

Letter from Mabel Hubbard Bell to Alexander Graham Bell, July 24, 1907, with transcript

Copy of a letter written by Mrs. Alexander Graham Bell, commenting upon the proposition of Dr. Bell to form an organization (later known as the American Experimental Association) to aid in promoting the Art of Aviation. Read Monday Evening, July 29, 1907 July 24, 1907
Dear Alec:

I was very much pleased with your Association proposition. I don't see anything wrong with it. I do not see how your hands are "tied behind your back," seeing that you have 51% of the Association, that means you can always out vote the combined forces of the rest.

I have been wanting to see an Association of this kind formed for three or four years now. I have particularly wanted you to have associated with you some practical business man who would relieve you of the running of a large experimental workshop, and provide you with proper skilled labor. For years you have struggled along working under tremendous handicap in the want of intelligent assistants who were able to take your ideas and either carry out your instructions carefully and accurately, or help you by the devising of means of putting your apparatus together. For years Mr. McNeil was the only man you had who took an intelligent interest in your work and helped you by inventing little details that made your bigger ideas more easily carried out. Think of that 18 of November when our big storm came and there was no one to take advantage of it! Think how often your kites were broken by the rough handling they received, of the floats that were not water tight because your workmen had no technical knowledge. You have had common carpenters and slow unskilled, half educated boys when you should have had the best intellect and highly skilled labor obtainable. You have got along in spite of all these drawbacks and I believe you could continue to get on as you have done in the past, but how slow that was, how often 2 you have been disappointed when you expected success, by the carelessness

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and stupidity of men who could not understand what you were driving at. The telephone was finished, and perfected when it left your hands, so that little has since been done to it, but the telephone by itself could not, or at all events did not make its way by itself into the commercial world. The telephone itself cost a few hundred dollars and your attention for a few years, the phaterphonetia (?) surrounding it many thousands, and the employment of the best and most highly trained labor. I think you have reached the stage when such labor would save you much unnecessary time and effort, when you require help in perfecting details small in themselves and yet essential to practical success.

In Mr. Curtis you have it seems to me a man who is likely to help you in the two points you need skilled labor, knowledge of motor engines and practical business management. You lost all last summer, or at least you were not able to accomplish so much as you expected because you had no motor engine, and when at last one came there was no one who understood it, and you had to waste time learning how to use it.

Now Mr. Curtis might be willing to give up his present independent position as head of a rapidly growing prosperous business in order to be your assistant and employee, but I do not think you want to ask this of him. I do not think it would be what you want of him. I think you need more a sort of junior partner who will work with you, who will understand and appreciate what you are driving at and provide you with the means of carrying out your ideas.

There is a possibility of course that Mr. Curtis might want to go his own way rather than yours, but there is always disadvantages in every 3 road to accomplishment. You have tried struggling under the dead load of ignorance and carelessness and indifference, now let's try what you can do harnessed to knowledge, interest and an established position in the commercial world. He might perhaps want to go ahead a little faster than you wanted, which might be annoying, but you must take your chance of that, or the certainty of being held back and delayed by the ignorance of people who don't know how to work machines. It seems to me you may very properly go to a man in Mr. Curtis' position and offer him a

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share in an Association formed by you and of which you are the dominate influence and expect him to appreciate the offer, and be willing to pay for it by relinquishing a portion of his income, but I don't see how you can go to him and ask him to be your mechanical expert without offering him a very large salary, more than he can make by himself. This would not be an added care to you, because this would leave him but one among many employees, while by the other arrangement he might properly assume management of your laboratory under your direction and arrange for the bringing out of your inventions. Anyway the whole thing is left in your hands, the Association is terminable in a year.

As regards the other young men — the way I feel about them is that you have notebooks extending back for thirty years and teeming with ideas and inventions which no one man could hope to bring to commercial perfection in an ordinary lifetime. What then is to become of these brain children of yours? Neither of your sons-in-law possess the turn of mind or the educational training to bring them out. The utmost either could do would be to put them in someone elses hands, to select some others to do so. Why shouldn't you select the men yourself.

4

These young men may not be the best for your purposes, they are the only ones you know of. It is not accurate to say they have done nothing. They have done a great deal, for they have prepared themselves by many years hard and expensive training to help you and continue your work, to fit themselves to understand and appreciate what you want done.

They are on an altogether different plane from Mr. McNeil or even Mr. Bedwin, for to these the necessity of making a livelihood comes first, to them it is secondary. Their chief desire and great ambition is to be the heirs of your ideas, you can hardly think of the other two in that light. They are your workmen, executors of your ideas. Mr. McNeil is a little more, he has assisted you by devising means of carrying out your ideas, but he hardly possesses the training or the business knowledge that would enable him to take an embryo invention and carry it to perfection and then put it on the market. I don't know that these young

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men can do it, but they have come forward to try, and they are the only ones who have. You want therefore to encourage them and give them every opportunity to go ahead and show what they can do. The way therefore is to show confidence in them and to treat them generously, it is not a question of dollars and cents but of your long experience and need of help against their youth, enthusiasm, practical training and eagerness to help you and be associated with you. What they want is association with you, quite apart from any salary. What the workmen want is salary first, Association afterward. They are willing to wait for pecuniary profit, the others care more for good present salaries. It is always within your means to show appreciation of their faithfulness by giving them shares in the profits. They would therefore naturally come in to the business company which is to exploit your inventions 5 when the Association has brought them to the practical stage. It seems to me very proper therefore to reserve the Association to yourself, your partner and the trained technical school graduates whose chief object is the developing of ideas and inventions, and to whom salaries are but a means of existence meanwhile, and to bring your workmen in when there are profits to be divided. The Association is not for the division of profits, but for the division of work, the coming together for consultation of the master, his junior partner and his disciples.

To say that the Association presupposes your giving away the laboratory and your work of fifteen years seems to me absurd, in the first place the agreement is for only one year, and you retain control of everything, on the other hand you want to inspire confidence by showing confidence.

My own idea of the way to spend the money was for you to assign the young men some special feature or department of your work, give them a certain amount of money from the fund to carry on their experiments or investigations and in this way test their ability to carry on your work and to stimulate their ambition to put forth their best effort in your service, you retaining the general oversight and control of the line of work, at the same time leaving them at liberty to devise ways and means of best carrying out the work assigned to them.

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It would not be a question of what have you done, but of what can you do? In order to test this they must have a certain amount of money to spend and liberty of action, and yet they must be all bound together and under your direction and subject to your desires.

The only feature of the Association as you outlined that I did not like was the putting a price on your service, and one lower than Mr. Curtis. 6 Your services, like the value of your sheep cannot be estimated in dollars and cents.

My idea would be to have all your workmen specially trained and skilled in their trades, and as it is difficult for you to go around and find the best men, it would be well to have some one whose business it would be to seek for and engage such men, whether skilled carpenters, engineers or graduates of Institutes of Technology. I had not thought of Mr. Curtis when offering my share. I had hoped Charlie could find some business man to take all this burden off you and provide you with the help you needed, but Charlie can't or won't and who do we know better? Of course if you prefer to keep the whole thing in your hands you are perfectly competent to do so, but it would take up your time unnecessarily and you have so often said you wished you could get some one to do this or that, but it would never be done because you couldn't take the time. The whole idea is to have your ideas carried out, your embryo inventions brought to completion according to your own desires as quickly and perfectly as possible and these young men are banded together for this purpose.

M. G. B.