

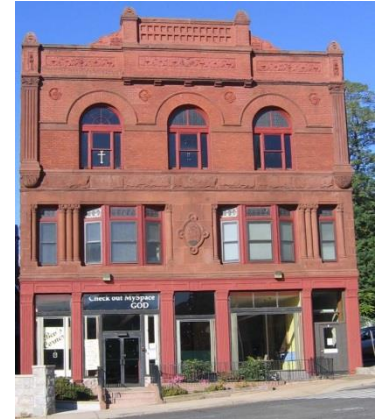
Telephone Service in Vernon and Rockville in the early 20th century

By Jean Luddy

As the 20th century began, Americans improved and expanded the communication systems that had been invented in the previous century. While the telegraph remained a leading way to send messages, the convenience and expanding networks of the telephone resulted in a surge in usage and installation. Telephones facilitated transactions for business, the military and government. Individual subscribers came to appreciate the ways that the phone easily enabled social and community connections. As the decades progressed, phones became a required technology in homes, apartments and farms.

The Rockville phone exchange, which first opened in 1883, was located in the Rockville National Bank building at 6 Elm Street. That building is now part of Union Church. By 1911, customer phone service had increased to the extent that the phone company needed to upgrade the equipment and increase the space in the facility. As a result of the renovation, the telephone office grew from two rooms at the back of the 2nd floor to most of the floor. A new switchboard was installed. The phone company planned to spend \$25,000 to improve the facility which served Vernon, Rockville and nearby towns.

In May 1912, a reporter from the *Rockville Journal* visited the remodeled exchange on the second floor of the bank building for a tour.



“As one reaches the head of the stairs, he notices a neatly lettered office door, which opens into the commercial office occupied by the manager and the cashier. It is adequately equipped with modern furniture, a counter, cashier’s desk, sanitary desks, filing cabinets, roll-top desk for the manager, etc. It is lighted with a new system of electric lighting, a half dozen 60-watt Tungsten lamps being used, making the place at night as light as day. Here is also a booth for the public, ample waiting space with chairs for those awaiting calls. The predominating color scheme is pure white ceiling, light green below the moulding line. It is as nicely furnished a commercial office as there is in any third-class exchange in the state. Miss Josephine Carroll is the cashier.

In the rear is the operators’ retiring room, to be used by the operators for recreation, rest and study. It is equipped with the latest style steel lockers, lounging chairs, couches, writing desk together with tables for current copies of the magazines; also wash stand and toilet. This is to be the girls’ own room. This room is also lighted by Tungsten lamps.

The hall is shut off from the public entrance to the building by grill work and gate. Across the hall is the traffic department in charge of Miss Fitzgerald as chief operator. The traffic department is equipped with the latest and most approved common battery switchboard, the cost of which was approximately \$5,500. The rear windows have Venetian blinds which permit a quality of light suitable to the conditions existing at the time. The office furniture is of the sanitary type, the desk of Miss Fitzgerald having mounted on it an observation turret, which enables the chief operator to supervise the work of any and all of the operators at the board through the use of a suitable telephone apparatus which is connected directly to each operator’s head telephone and which permits her to coach any operator needing same. A cable runway is provided in semi-circle form which permits of the addition of sections to the present board as required by the expected growth of the exchange which will lengthen the board to three times its present size.

Forward of the traffic department is the wire chief's office of the plant department which is in charge of W. C. Dorgan as wire chief. This room is the distributing center for all incoming wires and is equipped with suitable testing devices and lightning arrestors by use of which all foreign current is conducted to the earth for dissipation. There is also a complete set of storage batteries charged from alternating current by a General Electric mercury arc rectifier. The main distributing frame will provide entrance of 750 subscribers' lines which is considered adequate for the needs of the city for the next 15 to 20 years.

The complete office improvements ...were made necessary through the exceptional growth of the business in the past few years, the number of telephones having increased since Mr. [George] Smytheman took charge as manager from 80 to 556." (RJ, 5/30/1912)

The reporter concluded the article with an invitation from Mr. Smytheman to the public to visit the exchange for a tour after the renovations were complete. In an article from the 11/28/1912 edition of the *Rockville Journal*, a reporter wrote that 263 people came to tour the new facility and see the workings of the battery system.

"The company is grateful for the interest shown by the public and believes that it is to the mutual benefit of both the subscriber and the company that the subscriber has some knowledge as to what happened when the received is lifted from the hook. To obtain that knowledge, it is essential that the patron be shown the actual apparatus involved in the passing of a call from which a much clearer idea can be obtained than can be secured by any written or verbal description."

Each visitor left that day with a copy of the most recent issue of the telephone company's monthly newsletter that featured an article about the Rockville exchange. In the conclusion the article summarized the growth of phone service in Rockville.

"While Rockville has progressed along manufacturing and civic lines, it has also gone forward telephonically. The local exchange of The Southern New England Telephone Company was opened there in 1883 with 52 subscribers. The next ten years showed a falling off, the total in 1892 being but 29. In 1902, however, the number of telephones had increased to 137, and the next decade showed an increase of over 600 percent, the total number of stations at that time being 701. At present the Rockville exchange has 828 telephones within its limits. The central office is equipped with a common battery switchboard and all the most modern facilities associated with an up-to-date central office system of this character. The outside construction is of the same modern type and every effort is being made by the Telephone Company to give the residents of Rockville a grade of telephone service second to that of no city of its size and character in the county." (RJ, 11/28/1912),

City directories had been published for the Rockville, Vernon, Ellington and Tolland communities since the late 1870s. These books listed each resident by name and included their occupation and work and home addresses. By 1922, a symbol was added to a listing to indicate if a resident had a phone in the home. In the following years, the number of residential phone grew rapidly.

The role of the telephone in business and at home evolved as the 19th century turned into the 20th century. People grappled with incorporating the new style of communication into their public and private lives.

“Some people thought that while it might be all right for men to use phones, especially for business or government purposes, there was something vaguely indecent about women sending their voices out into the world on the new contraption. Others saw nothing wrong with housewives- or their servants- using the telephone for practical things, such as ordering groceries or summoning a doctor to a sick child, but thought it rude to use a phone for personal communication.

Some people were so proud to have a telephone that they had the machine installed in the front hall or parlor of their house. Others hid it away. A 1917 guide to home decoration recommended the secretive approach. ‘Another hall abomination is the telephone. Unless we want our guests to know the price of their roast, or the family to listen in aghast while we tell a white lie for society’s sake, or the cook to hear us asking for a new one’s references, don’t put your telephone in the hall. Close it or keep it upstairs.’ But by 1922 when a magazine article on etiquette reported that several high-society matrons had recently used telephones to invite guests to parties, snobbish resistance to the phone was fading fast.” (Steffoff, 74)

As with computers, cell phones and social media in our time, families investing in a home phone had to decide the appropriate use for the instrument.

Local natives Dorothy Gunther Dimmock and Ellen Kreyssig Rowe were interviewed to share their memories of phone service and how the phone was used in their lives in the 1920s and 1930s. Mrs. Dimmock grew up on the family farm along Route 30 near the Tolland town line. Mrs. Rowe lived on Nye Street in neighborhood near relatives and other members of the German immigrant community.

Mrs. Dimmock’s family had a phone installed in the late 1920s. It was a party line, a common type of service where several homes shared the same phone number. Her family phone number was 506. The operator would ring twice to let the Gunthers know that the incoming call was for them. One could pick up the phone at other times to listen into conversations, but that was considered rude and intrusive. The Gunthers shared a party line with their neighbors along Route 30. Party lines started to be phased about in the late 1930s and 1940s.

Mrs. Rowe said that her family did not get a residential phone until the late 1930s, because her mother did not like the lack of privacy that came with a party line. Her relatives and friends lived within walking distance.

Both families had one phone in home in a central location. At the Gunther Farm, the phone was installed in the dining room on a shelf. The Kreyssig family had their phone placed in the kitchen. Family rules were established for using the phones. Both Mrs. Gunther and Mrs.



Rowe agreed that their parents said that phone calls should be brief. No socializing or random calls were allowed. Long distance calls could be placed by going through the operators at the switchboard at the Rockville exchange, but long distance calls were rarely placed in many households. Mr. Gunther used the phone for business, while Mrs. Kreyssig called local grocery stores to place orders.

Both women recalled using their early phones. Mrs. Dimmock said that her family’s first phone did not have a dial. She had to pick up the receiver and talk into the speaker to give the operator the name or number of the person that she wanted to call. The candlestick phone model was used at one time in both homes.

When asked to reflect on the impact of the phone in their early years, both agreed that the phone made it easier to keep in touch with people outside of their immediate neighborhoods. Mrs. Rowe’s mother’s initial resistance to having a phone changed when she realized that phone

service made it easier to shop or make arrangements to visit friends. Both women observed that after World War II, private residential phones were considered a necessity, not a luxury.

Phone service and telephones themselves have evolved in directions that few could have envisioned in the middle of the 20th century. Telephone systems must now handle the communications between huge numbers of people with their personal phones. The instruments themselves offer so many features and options as to make them like hand held personal computers.

The role of the phone in our lives will continue to expand. We will have to decide how we want to manage the impact of technology and connectivity on our own lives. In the conclusion to her book, *The Telephone*, Rebecca Steffoff reminds us that we have a choice.

“What was once a communications miracle - the ability to reach people anywhere in the world by means of something carried in a pocket - is now an everyday occurrence. Evolving telephone technology is blurring the boundaries between public and private life, making the world a smaller place, and changing the way people do business and conduct their personal relationships. Some things, though have not changed since the beginning of telephony. One of the very first telephones customers, Mark Twain, told the telephone installers to put the machine near a window so he could get rid of it easily if it became too annoying. And today, as communications scholar Paul Levinson points out in *Cellphone*, you ‘always can choose to shut the cellphone off, and be no worse than any other human since the beginning of time.’”
(Steffoff, p106)

The Rockville Journal

Steffoff, Rebecca. *The Telephone*. New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2006.

Interview with Mrs. Dorothy G. Dimmock, November 2014.

Interview with Mrs. Ellen K. Rowe, November 2014.