No Morse

The days of Western Union knocking on the door are over. But 4 those w/a talnt 4 abbrevs, there's still cellphone text messaging.

By Tom Standage, TOM STANDAGE is technology editor at the Economist and author of "The Victorian Internet."

IT WAS A SHORT, even telegraphic, message: "Effective January 27, 2006, Western Union will discontinue all Telegram and Commercial Messaging services. We regret any inconvenience this may cause you, and we thank you for your loyal patronage."

With these words, Western Union announced the death of the telegram, the original form of electronic communication that dates back 150 years. Like many people, I was saddened to hear of its demise. I was also surprised to learn that the telegram had survived as long as it had, given the availability of so many faster, cheaper and more convenient forms of electronic messaging.

The technology certainly had a good run. Officially, the first telegram sent in the United States was "WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT". It was transmitted on May 24, 1844, by Samuel Morse, inventor of the code that bears his name, along the experimental telegraph line he had constructed between Washington and Baltimore. At the time, Morse was thought by many to be deranged, and his scheme to send messages along wires was widely assumed to be some kind of scam. When the line between the two cities opened for business in 1845, it took in 1 cent in revenue in its first four days of operation.

But the technology soon took off, and by 1848 one writer was complaining that "no schedule of telegraphic lines can now be relied upon for a month in succession, as hundreds of miles may be added in that time … the whole of the populous parts of the United States will, within two or three years, be covered with net-work like a spider’s web."

By 1852, the United States had the most extensive telegraph network in the world. The lines hummed with telegrams whizzing to and fro, with the most fervent users — New York bankers — sending a dozen messages a day. Dozens of competing firms sprang up to build and operate networks, and in 1856 several of them merged to form Western Union. The company went on to establish a near-monopoly of the industry.

Such was the company’s domination that in 1870 its president, William Orton, told a congressional committee that the volume of telegrams being sent over his network was as good a means as any of measuring economic activity. “The fact is, the telegraph lives upon commerce,” he said. “It is the nervous system of the commercial system. If you will sit down with me at my office for 20 minutes, I will show you what the condition of business is at any given time in any locality in the United States.”

It was not just business that was transformed by the new technology. By the end of the 1870s, telegraph cables circled the globe, and messages that had previously taken months to deliver could instead be transmitted in seconds. This had a dramatic effect on news gathering, politics and international relations. As the telegrams flowed back and forth, it seemed to many that world peace would inevitably follow. “It is impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for the exchange of thought between all the nations of the Earth,” gushed one enthusiast.

Alas, the utopian visions inspired by the telegraph failed to materialize. At the height of the telegraph mania, the seeds of its eventual destruction had already been sown with the invention of the telephone in 1876. At first, the "speaking telegraph" (as it was known) was merely expected to speed up the transmission of telegrams by enabling telegraph operators to dictate messages to each other, rather than tapping them out in Morse code. But the telephone’s effect was far wider because, unlike telegraph equipment, anyone could use it — so it made sense to install direct telephone lines into homes and offices.

That said, early telephones could only be used over short distances, and even when long-distance calling became technically possible, it was horribly expensive. As a result, telegrams reached the height of their popularity in the 1920s and 1930s before slowly falling into a long, slow decline that ended with the final
Yet although the old-fashioned telegram has now passed into history, it has in a sense been reborn — in the
form of the short text messages that are commonly sent between cellphones: more than 7.3 billion of them every
month in the United States alone, according to industry figures.

Like telegrams, text messages force people to be brief and to the point, and they have spawned a curious
vocabulary of space-saving abbreviations, such as "c u l8r." That is not the only echo from the age of the
telegram.

If you have a Nokia handset, it will announce incoming text messages with three short beeps, two long ones,
and three short ones — Morse code for "SMS," or "short message service." A defunct 19th century technology
has, in effect, been reincarnated in the 21st century. The telegram is dead — long live the telegram.

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Barbed wires

Physicist Edward Teller's message to his colleagues at Los Alamos after the successful detonation of the first
hydrogen bomb:

IT'S A BOY

--

W.C. Fields to John Barrymore, who was on his deathbed:

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