was completed in December 1877 while a submarine cable connection to New Zealand was opened in 1876. This huge network gave meteorologists an opportunity to collect expansive, real-time data, developing their understanding of the very large weather patterns and phenomena that affected our part of the globe. Within 5 years, [synoptic charts](#) were being drawn at the Observatory on West Terrace that covered more territory than any being drawn in Europe or North America

Talk to us

The OT-150 Committee is very interested in hearing about the work of our community members. Please contact us with any material you have developed or discovered that you believe will be of interest, whether for the Newsletter or the website. info@ot150.net

Mac Benoy, OT-150 Coordinator