

NCC's History

From a one-room office in the Ray Co-op Credit Union building, to providing our members with a modern communications network, Northwest Communications Cooperative (NCC) has prospered in many areas since it was incorporated in 1951.

In December of 1949, the first meeting was held in Williston to discuss forming a county-wide telephone system. An organizational meeting was held in Wildrose in July 1951, and Northwest Mutual Aid Telephone Corporation was born. Elected to serve as the first directors at that organizational meeting were: Arthur Johnson, Ray, President; J. Agnes Lucy, Powers Lake, Secretary; Edwin Dordahl, Hanks; Harvey Jacobson, Crosby; Alvin Anderson, Epping; Olaf Opedahl, Tioga; and George Bourdeau, Columbus.

The Articles of Incorporation were signed on October 19, 1951. The Cooperative's name was changed to Northwest Communications Cooperative at the annual meeting in Alamo in 1986.

Art Johnson, the first president of the Cooperative served in this capacity from 1951-1957. His successor, Wayne Johnson, held this position from 1957-1990. Arvin Larson of Ray is currently serving as president of the board.

Art Johnson was not only the first president; he was also the first manager of the Cooperative. Art managed the Cooperative from 1951 to 1953, and again from 1957 to 1986. Serving as manager from 1953 to 1957 was Orlando V. "Duke" Ellingson. Kenneth Lund, Jr., served in this capacity from 1986 to 2003. Currently serving as General Manager/CEO is Dwight Schmitt.

Dean Winkjer, formerly of Wildrose, became very involved in the telephone movement in 1949 and served as NCC's legal counsel from the beginning until June 1998. Mark Stenehjem of McKennett Stenehjem Forsberg & Hermanson in Williston is currently legal counsel.

Between 1951 and 1957, additional telephone companies were purchased to make up the 13 original exchanges operated by NCC. In 1953, the Epping Telephone Company, the Wildrose Mutual Telephone Company, the Williams County Mutual Telephone Company of Ray, the Williams County Farmers Mutual Company of Williston, the Farmers Northwest Telephone Company of Williston, and the Tri-County Telephone Company of McGregor, were purchased. In 1954, the Columbus, Flaxton and Lignite exchanges were purchased from North Dakota Telephone Co. Purchased in 1955 were the Larson Farmers Telephone Company. In 1956, the Grenora Telephone Company and the Bowbells Telephone Company were purchased, and in 1957, the Powers Lake Telephone Company was acquired.

The NCC headquarters building, located in Ray, began in a small one-room office in a building shared with another cooperative. In January 1954, the office was moved to the former Ray Post Office building on Main Street. While the headquarters office was located there for two years, a number of other farmer-owned exchanges were acquired, more staff was added, and upgrades were completed to all exchanges.

In the years to follow, NCC was making many changes to their services to provide needed technology to rural northwest North Dakota.

The first changes and updates to be made were concerning the telephone services provided to the customers. Between 1955 and 1960, all of the original 13 exchanges were converted to modern dial service. To follow this change, between 1970 and 1975, all of these exchanges were converted from party lines to private line service.

As progress continued, it was apparent that a new headquarters building must be sought. In November 1956, the headquarters was moved to the Charlson Motor Company building on Score

Street in Ray. The building was remodeled to accommodate the needs of the company and served as headquarters until 1966. In June 1964, discussions began for a brand new office facility. Les Blake was hired as the architect for the project on August 3, 1964, and sketches were presented to the board on March 23, 1965. The project was completed and the move to the new office building took place in February 1966.

Once the telephone system was up to date, NCC made another change in the services they were able to provide. In 1981, NCC became the first telephone company in ND to operate a Cable TV system. This system delivered a basic channel line up to customers in the towns of 10 exchanges including: Bowbells, Columbus, Crosby, Flaxton, Grenora, Lignite, Powers Lake, Ray, Tioga and Wildrose.

In 1985, NCC was the first telephone company in ND to have an all digital switching and transmission network.

In 1985, NCC became the first telephone company in ND and the first REA borrower in the US to operate a single mode fiber optic cable system.

In 1990, NCC became the first telephone company in the United States to own and operate a Wireless Cable TV system. The MMDS system operates from two towers located near Epping and Bowbells, which bring a basic Cable TV line up to customers who may not otherwise have these services because of their rural location.

The cooperative once again outgrew its office facilities and an addition to the east of the existing structure was completed in the spring of 1991. The new area housed a reception area, office for the general manager, office manager, board room, training room, and work areas for other office personnel. The main entrance was moved from the north side of the building to the northeast corner. Some remodeling of the existing building was also done at this time. An Open House celebrating 40 years of service and the new office was held on July 31, 1991.

On June 1, 1996, the Crosby and Tioga exchanges were purchased from U S West.

In 1996, NCC installed a Siemens EWSD digital switching system in all 15 exchanges. With this new digital switch, the latest up-to-date communications services were available to northwest ND.

In 1997, NCC became an Internet Service Provider with 56k dial-up service. In 2000, ADSL became available and NCC was able to provide High Speed Internet service to customers located within 3 miles of each central office. In late 2000, NCC became the first telephone company in ND to offer High Speed Wireless Internet through the MMDS system. Over the years, NCC has found numerous additional ways to bring High Speed Internet to all NCC customers, including a Charles system which extends ADSL, Waverider which is a wireless product used near Crosby and in Williston, and satellite Wildblue Internet.

In 2001, an OC-48 fiber-optic ring was completed to expand the back-bone capabilities of NCC. The back-bone created additional bandwidth capacity for the increased broadband needs of customers and to ensure redundancy in the network.

Noonan Farmers Telephone Cooperative was purchased in 2005, making the present day total of 16 telephone exchanges. Cable TV was also brought to customers in the town of Noonan.

With the addition of new technologies, it again became obvious more office space at the headquarters in Ray was needed. Tentative remodeling plans began in 2004 and construction began in the fall of 2006. Kraft Construction of Minot was selected as General Contractor. Other subcontractors included Williston Woodworks and Minot Sash & Door for cabinets, desks, and woodwork; MonDak Heating & Plumbing for mechanical; A&F Electric for electrical; and Springan Furniture of Stanley and Hegstad Furniture of Tioga for carpet. The remodeling provided a larger area for the Networking Department, an expanded break room which would seat all employees comfortably for staff meetings. The front office was opened up to create a more relaxed and welcoming customer service area. An Open House was held on August 10, 2007.

After plant upgrades to the Cable TV system, NCC introduced Digital, High Definition and Movie channels in February 2007. Over 75 digital channels of variety, family, regional sports, and music were added with the Digital package. Premium movie packages included numerous channels of Showtime, Starz/Encore, Cinemax and HBO. The High Definition started out with a handful of channels and has now grown to over 30 in HD, including local CBS, NBC, ABC, Fox, and PBS. NCC began selling and installing High Definition television sets and leasing HD Digital Video Recorders and HD set top boxes.

In the spring 2007, NCC began a Fiber to the Home (FTTH) trial run in an area of the rural Wildrose exchange, which affected approximately 16 subscribers. The trial run allowed NCC to experiment with the methods and process of a FTTH project. GM/CEO Dwight Schmitt stated that Wildrose was a good area to test FTTH because the copper needed to be replaced. In April 2008, the NCC Board of Directors voted in favor of a tentative 10 year FTTH build-out plan for rural areas and towns with the oldest copper and areas currently not served by NCC Cable TV. The plan will be reviewed annually to determine the FTTH project area(s) for each year. With the assistance of Central Trenching Inc. in Minot, FTTH construction began in the entire Epping exchange, including Wheelock, JV Thomas and Longcreek areas. The Epping FTTH project included approximately 157 miles of fiber optic cable and affected about 220 customers. Construction plans for 2010 are planned to begin in the spring for rural Crosby and a portion of Round Prairie exchanges. This project will consist of approximately 221 miles of fiber and about 184 customers. In following the NCC motto of 'bringing modern communication services to northwest North Dakota,' FTTH will allow NCC to provide customers with unlimited bandwidth capacity for Voice, Video, and Data. Bandwidth capacity is becoming essential for applications being used by customers today. In addition to replacing aging copper, FTTH is bringing advanced communication services including Cable TV, High Definition TV, and faster High Speed Internet speeds to rural areas that were previously not able to receive it.

Bundles were introduced in July 2007 for residential customers. NCC customers were able to bundle Local Telephone, Unlimited Long Distance, Cable TV and High Speed Internet for discount pricing.

After 25 years of use, the black and red Northwest Communications logo was retired to the archives and NCC introduced a new logo. The new logo was featured at the 2008 Annual Meeting in June. The logo's colors of green, blue and black represent northwest North Dakota's major resources including agriculture, water and oil. It also features the communications company that NCC has become and is moving towards in the future, by providing Internet, Wireless, Voice and Cable TV. The NCC logo reflects the cooperative's mission to be the premier provider of these services to the people of northwest North Dakota.

January 2008, NCC announced that it would soon be offering Wireless Phone Service. NCC joined forces with two adjacent cooperatives, Nemont and SRT, in an effort to offer regional and nationwide calling plans, unlimited texting and data to NCC cooperative customers. Five towers were built, and seven became operational in Burke County by July 2008. NCC began offering service to cooperative customers in Burke and Mountrail counties in October 2008. By October 2009, 18 towers with PCS equipment were providing wireless phone service throughout the NCC service area. An additional 5 towers near Grenora, Zahl, Blacktail, Hwy 1804 and Round Prairie are scheduled for construction in early 2010. A Wireless Phone service allowed NCC to become one of the few telecommunications companies who are offering the Quad Play, including Voice, Video, Data and Wireless services to customers.