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CenturyLink Inc

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Introduction

CenturyLink Inc., now known as Lumen Technologies, is a quintessential story of American entrepreneurship, resilience, and adaptation. From its humble beginnings in rural Oak Ridge, Louisiana, as a small family-owned telephone company, the organization evolved into a S&P 500 powerhouse and one of the world's leading telecommunications and technology companies. This book endeavors to trace the remarkable path of this company—from mid-century party lines to the fiber networks of the digital age—and to examine how it has navigated the turbulent waters of an industry reinvented by technology and competition.

The journey of CenturyLink spans almost a century of incessant change, marked by strategic foresight and bold acquisitions. It is a history carved by visionaries like Clarke Williams, who transformed a family gift into a legacy of connectivity and technological innovation. By acquiring and integrating dozens of regional and national providers, the company not only expanded its reach but also actively shaped the American telecommunications landscape. This pattern of consistent growth, characterized by both ambition and calculated risk, set the stage for its transformation into an industry giant.

Yet, CenturyLink's story is not defined by its expansion alone. Facing the dawn of a new millennium, the company recognized the necessity to evolve beyond traditional telephony. Major mergers such as those with Embarq and Qwest thrust CenturyLink into the national spotlight and enabled it to provide advanced broadband and communications solutions to millions. Strategic moves into cloud computing, managed services, and cybersecurity further positioned the company for relevance amidst the accelerating pace of digital transformation, culminating with the monumental acquisition of Level 3 Communications and an unprecedented global fiber reach.

As the industry and world changed, so too did the company's identity. The rebranding to Lumen Technologies marked more than a new name—it represented a strategic pivot towards next-generation technologies, fiber investment, and the bold ambition to power the "Fourth Industrial Revolution." The company's recent divestments, product innovations, and customer-focused realignments further signal its commitment to a future driven by fiber, digital solutions, and global enterprise connectivity.

However, this story would be incomplete without acknowledging the trials and controversies CenturyLink has faced. Regulatory scrutiny, customer complaints, technological disruptions, and allegations of unfair practices have challenged the company to adapt, improve, and strive for greater transparency and responsibility. Alongside these challenges, its efforts in corporate social responsibility, sustainability,

and local community engagement have become vital strands of its corporate DNA.

This book invites readers to explore not just the business and technological milestones of CenturyLink Inc., but also the human stories, the shifting market forces, and the pivotal decisions that shaped its destiny. In doing so, we seek to illuminate the company's legacy, its continuing transformation as Lumen Technologies, and its prospects for the digital future.

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CHAPTER ONE: Roots in Rural Louisiana: The Birth of Oak Ridge Telephone Company

In the quiet, rural landscape of Oak Ridge, Louisiana, a modest beginning was sown that would eventually blossom into one of America's largest telecommunications companies. The year was 1930, a time when the echoes of the Great Depression were beginning to reverberate across the nation, yet the fundamental need for connection persisted, even in remote communities. It was in this setting that the Oak Ridge Telephone Company first emerged, an enterprise whose initial scale belied the vast technological empire it would one day inspire.

The nascent telephone company was originally owned by F.E. Hogan Sr. His vision, however limited in scope at the time, was to bring the then-modern marvel of telephone communication to the residents of Oak Ridge. In an era when private telephone lines were a luxury and party lines were common, even a small, local exchange was a vital link to the outside world. The switchboard, the heart of this early operation, found its place not in a purpose-built office, but rather in the intimate setting of a family home, highlighting the grassroots nature of telecommunications in rural America.

In a transaction that would prove to be profoundly significant for the future of the company, F.E. Hogan Sr. sold the Oak Ridge Telephone Company to William Clarke and Marie Williams in 1930. The price tag for this fledgling operation, serving a mere 75 subscribers, was a modest \$500. This acquisition marked the true genesis of what would become CenturyLink. The Williams family, with their new venture, essentially brought the communication hub into their everyday lives.

The switchboard, a bulky piece of equipment with its tangle of cords and jacks, was relocated to the front parlor of the Williams' home. This setup meant that the telephone company was truly a family affair, requiring constant vigilance. Marie Williams herself took on the demanding role of operator, working tirelessly to connect calls around the clock. Her dedication was such that the only break in service was a five-hour window on Sundays, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., allowing the family to attend church and enjoy a much-deserved dinner.

The day-to-day operations also involved the youngest member of the family, Clarke McRae Williams. Even as an eight-year-old boy, he contributed to the family business by delivering the handwritten bills. These humble beginnings, with bills meticulously penned by his mother and delivered on his bicycle, painted a vivid picture of the personal touch and community embedded in early telecommunications. This early

exposure to the intricacies of the telephone business would lay the foundation for his future leadership and expansion of the company.

In 1946, a new chapter began for the Oak Ridge Telephone Company. Clarke McRae Williams, having returned from his service in World War II, married Mary Kathryn Lee. As a wedding gift, his parents, William Clarke and Marie Williams, bestowed upon the newlyweds the ownership of the family telephone company. This act of familial transfer solidified the company's place as a deeply personal and interwoven part of the Williams' legacy, setting the stage for Clarke McRae Williams to embark on his ambitious journey of growth and modernization.

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