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Remarks by John A. Squires — 150 years of Alexander Graham Bell's telephone patent

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Remarks as written

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150 years of Alexander Graham Bell's telephone patent

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Good afternoon and thank you Jason for that kind introduction.

I'm honored and humbled to be here and share with our stakeholders, sponsors, honored guests, web viewers and even descendants of the great Alexander Graham Bell himself, as we celebrate one of the true giants, one of the greatest inventors and patent holders in history.

Since our nation's very inception, innovation has been one of the fiercest drivers of our cultural heritage, as the irresistible force of American ingenuity inexorably pushes and pushes back on the frontiers of science, technology, and knowledge — A manifest destiny fueled by the fires of genius, as integral to our American identity and our prosperity as freedom itself.

The spirit of innovation is the spirit of America. And nowhere is it more evident than at the USPTO, America's Innovation Agency.

We're here today of course because of Mr. Bell's world-changing inspiration and perspiration resulting in the invention of the telephone, and his resulting U.S. patent which transformed the world of telecommunications. In 1876, almost exactly 150 years to the day, he made the first phone call from another room to his assistant.

And with just nine words — “Mr. Watson, come here; I want to see you” — Mr. Bell’s simple, vocal request made history as the first words ever spoken by humans over a wire. Literally, utterly remarkable.

Flash forward to the future, what no one could have predicted then, how the world would change now that distance was no longer a barrier to language, time was compressed, and what his modest yet profound oral request would evolve into, today.

Including… that ubiquitous wireless device society could not function without, over eight billion of them, the smartphone.

Now, smartphones of course are portable mini-computers and, yes, they are 150 years removed from Mr. Bell’s invention, but these mini-computers still serve the rudimentary function of transmitting speech.

You see, invention is like a chain reaction — a butterfly effect..

One person’s inspiration will spur another’s curiosity, and then further innovation and more curiosity, and so on, and so on and so on.

And that’s the beauty of both our system and our agency — disclosure for exclusivity, make the patent bargain and society advances. Alexander Graham Bell understood this, lived it, embodied it, and seized with the muse of innovation, went on to successfully invent additional societal marvels, like Graphophone, an improved version of the phonograph that could record and play back sound. An enhanced version of Edison’s 1877 phonograph.

Mr. Bell was a remarkable, remarkable man, a remarkable American, becoming a naturalized citizen in 1882. In total, he came to hold 30 patents.

And only a few years after that first call, Mr. Bell made the first transcontinental phone call — again to Watson — from New York City to San Francisco.

Distance conquered.

Time tamed.

History made.

Remarkable also, the effect that his U.S. patent had in launching an industry that dominated the world. You see, America’s Founders did something extraordinary, something that no other country had done: They enshrined protection for inventions directly into the text of our nation’s charter — Article I, Section 8, Clause 8. The USPTO is one of the oldest missions in our federal government. Before there was a Treasury Department, before there was a Department of State, before there were most of the institutions we now take for granted — there was a foundational commitment to invention.

In 1790, President George Washington signed the first U.S. patent. Thomas Jefferson served as our first patent examiner. From the birth of the Republic, innovation has been central — part and parcel of the American experiment itself.

And Alexander Graham Bell knew this, and because he knew this, he raced to patent-protect the fruits of HIS experiments. And armed with his patent, he had the full faith and credit of the U.S. government

backing his invention, attracted investment, built the necessary infrastructure and gave birth to the telecommunications industry as we now know it.

And in no small part, that's why we lovingly refer to the company he founded as Ma Bell, and Ma Bell's patents were most certainly born strong. How strong? Well, you don't have to take my word for it.

You see, competition at the time of Bell's invention was fierce, many scientists were experimenting with voice signals over wire to improve upon the works of Samuel Morse.

One such scientist was Ericsson's founder, Lars Magnus Ericsson — who just couldn't break into the market as a second comer because of Bell's patent and famously wrote a letter to his wife-and-business partner Hilda in 1885, about his frustration.

He wrote:

"However, the telephone area is not what we at home so eagerly expect, but mostly rather poorly, probably due to the fact that the patent conditions have made all competition impossible. Everything with the name Bell branches off the same tree and therefore all with common interests and purpose to control the telephone systems worldwide..."

Amazing. Ericsson's letter from 140 years ago demonstrates the power of born-strong patents, the foresight of our nation's founders and the genius not only of Bell's invention but of availing himself of the world's sturdiest backing to protect it.

Now, flash forward to today, you can still see the power of his invention, and the global infrastructure he launched.

Back to today's smartphone, and with the advent of it — again eight billion of them — many predicted a death knell for the landline.

They'd be wrong.

Rumors of the landlines demise appear to have been greatly exaggerated — to this day, there's still over 800 million landlines around the world.

There's no escaping the richness of the modern world we live in due to Mr. Bell's curiosity, fascination, and perserverence with sound.

And his patent that made it a reality.

Flash again to the future, and oddly enough, as we all have a love/hate relationship with our smartphones — it's okay, you can admit it — I have — but the hate part being that we think of them as distractions. Flash back again, 150 years ago, Mr. Bell also considered his early version to be a distraction and refused to even have a telephone in his study for fear that it would distract his scientific work.

Now, that got me thinking...a distraction then, a distraction now... We talked about the butterfly, chain reaction effect of innovation. Well, what if there had been no Alexander Graham Bell invention, no patent to secure it? Suppose Marty McFly had dialed Doc Brown's Delorian to circa 1844 and prevented Alexander Mellville Bell and Eliza Grace Symonds from falling in love?

No Alexandar Graham, no telephone.

Could we even imagine — and would we want to — a world without the telephone and the telephone patent? It's almost impossible — no invention and no patent disclosure to ever seed the idea into public consciousness or to protect his idea. And if we are able to get our heads around it — no Bell, no telephone — we're in a 2026 that's profoundly stunted in connectivity. You're probably not watching me right now on the web for starters. Without his 1876 spark of genius and the patent exclusivity around it, our world experience diverges wildly.

Communications tech might have stalled right then and there at enhanced telegraphs (Morse code evolutions) or pivoted to radio broadcasting for one-way mass media… but no bidirectional voice lines means no fundamental infrastructure for data piggybacking, packet switching, synchronous or asynchronous communications of any stripe.

And what about the butterfly effect of a null set: no telephone poles wiring up cities, no Bell System, no Bell Labs driving R&D, no AT&T birthing innovations like transistors or Unix. Society evolves around slower interactions — letters, in-person meetings, or visual signals — all at the expense of global immediacy and prosperity.

Okay, forget the left-brain loss, what about the right brain?

No "it's good to hear your voice." "Mom and Dad, it's a baby boy, it's a baby girl!"

No "I'm coming home."

No singing "happy birthday" over long distance. Speaking of singing, what would have become of the music industry? With no staticy connections, crooners and songwriters are supposed to what? Write odes maybe to smoke signals or even carrier pigeons??

No Garth Brooks "operator, you got to put me on through, I gotta send my love to Baton Rouge." No Jim Crocce "operator (That's not the way it feels)." No Glenn Miller Orchestra, "Pennsylvania 6-5000," which was the famous New York hotel's phone number… No Tommy TuTone, "Jenny 867-5309" (Well, maybe that's okay…). No Electric Light Orchestra, "Telephone Line." No "Ma-Ma-Ma Belle" (clearly Jeff Lynne had a thing for phones). No "You had me at hello." No Adele super ballad "Hello." No Big Bopper, "Hellooo, Baby." No Stevie Wonder, "I just called to say I love you."

No thanks. I'll Back to the Future right here, right now in 2026, thank you very much, where we'll celebrate 150 years of a marvel and a man without whose brilliance we wouldn't have such enriched lives. And celebrate we shall.

Our event today is the first of an exciting number of programs and activities we have planned at America's Innovation Agency for the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. And remarkably, and how fittingly, Bell received his patent the same year the United States celebrated its 100th birthday in the summer of 1876. And in that year, he famously demonstrated his new invention before a crowd at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia.

Since his first spoken words, the telephone has emerged as a ubiquitous form of communication in our daily lives and in our most important and cherished moments. He — literally — forever changed the world.

Now, I'll turn over to the unveiling of our Alexander Graham Bell inventor trading card. First, I'd like to thank the following individuals for making this card possible: Joyce Ward, Roberto Ortiz, Pierre Georges, and Paul Ehlke.

The Inventor Collectible Trading Card Series started in 2012 and is a collection of cards featuring inventors and their notable inventions used to inspire future innovators. This card will be part of our Celebration of America's 250th Birthday Collection. So, I'm thrilled to honor one of the greatest inventors of all time, Alexander Graham Bell, by unveiling his inventor collectible trading card today.

Thank you.

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