**westernunionhistory**

**Western Union History**

**A Data Communication Historical Series**

**By Bob Pollard**

**A Brief history of the Western Union Telegraph Company:**

Time-line:

1851: A group of businessmen in Rochester, New York formed The New York and Mississippi Valley Printing Telegraph Company, Western Union's predecessor company.

1856: The New York and Mississippi Valley Printing Telegraph Company changes its name to The Western Union Telegraph Company, signifying the union of ‘western’ telegraph lines with eastern lines into one system, followed by the acquisition of a series of competing telegraph systems.

1861: Western Union completes the first transcontinental telegraph line, providing fast, coast-to-coast communications during the U.S. Civil War.

1866: Introduces the first stock ticker, providing brokerage firms with New York Stock Exchange quotations.

1870: Launches a time service, helping to standardize time nationally. Western Union will hold the distinction as ‘The Nation's Timekeeper’ for nearly a century.

1871: Western Union Money Transfer® service was introduced and became one of the company's primary business.

1884: Western Union is selected as one of the original 11 stocks tracked in the first Dow Jones Average.

1914: Introduces the first consumer charge card.

1923: Introduces teletypewriters, joining together branches and individual companies.

1933: Singing telegrams are introduced.

1935: The first inter-city facsimile service is introduced. Data Communication Switching Systems initiated.

1943: Pioneered the first commercial inter-city microwave system.

1958: Introduces Telex, a direct-dial consumer to consumer Tele-printer service.

1960s & 1970s developed and installed digital message switching computer systems.

1964: Inaugurates the use of a transcontinental microwave radio beam system, replacing many poles and wires, spanning the continent.

1970: Western Union Mailgram messages offer next-day delivery via postal service.

1974: Launches Westar I, the first domestic communications satellite for America.

1982: Western Union is the first company with five satellites in orbit.

2007: Western Union sold most of its business activities and remains primarily in the money transfer and money order business.

**Narrative History:**

When Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph, transmitted the first telegram approximately 150 years ago, he set in motion a series of events that revolutionized the world’s social and economic life. Before the light bulb and the telephone were invented, Morse had discovered the first practical use for electricity; helping people communicate beyond the barriers of time and space.

Morse learned the principles of electricity as an undergraduate at Yale and in 1832 while returning home after a tour in Europe he joined a shipboard conversation about the scientific wonder of the day, the recently invented electromagnet.

Morse quickly realized that if electricity could flash instantly along the length of a wire, by interrupting the current, he should be able to send signals representing a message over the wire.

Back in New York, while teaching art at New York University, Morse developed his idea. On September 2, 1835, Morse stretched 1,700 feet of wire from one classroom to another and succeeded in transmitting signals, but not a message, from a crude sending instrument at one end of the wire to a receiver at the other end. The experiment impressed Alfred Vail, a student at the university, who persuaded his father to back Morse and he spent long hours working to improve the telegraph at his father’s Speedwell Iron Works in New Jersey.

Finally, on January 6, 1838, Vail asked his father to sit at one end of a long room and write out a message. His sentence, "A patient waiter is no loser”, was encoded, transmitted across three miles of wire stretched around the room, and successfully deciphered. Morse’s first code used dots and dashes representing numbers, which in turn corresponded to a list of words; later, at Vail’s suggestion, Morse simplified his code to dots and dashes representing the alphabet.

Morse demonstrated the telegraph before President Martin Van Buren in Washington. However, it was not until 1843 that Congress appropriated $30,000 to build an experimental telegraph line along the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad’s route from Washington to Baltimore.

Morse officially demonstrated the telegraph to members of Congress on May 24, 1844. In the old Supreme Court Chamber in the Capitol in Washington, D.C., with Dolly Madison, Henry Clay and other dignitaries looking on, he tapped out his famous message: "What hath God wrought!" The message was flashed to Alfred Vail at the railroad depot in Baltimore. That first telegram sped 40 miles in an instant; the age of telecommunications had begun.

On April 8, 1851, a group of Rochester, New York businessmen organized Western Union’s predecessor company, the New York and Mississippi Valley Printing Telegraph Company. It started operation with 550 miles of wire and the license to use a printer invented by Royal E. House. The device, resembling a small piano, was the first to print letters, numbers and punctuation marks instead of Morse code. Although it had only limited use then, the House printer was the forerunner of the teletypewriter terminal. These early devices that printed dots and dashes were eventually abandoned, as a telegrapher could transcribe messages faster just by listening to the clicks of a sounder.

When the new telegraph company began operation, it was one of 50 that crisscrossed the northeastern states. There was no interconnection of lines; messages were transferred physically from one company to another, and rates were as high as $20 for a telegram.

The New York and Mississippi Valley Printing Telegraph Company set out to establish a unified and nationwide efficient telegraph service. During its first five years, the company acquired 11 other companies’ lines operating in five states north of the Ohio River, subsequently connecting its eastern network with a telegraph line running as far west as St. Joseph, Missouri.

On April 8, 1856, the name of the company was changed to The Western Union Telegraph Company, signifying the union of ‘western lines’ into one system.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, fast communication with the far West became essential. The only rapid communication beyond the Missouri River was by pony express, which took 10 days to carry telegrams and mail from St. Joseph to Sacramento, California.

Although a telegraph line was needed, it seemed impossible to string a 2,000-mile line across the plains and over the rugged Rockies. Other telegraph companies refused to join in the undertaking and President Abraham Lincoln told Hiram Siley, Western Union’s president "I think it is a wild scheme. It will be next to impossible to get your poles and materials distributed on the plains, and as fast as you complete the line, the Indians will cut it down."

Engineers said the project would take 10 years. But Edward Creighton, a young, resourceful Western Union Agent, crossed icy rivers and desolate plains to survey several routes. Finally, he selected one that generally followed the pony express route and organized two teams of builders, one under his leadership to work from the East and another, under James Gamble, to work from the West.

The first poles were set up on July 4, 1861. Creighton and Gamble managed to persuade the Indians that the telegraph was the voice of the Great Spirit Manitou and should not be harmed, and during the same period Brigham Young arranged for Mormon contractors to haul poles hundreds of miles across the treeless plains. Each day, following heavy supply wagons and herds of cattle, each team of builders stretched the line 10 or 12 miles farther across the nation.

The strands of iron wire, uniting the nation in rapid communication for the first time, were joined at Salt Lake City on October 24, 1861 only 112 days after the project began. Two days later, the U.S. government stopped its pony express service and started using the newly constructed telegraph lines to speed messages across the continent.

When the telegraph had reached Salt Lake City from the East on October 17, 1861, Brigham Young immediately wired President Lincoln that, despite rumors, Utah had not seceded. Similarly, the first transcontinental telegram, sent to President Lincoln by Chief Justice Stephen J. Field of California, assured Lincoln that California would "stand by the Union...on this, its day of trial."

From the military telegraph office near the White House, where Lincoln received war dispatches daily, from the telegrapher’s tents that dotted the battlefields of the South, and from offices in the mining towns of Nevada and California, the telegraph played an essential role in sustaining the war effort and holding the Union together.

The first transatlantic telegrams, exchanged between Queen Victoria and President Buchanan in 1858, were carried on Cyrus Field’s pioneering undersea cable, which operated briefly and then failed within a few days. In 1864, wary of long underwater cables, Western Union promoted a telegraph line to Europe via Russian Alaska, under the narrow Bering Strait, and across Siberia to the capitals of Europe.

Along uncharted coasts, Western Union linemen began to set poles in the Alaskan wilderness, but the success of two new Atlantic cables ended the project in 1866. However, the enterprise produced an unexpected bonus. When Western Union’s Hiram Sibley was in St. Petersburg to negotiate routes across Russia, he told the Russian Premier that the Hudson Bay Company was charging Western Union nearly $ 6 million to cross their territory, the Premier exclaimed, "Why, we would sell you Alaska for nearly that price!"

Sibley quickly informed President Franklin Pierce. Relying on information gleaned from Western Union’s exploration of the mineral and timber rich territory, the United States purchased Alaska for $7,200,000 on October 18, 1867. A grateful Congress granted Western Union sweeping rights of way along military and post roads, including railroad lines.

Note: Later, Western Union did develop its own submarine cable technology. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, Western Union operated a fleet of cable-laying ships and pioneered many technical advances.

As Western Union extended its telegraph lines to keep pace with the westward push of settlers, railroads and industry, the Morse key and sounder became a familiar sight and sound throughout the United States. Gradually, Western Union absorbed more than 500 telegraph companies throughout the nation, growing so much by 1884 that it was included in the original 11 stocks tracked in the first Dow-Jones Average. As the company expanded, it developed new services to keep pace with the changing needs of the American public.

Moving its headquarters from Rochester to New York City in 1866, Western Union introduced stock tickers to speed New York Stock Exchange quotations to brokerage firms. Later, tickers became a popular office gathering spot; after the market closed, the tickers often flashed sports scores.

Western Union introduced one of its key services, Money Transfer, in October 1871. In peacetime and while the nation was at war, the American public has continued to rely on Western Union to wire funds wherever they are needed.

Until time was standardized nationwide, many companies obtained time signals from private observatories and sold them locally. Western Union began its own time service in 1870. In 1877, two years after Western Union moved into a brand-new 10-story building at 195 Broadway, New York City, it added a time ball at the top. The ball dropped at noon on a signal telegraphed from the U.S. Naval Observatory, and the ball mechanism also provided signals for regulating hundreds of clocks across the country and allowing New Yorkers for miles around 195 Broadway to check their timepieces against the dropping ball. Western Union’s Naval Observatory time was generally judged to be the ‘best’; in fact, the official start of Standard Railway Time on November 18, 1883, was signaled across the country with the decent of the Western Union time ball.

In 1886, working with the Self-Winding Clock Company of Brooklyn, Western Union began to rent clocks that it adjusted hourly by a telegraph signal, which was accurate to the second.

Huge Western Union timers installed at track meets were credited with spurring runners to set new records, and after the infamous ‘long count’ in the 1927 Dempsey-Tunney title fight, Western Union spot timers were hung over many boxing rings. With clocks that rang school bells, blew factory whistles and flashed signal lights, Western Union became ‘The Nation’s Timekeeper’.

During local and national emergencies, the Company would rush Telegraphers and linemen to the scene to speed the rapid transmission of news. In 1888, a Western Union lineman braved the torrents during the Johnstown flood, tools strapped to his back, to repair the wires and send early reports to the newspapers. In 1906, the first news to reach the East from earthquake-stricken San Francisco came over Western Union lines.

Western Union began using radio telegraph to reach passengers on ships at sea in 1904. During the sinking of the Titanic, Western Union’s radio-marine service helped save lives. Radio-marine operators also received the first word that the ship Morro Castle was sinking in flames off the New Jersey coast. Identifying three places where survivors might be landed, Western Union rushed linemen to all three sites and dispatched cashiers to pay out money wired to the rescued passengers.

In 1920, the first pictures to be telegraphed across the ocean were sent from England to America via Western Union cables. For decades, cable photos brought newspaper readers vivid images of the Jazz Age, the Great Depression, and the London blitz during World War II.

In major cities and small towns, Western Union messengers were a familiar sight. During the 1930s, a complete wardrobe department was needed to outfit the Company’s 14,000 messengers. Training was rigorous, and standards of dress and performance were strict. Many messengers later held executive positions; one even became Western Union’s president.

Providing service to the public was so important that messengers were often sent on unusual errands. They might be asked to deliver advertising samples, drop in daily on an elderly person, round up partners for bridge game, take children to the movies, or hold a place in line at a ticket window. Of course, the most important job was delivering messages.

Western Union had been offering such low rates to the fledgling Associated Press that for many years it handled nearly all of the wire service that the press required. In the 1920s the Company began to station telegraphers at ringside (boxing) or in the press box at baseball games where they would provide inning-by-inning reports to newspapers and radio stations. Few listeners realized that sports announcers were reporting the game while reading from a Western Union sports ticker at the radio station. Western Union also provided operators and terminals at political conventions and other public meetings so that reporters could file their dispatches as soon as events occurred.

A little point of interest: When radio announcers were reporting a game, reading from a sport ticker, they would hit a pencil against some object to provide the effect of a bat hitting a ball.

Early in the 1920s, when the rapid, easy-to-read teletypewriter began to replace the key and sounder, the Western Union teletypewriter network connected branch offices and individual companies, enabling them to communicate with the rest of the business community.

Western Union introduced telex, a direct-dial customer-to-customer ‘Teleprinter’ service in 1958, and acquired AT&T’s TWX eight years later.

One of Western Union’s most popular services was introduced in 1933, when an operator was asked to sing "Happy Birthday" to Rudy Vallee. Walter Winchell mentioned the birthday greeting in his column and, by popular demand, the Singing Telegram was born.

Over the years, Western Union research engineers continually advanced the technology of communications. As business increased their use of the telegraph, Western Union introduced multiplexed telegraphy, a way of carrying several messages on one line, and installed lines connecting workplaces directly to local telegraph offices. In 1935, Western Union developed desktop faxing to speed customers messages to its offices and also introduced the first intercity facsimile service. Also, Western Union installed carrier device systems in the late 1930s that allowed the sub-division of a Telephone line between many users.

The company’s first major private wire system was installed in 1939. Since then, Western Union continued to provide businesses and other organizations with a full range of dedicated, point-to-point and multipoint networks for voice, data, facsimile and broadcast use.

Building on wartime advances in radio communications, Western Union pioneered the first commercial intercity microwave system in 1945. It inaugurated its 11,000-mile transcontinental microwave system in 1964, replacing many of the poles and wires that spanned the continent.

Computerization brought the most dramatic innovations to Western Union’s services. Back in the 1930s at Western Union switching centers women on roller skates moved incoming perforated tape(s) from receivers to transmitters for relaying messages across the nation; in the 1940s and 1950s semi-automatic and automatic paper tape switching centers were placed in operation.

Utilizing the late 1950s computer technology Western Union designed, purchased and installed computerized message-switching centers in the 1960s, which included: Digital data networks and an advanced packet switching network to carry voice and data transmissions; Easy Link electronic mail service, Money Transfers and other financial transactions; Mailgram and other priority messages. In addition, Automatic Digital Network (AUTODIN) switching systems (early1960s thru 1970s) were installed for the Department of Defense.

Note: Over the years because Western Union networks have always met the government’s stringent standards of ‘the four nines’, or 99.99 percent reliability, Western Union was continuously chosen to provide communications for the Department of Defense, link thousands of offices of the civilian agencies of the Federal government, and supply microwave communications for various defense and intelligence agencies.

The Federal Reserve Bank used a Western Union information network to connect member banks to a central computer center, and other Western Union networks helped law enforcement agencies exchange data; other networks provided weather and flight information to pilots for the Federal Aviation Administration, and tracked snow and rainfall information in Western states.

In 1970, Mailgram® messages, flashed across the country by wire and delivered with the next business day’s mail, were introduced, and they quickly became popular for social and commercial use. For business customers, Western Union sends hundreds of thousands of Mailgram messages quickly and simultaneously. It also introduced other priority messages for two-and three-day delivery.

Western Union added satellite communications, launching Westar® I, America’s first domestic communication satellite, in April 1974. By 1982, Western Union had become the first U.S. Company to have five satellites in orbit.

The satellites were representative of giant microwave relay stations in the sky, which was the equivalent of hundreds of land-based microwave relay points spaced about 30 miles apart. For many years Western Union handled messages, data and graphics for major publishers, broadcasters and corporations for delivery across the nation, via the Westar satellites.

Western Union also built large central telephone bureaus, where Mailgram, telegram and Money Transfer services are available via a toll-free call. Around the clock, every day of the year, hundreds of operators receive a constant stream of messages from the public and from Western Union agents. They answered each call and routed each message to its proper destination.

In 1987, Western Union completed a comprehensive financial restructuring, with a subsequent recapitalization in 1990. It divested itself of its satellite fleet, its transmission-oriented businesses, and its telex and electronic mail services.

Today, Western Union having sold the majority of their business focuses primarily on financial services (money transfers) and priority message services.

Below are a few signs used by Western Union over the years. The six signs displayed with the yellow background illustrate the sign changes from about 1960 forward, ending with New Valley Corporation.

