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## Telautograph Forerunner to Modern Fax

By Neal McChristy 20-Aug-99

Over 100 years ago, you might have lived in New York and instantly received a handwritten faxed note from your grandmother in Boston.

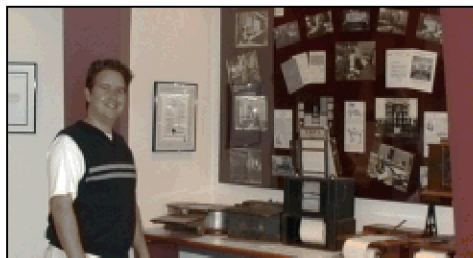
While most people consider the fax machine a modern invention, its use over telegraph wires started with the invention of the telautograph, which transmitted handwriting to distant points over a two-wire circuit such as telegraph wires.

The 1888 invention by the founder of Omnifax, Elisha Gray, was displayed at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, which featured electricity as a fairly new phenomenon of science.

It was in 1894 that George Tiffany invented the faster "Eureka" model, and commercial instruments were first installed that year at the American Bank Note Company. It was the start of a number of business uses, including in the sales world. And in the political world, results were instantaneously transmitted to the public on election night Nov. 7, 1916, when record crowds watched as President Woodrow Wilson was re-elected.

The earlier telautograph was both transmitter and receiver, but evolved into separate units in the 1930s. The transmitter wrote with a metal plate connected to a stylus, which was connected to [potentiometers](#).

The amplitude of the voltage was related to the position of the stylus on the metal plate, measured the set of potentiometers. On the receiving end, motors would move according to the voltage received from the transmitter. The receiver pen was held away from the paper by a metal bar. The operator wrote on the metal plate and motion on the metal plate on the transmitting end would cause the bar to drop and the pen to touch the paper on the receiver.



A "Telescriber" was an improved telautograph in the '40s. It was part of a growing technology today known as facsimile. The technique was also growing for use of a rotating cylinder and transmitter for transmission of photos by press service another fax-related technology.

In about 1956, long-range transmission using low-frequency

signals was introduced. There was also the introduction of the "Model D" series that used paper, instead of metal plates, for the transmitters and amplifiers in all receivers. Facsimile improved dramatically in the '60s with the introduction of the "Copyphone," which transmitted at a page per minute.

In 1979, the Telautograph Corp., formed in the '20s, introduced its Omnifax brand name. It was the year that the first thermal fax was introduced.

As fax machines became more common in the '80s and '90s, smaller, personal-unit machines began to be used. Telautograph became Danka/Omnifax in 1993, bought by Danka Business Systems PLC. The Danka fax machine business was sold to Xerox in June of this year.

**Editor's Note:** *The information for this article was compiled from information supplied by Omnifax, now owned by Xerox and headquartered in Austin, Texas. See the history of the Omnifax at the [Omnifax history pages](#).*

**Related Web sites:**

[Omnifax home page](#)

There is mention of demonstration of the telautograph at the [1893 Chicago World's Fair Tour narrative](#).

[Omnifax home page](#)

[RS&R News Online: "A History of Fax-Related Technology"](#)

[RS&R News Online: "Danka Sells Fax Business to Xerox"](#)

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