THE VAIL AWARD TALE

Since its creation in 1920, the Theodore N. Vail Award program has changed a bit.
But its basic premise, recognizing employees' heroism, remains the same

Theodore N. Vail helped create the Information Age.

Quick: Who was Mildred Lothrop? And how did she make AT&T history?

Telephone trivia fans know that the Vail Award program goes back to the early days of the company—when Ma Bell herself was little more than an infant. Why has the program endured so long in a time of great change? First, it honors the man whose foresight helped create the Information Age. Second, it honors the people of AT&T.

Shortly after the telephone was patented in 1877, it was being demonstrated in concert halls throughout the country as part of an evening's entertainment. Theodore N. Vail helped transform the telephone from "gadget" to vital link of the Information Age 100 years later.

Vail was general manager of the Bell Telephone Company from 1878 to 1887. He had a vision of the industry and its potential. He fired that vision with his strong business sense. Vail believed that the telephone should be so accessible that the growth of a national telephone system could benefit everyone—the concept of universeral service was apparent to Vail even then.

He was convinced that money was only a means to advance the system, and he wanted as much money as possible put back into the company. Vail's vision ran counter to that of William Forbes, American Bell's president, who felt generous dividends for stockholders should be the company's first priority. Rather than make a choice between his vision for the company and his position as employee, Vail resigned in 1887. Although other company officers agreed with Vail's vision, it wasn't until 20 years later that he was asked to return as president.

After Vail's death in 1920, his colleagues wanted to honor him with a suitable memorial. His widow, Mabel Sanderson Vail, donated over $70,000 of salary owed to Vail to the memorial fund. After much discussion, an executive committee decided to hold the money in trust, invest in AT&T stock and use the income to reward employees for acts above and beyond their normal job duties.

Since the award was established 2,706 awards have been given—21 gold, 289 silver and 2,396 bronze.

Each recipient is awarded a cash gift as well as a citation signed by a company officer. A gold medal is accompanied by $10,000; a silver medal is accompanied by $5,000; and a bronze medal is accompanied by $2,000.

Each of the business units has the power to decide that an act should be recognized with a bronze medal. All case histories are passed through the benefit administration group in Morristown, N.J. The national committee determines whether a case may be worthy of a silver or gold medal.

Linda Kornacki, assistant staff manager in the benefit administration group, is the "quality control" point person. "Knowing the details of the nominated case can make the difference between a silver or gold medal," she says. "A nominee's age and physical health may be a deciding factor."

The nature of the nominations has changed over the last six decades.

"The last award given for saving a person from a runaway horse was 61 years ago," Kornacki says. Also, technological advances now help predict storms and broadcast warnings quickly. The scenario was different in the 1920s, when loyal operators remained at their cordboards warning nearby towns of an approaching flood while risking their lives.

"The program has continued without a break since 1920," says Kornacki. "Even through divestiture and downsizings it has remained a constant in a business environment that was often not stable."

By the way, Mildred Lothrop was the only employee to win not one but two gold medals. Once in 1920, and again in 1940, the Homer, Neb., operator warned neighbors and rescue teams about approaching floods.

Janet Brown

And the 1987 winners are. . .

Gold

Gregory Robertson—Robertson was participating in a skydiving competition in Phoenix, Ariz., when he saved the life of Debbie Williams. Williams was knocked unconscious by a midair collision with a fellow jumper. Robertson caught her about 10 seconds before impact and opened her chute, allowing both of them to land safely. Robertson is an engineer at the Phoenix Works.

Bronze

Carl Florman—Florman, an account executive for Network Systems, rescued Sylvester Lange, a fisherman, who broke through thin ice at the Chatfield Reservoir in Littleton, Colo. Florman was at the head of a human chain that pulled Lange from the water.

Edward Foley—Foley was at his home in Los Angeles, Calif., when he heard screams from the apartment below. After calling the police, Foley went to the apartment to investigate and came face to face with the assailant. Foley was able to wrestle him to the ground and hold him until the police arrived. It was later discovered that the attacker had a knife. Foley is a systems consultant.

Winfield and Jean Hoffman—The Hoffmans were at the scene of a truck and car accident in Davie, Fla. The car, which was carrying five elderly women, was pushed into a canal and was beginning to sink. Jean and Winfield were able to pull the victims out of the car through an open window, saving all five women. Winfield is a system technician, and Jean is a secretary.