Telegraphy and the downfall of the Kelly Gang

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Abstract

Four historical vignettes are provided from the period 1875 to 1880 from the Proceedings of the Telegraph Electrical Society of Victoria – the lineal antecedent of today’s TelSoc (Australian Telecommunications Society). The extracts cover Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone, Telegraphy at the downfall of the Kelly Gang, the speed of the Morse system, and the curious phenomenon of ‘Fighting by Telegraph’.

Introduction to the historical extracts

Peter Gerrand’s article in the June issue of the *Australian Journal of Telecommunications and the Digital Economy* (Gerrand 2014 [6]) traced the opening of the first telegraph office in the Southern Hemisphere back to Melbourne, Australia on 3rd March 1854.

Twenty years later in 1874 (and two years before Alexander Graham Bell patented the telephone), several like-minded telegraph workers and country postmasters formed the Telegraph Electrical Society of Victoria. The purpose was for mutual discussion of day to day telegraph problems and the advancement of their technical and practical knowledge (Credlin 1938 [6]).

The Proceedings of the Society were published on a quarterly basis and lecture pamphlets were reproduced in newspapers of the day such as *The Argus*. This paper features four extracts from those Proceedings, which resonate into the modern era.

The first extract, entitled 'Novel Telegraphy in Canada' [7], was published in 1876.

It perspicaciously described Dr Bell’s invention of the telephone as ‘very satisfactory’ and ‘[it] will certainly be the greatest mechanical discovery since the telegraph’.

The second extract, entitled ‘Extermination of the Kelly Gang’ [8], was published in 1880.

It described two Posts and Telegraph personnel who attended the siege at Glenrowan. One bravely climbed a pole while bullets were flying to establish a telegraph connection to Melbourne, and the other relayed continuous
updates on the situation.

The third extract, entitled ?Speed of Working the Morse Instrument? [9], was published in 1875. It discussed the top speed of Morse messages on the busiest telegraph lines in New York, USA. Not to be outdone, the Victorian operators covering the Melbourne Cup demonstrated they could send messages at double that speed.

The fourth and final extract, entitled ?Fighting by Telegraph? [10], was published in 1880. It is a curious article describing the fighting by operators over telegraph lines, before reliable duplex systems were introduced.

These extracts were all published later in a Society paper entitled ?Centenary of Telecommunication Societies in Australia?, written by J.E. Sander for the Telecommunication Journal of Australia, the predecessor of this Journal, in 1974 (Sander 1974 [11]).

References


The historical extracts
Figure 1 ? Novel Telegraphy in Canada
THE EXTERMINATION OF THE KELLY GANG.

The Telegraph Service was not unrepresented at this terrible affair. Mr. H. E. Cheshire, who was acting as Post and Telegraph Master at Beechworth, volunteered, with Line-Repairer Osborne, to accompany the train which left that town on the morning of the 20th June for Glenrowan. They arrived there during the thick of the fray, and Mr. Osborne having, in a most plucky manner, climbed a pole while bullets were flying about him, communication was established with Melbourne, and Mr. Cheshire was enabled to keep the colony—indeed the neighbouring colonies also, for the excitement extended equally to them—informed of the progress of events until all was over. The Postmaster-General has expressed a high sense of the conduct of Messrs. Cheshire and Osborne in this affair. Messrs. D. Mickle and P. Cregan, operators from the Melbourne office, were also despatched to the scene of combat, but did not arrive there until the hotel had been burnt, and the dead and charred remains of the bloodthirsty Kelly gang had been taken from the smoking ruins of the hotel.

We are also glad to observe that Superintendant Hare, in his report on this affair, alludes to Mr. Saxe, of the Benalla Telegraph office, in the following complimentary terms:—“I would also bring under your notice the great services rendered by Mr. Saxe, Telegraph Master at Benalla. The police in the district found him always ready to assist them at any moment, day or night (Sundays inclusive), and he complied with everything he was asked to do most readily and cheerfully. I would therefore urge upon you the desirability of bringing his conduct under the notice of the hon. the Postmaster-General, with a view to his promotion in the service, as you are well aware, from your own personal knowledge, of the many services rendered to us by him.”
Figure 3 ? Speed of Working the Morse Instrument