

Do You Know Who Invented the Telephone?

Documentation of an invention is an important step in the creative process. Without documentation, an inventor can lose his creative process. Without documentation, an invention can lose his right to claim a patent if someone contests the date of creation. Throughout history, there are stories of inventors who have fought to prove that they were the first. Perhaps no story is more illustrative of this than that of the invention of the telephone.

We are taught that Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone and the law upholds that fact. It is Bell who claimed the rights to the patent, a patent that was upheld in numerous court cases. However, a search on the Internet querying “who invented the telephone” returns a wide variety of other answers – Elisha Gray, Phillip Reis, Bourseul, Antonia Meucci, and many more.



So what is the answer? The truth lies with who holds the patent- Bell. Bell was the first to apply and complete the patent process. Meucci is credited with having applied also, but he apparently had been too poor to pursue a patent years before. Meucci died before his court case came up and the case was eventually dropped when the patent expired. A Reis machine was presented in one court case against Bell, but would transmit little more than a squeak. Elisha Gray’s claim was even closer- he had filed a patent caveat the same day that Bell applied for his patent. On September 12, 1878, Bell and Gray entered a lengthy patent litigation. As it usually goes in court cases, documentation is what saved Bell’s case.

In all, the Bell Company fought out thirteen lawsuits that were of national interest, and five that were carried to the Supreme Court of the United States. It fought out 587 other lawsuits of various nature; and with exception of two unrelated contract suits, IT NEVER LOST A CASE.

Bell, and the story of the invention of the telephone, is all about how multiple people can develop and work on an invention independently of each other. This story demonstrates that the one to go down in history as the inventor, is the one who gets the patent and can prove his or her case.

Questions:

1. Why did Bells patent hold up through time?
2. What other items do you associate with their famous inventors?
3. Are they the “real” inventors?