



# Western Electric

## The Hawthorne Works

On September 14, 1902, Western Electric purchased 113 acres of prairie land west of Chicago in an area known as "Hawthorne" [now Cicero] to build the manufacturing arm of the Bell Telephone System. The rural Hawthorne Works plant became a self-sufficient city, with a hospital, fire brigade, laundry, greenhouse, a brass band, running track, tennis courts, gymnasium, an annual beauty pageant and a staff of trained nurses who made house calls.

In 1913, Western Electric developed the high vacuum tube, thereby ushering in the electronic age. The company subsequently invented the loudspeaker, public address systems, radar, brought sound to motion pictures, and most importantly, the transistor for which Bell Labs researchers won the Nobel Prize. Hawthorne was also the cradle of industrial psychology, with a series of experiments that began in 1924.

In 1915, Western Electric was associated with one of the worst accidents in Chicago history, when the *Eastland*, a vessel filled with Hawthorne Works employees and their family members attending the company's annual outing, capsized at its dock in the Chicago River, killing more than 800 people.

By 1917, the Hawthorne Works facility employed 25,000 people, many of them Cicero residents of Czech or Polish descent, who produced telephones, cable and every major telephone switching system in the country. In 1900, 676,733 Bell telephone stations were owned and connected in the country; by 1910, 3 years after Hawthorne Works opened, these 25,000 employees produced 5,142,699 telephones and by 1920, 11,795,747 Bell telephones. Over 14,000 different types of apparatus were manufactured at the plant to provide the telecommunications infrastructure for this exponential growth. During the early years of the plant into the 1920's, Western Electric also was a major producer of household appliances.

In the early forties, on the eve of World War II, roughly 90 percent of demand for Western Electric's products came from one customer: the Bell System. By 1944, 85 percent of demand for Western Electric's products came from the federal government, for which the company provided more than 30 percent of all electronic gear for war.

The men and women of Hawthorne Works were the men and women of America representing all cultures, demonstrating the urge to learn, grow and prosper. Hawthorne's giant buildings and equipment were just concrete, brick and metal. Hawthorne's heart was its people. Morton College dedicates this Museum to those 45,000 individuals whose labor profoundly improved our quality of life.

# *Western Electric*

## *Beginnings / Endings*

---

The Western Electric Corporation was founded in 1869 and held the patents of telephone pioneer Alexander Graham Bell. The goal of the company was to produce and operate the telephone and telegraph system of the United States, the Bell System, and their primary equipment manufacturing plant, the Hawthorne Works founded in Cicero in 1904. By 1917, the Hawthorne Works facility employed 25,000 people, many of them Cicero residents of Czech or Polish descent, making it one of the largest manufacturing plants in the world. The Hawthorne Works dwarfed the town of Cicero whose population was 14,577 in 1910.

The Hawthorne Works was one of the most famous and most important factories in the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The complex reached its zenith during World War II when it employed 50,000 workers. The Hawthorne Works was exceptional for the benefits offered its employees in salary and extraordinary benefits. The average wage of an employee was considerably more than the average wage of other factory workers and was regarded as a place where you could maintain employment for your working life as well as a factory which would employ your sons and daughters for many years.

The initial components made at the factory included telegraph instruments, signal boxes, fire alarm apparatus and similar electrical components and devices. Over time, with a skilled

workforce meeting the demands of the telecommunications industry, the factory manufactured diverse products ranging from telephones, cable, switchboards, copper rod, pulp-insulated exchange and toll cable, relays, capacitors, sheet metal and ironwork and thin film circuits. When the needs of the parent company — AT&T — diminished because of the depression in the 1930's, the plant kept its workers employed by making "articles in general demand" from furniture to cigarette lighters under the "Make Work" projects. The goods were distributed at-cost through the company stores.

The Hawthorne Works employed not just the tens of thousands who worked at the plant, but through its sheer size, stimulated employment for thousands more who supplied the factory and met the needs of the employees.

In 1974, the Justice Department began antitrust proceedings to seek dismemberment of AT&T, which was the largest corporation in the world. Eight years later, AT&T abandoned two names which had been associated with the company for more than a century: Bell and Western Electric. The government ordered that AT&T forfeit use of the Bell name and logo to the operating companies (excepting the name Bell Laboratories). Western Electric disappeared as a separate entity when AT&T restructured according to its new competitive situation.

The Hawthorne Works factory shut its doors in 1984.

It was the end of an era.

## *Contacts*

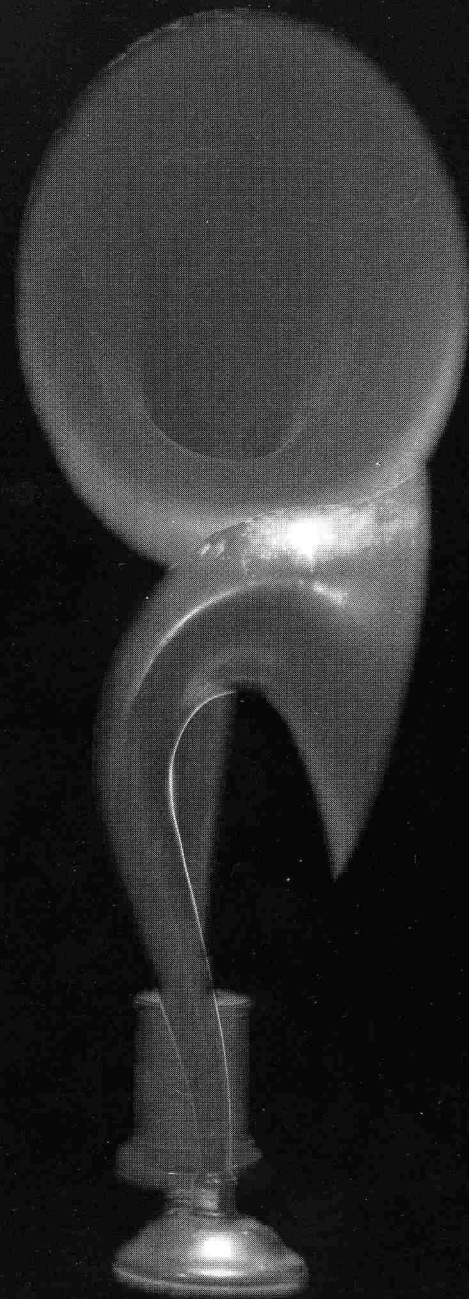
For Programs, Tours and Research Services:

Promilla Bansal, Coordinator  
Hawthorne Works Museum  
(708) 656-8000, Ext. 429  
mortonreference@yahoo.com

For Questions about Museum or Donations:

Rebecca Schreiner, Director  
Hawthorne Works Museum  
(708) 656-8000, Ext. 322  
r.schreiner@morton.edu

Morton College  
3801 South Central Avenue  
Morton College, Illinois 60804



*Hawthorne*  
M U S E U M

# Hawthorne Works Museum

In 1908, 25,000 local Chicago residents, many of whom were new immigrants of Czech or Polish descent, began working at Western Electric's new Hawthorne Works manufacturing plant in Cicero, Illinois. The rural Hawthorne Works plant became a self-sufficient city with 100 buildings, a hospital, fire brigade, laundry facilities, greenhouse, a brass band, running track, tennis courts, gymnasium, an annual beauty pageant and a staff of trained nurses who made house calls!

In 1900, only 676,733 Bell telephones existed in the country. By 1975, 45,000 Western Electric employees had manufactured 140 million phones and provided the country-wide infrastructure for this exponential growth. They manufactured the famous inventions of Bell Labs from vacuum tubes to transistors, sound for motion pictures, the loudspeaker, the microphone, the transcontinental phone line, radar and ship-to-shore equipment for the Signal Corps and fiber optics.



This Museum provides a lens through which you can view the rich industrial history of our community, and, by extension, the history of 20th Century America.

## Programs

- Guided tours for individuals or groups including schools.
- Tailor-made presentations and/or handouts on Museum topics such as American and local history, Bell Labs inventions, motivational and management psychology, history of immigrant life, the Hawthorne Works Studies, the Eastland Disaster, history of telecommunications.
- Assistance in incorporating Museum topics into educational curriculum.
- Research service.
- Traveling exhibits and presentations.

## Hours:

Monday – Saturday

10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Evenings and Weekends

By Appointment

