

# The Great Cable

THAT people could communicate with one another over thousands of miles, any other way than the U. S. postal service, was unbelievable—that they could do it under an entire ocean of water was unheard of. And people were astounded one hundred years ago on August 5, 1858 when Cyrus Field's trans-Atlantic Telegraph cable was successfully completed. Battling ridicule and hostility for twelve years, Field had finally proven that his dream of trans-Atlantic communication had a basis in reality.

That first cable worked intermittently for four weeks—and then failed altogether. But the important thing was

that it did work, and from then on it was a matter of time. By July of 1866 trans-Atlantic telegraphy had become a successful reality.

And New Hampshire can justifiably accept a small share of glory in this year's centennial observances of Field's great dream, for it was in the seacoast town of Rye that the final link of the first telegraph cable directly connecting the United States with Europe was laid in June, 1874. Previous cables ran between England and the Canadian Provinces, the messages then being relayed overland to the United States.

The Rye Cable was laid down by a

British firm—the Direct United States Cable Company—and for many years remained under their control. The first section ran from Ballinskelligs Bay, Ireland, to a point near Halifax, Nova Scotia—a total distance of 2,546 nautical miles. The final section covered the 450 mile distance between Halifax and Rye Beach.

That Europe was being connected with the United States in small town Rye was front-page news to New Englanders of 1874 and drew them by the thousands to the shoreline to watch the final operation. They came from all parts of the region by horseback, wagon and stage. Officials had



STRAWS POINT RYE BEACH N.H.  
TERMINUS OF THE DIRECT ATLANTIC CABLE COE LINE

[JUNE 27, 1874.]

ORIGINAL WOOD ENGRAVING DRAWN FROM NATURE, ENGRAVED AND PUBLISHED JUNE 27, 1874.

The gathering here denoted marked the

made elaborate preparations to celebrate the event—and even located two small cannons to fire salutes at the proper moment. The normally quiet town was alive with excitement.

But as the day wore on and a last minute delay held up landing operations, the crowd dwindled to a few score spectators, who patiently watched the maneuvers of the cable squadron in the distance. The cable-ship *Fara-day*, assisted by the steamers *Ambassador* and *Dacia* had finished the final sea-length of the cable as far as the Isles of Shoals and now the ships waited off the coast to help bring in the shore-end of the cable.

Finally, on Wednesday morning, July 27th the last section of cable was reeled out from the ships to a platform laid upon two steam launches—a tremendously tedious and difficult operation with fifteen tons of cable. About three o'clock that afternoon the launches brought their heavy burden to the beach which was now wild with

crowd had regained its lost proportions and happily greeted the Company's success with a final cheer.

But the excitement soon died down. The first transmissions weren't sent over the cable until September, and it wasn't until the next year, 1875, that the line was in full operation. The extra time was needed for extensive testing to insure against further delays.

Sixteen telegraph operators and technicians from England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales were sent over by the cable company to man the Straw's Point station. Many built permanent homes on Cable Road in Rye, and some of their descendants still live in the seacoast area today.

The original cable house, loaned to the cable company by Governor Straw's estate, still stands in Rye, now a summer home. The old instrument room, which contained sending and receiving equipment, was on the first floor. The upstairs was used for a li-

a "double key," and two reading and decoding messages as they flashed from the Mirror Galvanometer, one of the earliest receiving instruments. The mirror moved back and forth, flashing code signals in series of dots and dashes on the wall.

As is often the way with things very new or very rare, production was expensive so messages were extremely costly. The all-time record was during the first year of World War I when 30,000 words were sent over the cable. Although costs have changed, transmission time was roughly the same as it is today.

The peaceful life of the Rye operators was broken when the U. S. entered the First World War. German submarine activity off the coast was a little threatening, and the government called in eight Marines to guard the cable station. But the Marines were soon needed overseas and a group of Naval Reservists replaced the watch.

During this hectic time the American-owned Western Union Telegraph Company took control of the cable as agreed in a long-term lease with the British firm signed in 1911. The understanding was that Western Union would operate the station, while Great Britain would maintain upkeep of the cable itself. However, the British government was busy with its own problems and couldn't keep up with necessary repairs, with the result that the cable ceased operations in 1918.

The last superintendent of the Rye station was Mr. Patrick W. Rieb who was one of the original company men sent over from England and whose son, Mr. Fred J. Rieb, still lives on Cable Road. The elder Mr. Rieb spent over 51 years in the cable service, 37 of them at the Rye station. His son, who is now retired, began work as an operator at the Rye house in 1913. Another former Rye operator, Mr. Edmund Watson, is also living and now makes his home in Hampton.

The Rye cable station was officially closed in 1921, ending almost a half a century of successful operation and marking the end of a pioneer era in international communication.

Today, if one strolls along Rye Beach, he can see the remains of the great cable buried in the sand near the famous "sunken forest"—where almost a century ago cannons boomed and crowds cheered the underwater miracle.



Original crew of telegraphers came from British Isles, worked on Greenwich Mean Time. Cable house can be seen in background.

cheers and cannon roars. A trench had been dug for the cable near Straw's Point and many of the onlookers, even a few women, enthusiastically helped the crew drag the line above high-water mark.

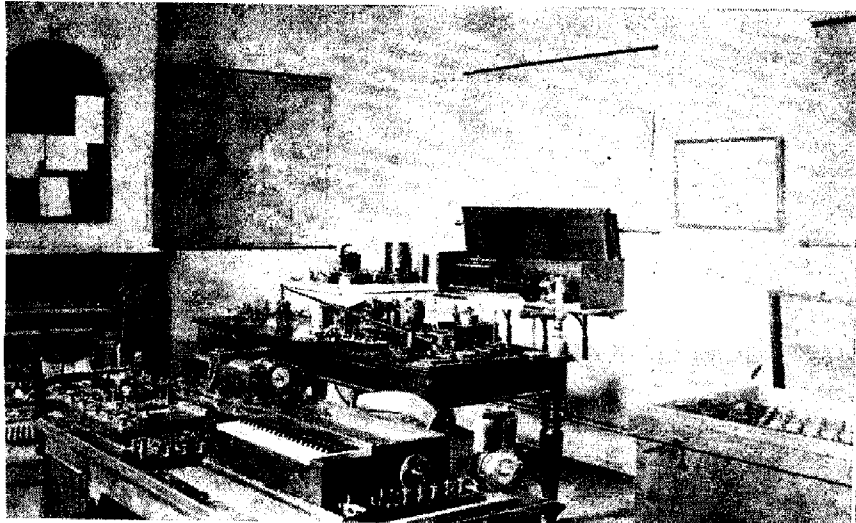
It was an hour's work to trench the cable and several more to make the final splicings off the Isles of Shoals. At last final adjustments were made, the shore cannon boomed approval and the *Ambassador* fired her own guns and shot blue rockets into the summer

brary, to store copies of all the messages sent over the cable, and for a pool-room—to play pool.

Local history has it that since the operators were employed by a British company, they worked on London time. Thus they arrived at work five hours earlier than anyone else in the Rye area. Whether they limited their social activities or just slept less is an unanswered question.

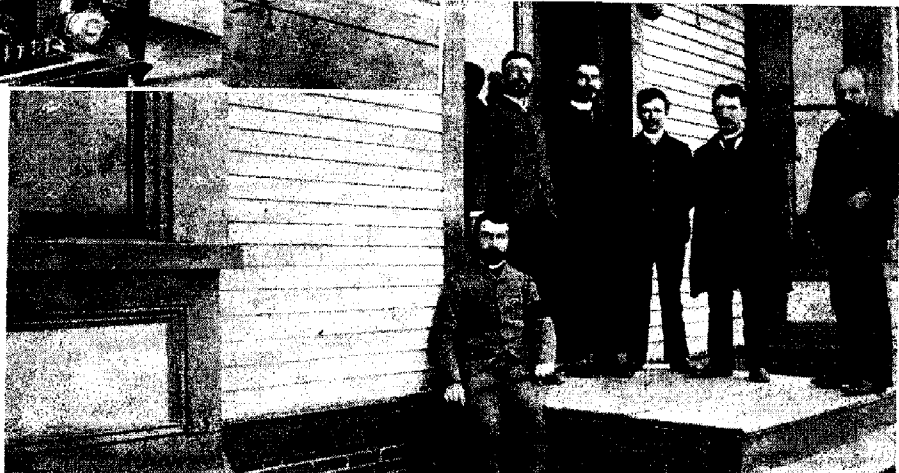
Ordinarily, four men were on duty at all times, two sending messages on

Remains of first cable to span Atlantic are still visible today, especially at low tide. Stumps are part of the "sunken forest," salt hardened and old beyond White Man's memory.



Original instrument room as it appeared in 1875. Apparatus at that time was tremendously cumbersome, required four men on duty at all times.

Later crew at cable house still had several British subjects in its ranks. Cable remained in operation until latter days of World War I.



HLES wishes to thank  
S. Rieb and Abbott