

## Matters “Telephonic”: The Early Telephone System in Rockville and Vernon By Jean Luddy

The October 8, 1881 issue of the *Tolland County Journal* reported with great interest that:

Mr. E. B. Baker, Superintendent of the Connecticut Telephone Company, and Mr. Henry Yost, Solicitor, have been in town the past few days in reference to establishing a local exchange in Rockville for the Telephone Company, or a circuit line connecting Rockville with Hartford and other places in the state. The company of which Mr. Baker is superintendent has its headquarters in New Haven and Ex-Gov. Jewell of Hartford is superintendent. Any statement Mr. Yost, who is solicitor of the company may make, can be relied upon as being correct. If a sufficient number of subscribers can be obtained in this place for a central office, it will be established. The advantages of the telephone are too well known to all to need anything urged in its behalf. It is particularly desirable that communications of this kind be introduced into Rockville, and doubtless the business portion of the community will take hold of the matter in earnest.

Interest in a telegraph that would send multiple messages had been building in the post-Civil War years with a number of inventors working on such a device. The field included Thomas Edison, Elisha Gray, who was sponsored by Western Union, and Alexander Graham Bell, a teacher at schools for the deaf. Intrigued by the relationship between sound and speech, Bell experimented with sound transmission and electricity. He wanted to create a machine that he called a “harmonic telegraph” that would transmit sounds from a speaker to a listener. Bell believed that his invention would be a benefit to humanity. Well aware that other inventors were working on this technology as well, Bell guarded his notes and equipment. By 1874, he had assembled financial backing and had founded the Bell Patent Association. Thomas Watson, an employee at a company that produced and sold electrical supplies, joined Bell as he experimented with his machine. Several models of a telephone (Greek for “distant voice”) were assembled and tested. In the meantime, Gardiner Hubbard, a business backer and Bell’s father-in-law, applied for a patent on a Bell machine on February 14, 1876, just hours before Elisha Gray applied for one for his device. On March 10, 1876, Bell discovered that his latest machine was able to transmit sound. From inside a room separated from Bell by several closed doors, Thomas Watson was able to hear Bell when he said, “Mr. Watson, come here. I need you.” (Steffoff, p 37-47)

As news of Bell’s successful speaking machine spread, different companies were formed to promote this latest technological advance. The first commercial telephone exchange was incorporated in New Haven, Connecticut in January 1878. Not a part of the Bell Company, the District Telephone Company of New Haven was funded by the Western Union Company. Western Union, the leading telegraph company, was concerned about possible competition. The company wanted to establish a presence in this new mode of communication. (Steffoff, p 54-55)

By the time that the District Telephone Company was reorganized as the Southern New England Telephone (SNET) in 1882, it had introduced some significant innovations in telephone operations. During its first year of operation the company issued the world’s first telephone directory and installed the world’s first telephone booth. In 1879, Marjorie Gray, the first woman operator, was hired for the Bridgeport exchange. In 1889, the company brought the first coin-box telephone into service. ([www.doddcenter.uconn.edu](http://www.doddcenter.uconn.edu))

By 1887 the United States had more than thousand exchanges serving a total of more than 150,000 subscribers. All of the exchanges worked in the same basic way. A line ran from each telephone customer to the exchange. A customer who picked up a telephone to make a call was connected to the exchange, where an operator answered. The customer gave the operator the name of person he or she wanted to call. The operator then called that line and, if the call was answered, used a short, flexible cord with a plug on each end to connect the line of the incoming call to the line that ran to the receiving phone. Telephone numbers soon replaced the use of names at exchanges. (Steffoff, p 62)

In late October of 1881, the Rockville exchange had its first list of subscribers, who were mostly mill owners, prominent citizen, banks, newspapers, the gas company, the railroad office and the water company (TCJ, 10/29/1881)

The *Tolland County Journal* (later the *Rockville Journal*) kept readers apprised of the expansion of the telephone into the community through a column entitled “Telephonic.”

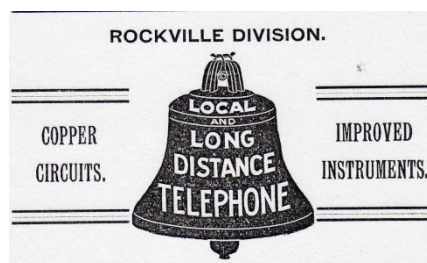
Before the end of the year, the *Tolland County Journal* had installed a phone to accept orders and news. “The telephone, hello!, is now passing over the wires, and we are now prepared to receive any orders for printing by this method of communication. Send along any items of news, but nothing bogus, as we have a patent sifting machine at the end of our wire which is warranted to separate the wheat from the chaff.” (TCJ, 12/21/1881)

In May of 1882, the editor for the newspaper commented on the growing use of the telephone in the community.

As usual when a new invention is introduced into a place, the telephone came in for its share of wonderment and experiment, more especially the latter, and the bells along the line have been ringing merrily for a few days past. Some of the messages have been of practical value, and others of no use save as a matter of experiment. Some of the messages have been a little indistinct to the uninitiated in listening, and many ludicrous mistakes have occurred but not resulting seriously. In a short time the whole thing will have become an old story, and the usefulness of the telephone fully established and acknowledged. (TCJ, 5/13/1882)

Local interest in telephone communication grew. By 1885 a phone line had been installed at the Sill Brothers Drug Store at 11 Park Place, Rockville. The 1887 city directory listed the Sill Brothers as druggists and the managers for the SNET office. Minnie C. Sill worked as the telephone operator.

Local subscribers began to request the convenience of telephone service in other parts of town. By February 1883, a telephone line had been run to Rockville from Vernon Depot. When the line to the depot first went in only Western Union had access to the phone. Telephone subscribers wanting to use the phone were told to send a telegram instead. “This manner of doing things doesn’t please Rockville subscribers and during the present state of public sentiment, a little effort would place an instrument in Thayer’s store or the depot. It has been convenient for telephone subscribers to notify their families of their arrival or departure and transact much business which could not be attended to before leaving town.” (TCJ, 2/23/1883) By April subscribers were able to use the line for free while nonsubscribers had to pay for the service. (TCJ, 4/20/1883)



The 1889 city directory showed that SNET had established a telephone office at 15 Park Place in Rockville. Mr. G. M. Brown was listed as the manager. By 1890 the phone company office had moved into the Rockville National Bank building at 6 Elm Street.

As with any new innovation, telephones and telephone operations had to adapt to the existing society. Telephone service with its required poles and wiring expanded rapidly in cities. Overloaded poles layered with telephone wires became a matter of concern for safety and aesthetic reasons. In July of 1890, the problem in Rockville was described in a Telephonic column.

The S.N.E. Telephone Co. petitioned the Common Council for leave to erect a pole near the new bank building, and string their wires to that building, connecting with their new office. When the work came to be done it was found by Supt. Frost best to place the pole at the end of Central Park and run a connection cable across to the building. While this was much the better plan, the committee on streets objected to any deviation from the letter of the permit granted. Mr. Frost was finally permitted to carry out his plan under protest, awaiting further action of the Common Council...How much neater in the appearance of the street to have the wires cross in a cable that strung across singly.

The cable running to the new office contains fifty-one wires. The new switch board which has arrived and been set up is much larger, more complicated appearing affair than that now in use.

The new office in the rear of the bank building, while giving Operator Brown very little of a view of what is going on outside, will give him more commodious quarters and ample ventilation.” (RJ, 7/17/1890)

Employment as operators for the phone company was offered first to men, then later to women.

The first operators were boys and young men, most of whom had worked as telegraph messengers. 'These youths were 'an instant and memorable disaster', wrote John Brooks in *Telephone: The First Hundred Years*. Boisterous and bored with the work at the telephone exchanges, they fought amongst themselves and treated customers rudely, swearing at them or prankishly misdirecting their calls.' Assistance came with the hiring of female operators, who were expected to be better behaved and more refined... Not just any women. The telephone company hired only those were single. An operator who married would lose her job. The operators had to wear long dark skirts and white shirts with linen collars. They were expected to sit upright with perfect posture wearing transmitters and receivers mounted on harnesses that rested on their shoulder, plugging and unplugging lines for nine hours a day, six days a week. Supervisors drilled in the pronunciation of the phrases to use with customers. (Steffoff, p70)



*Telephone operators in Connecticut c.1890*

A search of the Rockville city directories reveals that Miss Kate Joyce was employed as the manager of the Rockville exchange from 1891 to 1909. According to the directories for those years, she boarded at places within walking distance to her job.

From the onset of the telephone industry, young men were hired to erect telephones poles and string the lines between the poles or buildings. The lineman needed physical strength as well as training in working with electricity. In 1891, a crew of line men working in Rockville were replacing old poles and installing new ones which could carry more wires. The *Rockville Journal* described the life of a lineman for its readers.

The occupation of a lineman is a hazardous one, but there are many things about it that make it desirable. The work is entirely out of doors, the pay is good and there is a certain freedom and tinge of danger about the life that makes it fascinating. A good lineman seldom changes his occupation

The duties of a lineman consist in stringing the wires, telegraph, telephone, or electric, from pole to pole, and in keeping the same in repair. The men engaged in doing repair, or “trouble” work are, necessarily men of experience, and knowledge of electricity, and command better pay than the ordinary lineman. As for the danger, the most thrilling element is perhaps that from “live” electric wires; but as a matter of fact, accidents from this cause are comparatively few, and the danger is one that can be avoided by the exercise of caution.



Now and then a lineman falls from a pole; his “spur” will glance from a knot perhaps, or strike a soft spot; but, skillful and alert, the lineman will almost always catch himself and save a fall.

The danger most feared by the hardy fellows is the one from falling poles. When pole is supporting wires, the wires act as braces, and the pole cannot fall. But when a pole is being dismantled, and the wires are taken away, one by one, then the brave man at the top must look out.

As the last wires are removed, the pole will fall to the ground, unless supported by guys or braces. But the lineman laughs at danger. He is necessarily brave, hardy, sober, and self-reliant. The lineman earns from \$15 to \$20 per week, according to his ability. (RJ, 10/15/1891

*Telephone linemen, photographer Charles van Schaick*

Telephone companies developed new services to offer customers, including the ability to place long distance calls in 1891. In August of 1893, the *Rockville Journal* noted the impending arrival of a pay phone at the exchange. “An automatic telephone machine has been ordered for the Rockville exchange which will enable one to make telephonic connections out of town, at night and whenever the office is closed. It will be a slot machine, placed on a bracket in the hallway. There will be slots enough so that the right denomination in silver may be deposited, thereby signaling to Hartford the kind of service desired.” (RJ, 2/28/1893)

More telephone poles were needed along Rockville’s downtown street by early 1897. SNET applied to the County Commissioners “for permission to place new telephone poles on the east side of Main Street, adjoining the Rock Manufacturing Company’s property. The poles are at present located on that side of the street and through the company’s property. As the Rock Company on one side of the street and Nathan Doane and the Maxwells [owners of the Hockanum Mill Company] on the other side objected to the poles being located in front of their respective properties, the telephone company had to go before the commissioners for a decision.” After all sides presented their arguments, “the commissioners voted to allow the company to place three of its poles on the sidewalk abutting the Rock Company’s land. The remainder of the poles to complete the line to Market Street are to be placed on the south side of Central Park.” (RJ, 6/24/1897)

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, phone service was firmly established in cities and towns. Subscribers included local industries, businesses, government, prominent citizens, the press, and specialized occupations such as attorneys and physicians. The next few decades would see the expansion of communication by phone into the homes of middle class, working families and rural customers. This change will be discussed in the next edition of the Vernon Historical Society’s newsletter. So stay on the line for “Telephone Service in Vernon and Rockville in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”

Sources used for this article

*The Rockville Journal*

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*The Tolland County Journal*