

THE PALIMPSEST

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Hello Central

On March 10, 1876, Alexander Graham Bell spoke the first understandable sentence over a telephone. He said, "Mr. Watson, come here; I want you." When the Emperor of Brazil inspected the instrument at the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia later in the year, he was as surprised as he was impressed. All he could say was, "My God! It talks!" The London *Times* described the telephone as the "latest American humbug" but, in case the invention should prove successful, the *Times* established a basis for revising its judgment by claiming that the inventor was "a Scotchman, though a naturalized American". Americans were convinced that the telephone was not a humbug, but considered it not much more than an ingenious toy. In only a few years, however, the telephone became a necessity in our social and economic life.

Perhaps the first apparatus purporting to transmit the human voice was brought to Iowa

City from the Philadelphia Exposition by John Hensel. He paid one dollar for nothing more than two cans connected by a string. Of course persons could not talk over this device, but sounds were actually carried from one end to the other by the string. It was nearly three years later that S. D. Pryce and W. J. Schell, who operated a hardware store in Iowa City, ordered three telephones, one of them for Father Emonds of St. Mary's Church. During this interval a few telephones had been installed at Marshalltown, Burlington, Dubuque, Des Moines, and Keokuk.

As the number of telephones increased, the desirability of a central exchange office in Iowa City became so apparent that in the fall of 1880 Frank Moffitt, manager of the local telegraph office, undertook to organize one. In an advertisement in the *Iowa City Daily Republican* on October 6, 1880, he listed several advantages the telephone had to offer. A person could use it to call the doctor or to order groceries, and its potentialities in the world of business were unlimited. Merchants who had once installed a telephone "would not part with it for four times the cash". All these benefits are obvious today, but the need for a central exchange is not so clear without an understanding of the

operation of the early telephones in the pre-switchboard days.

If Mrs. Smith wanted to talk with Mrs. Jones, she could do so only if there was a direct wire connection between the two homes. An entire neighborhood might be connected on the same wire, with leads dropping off into the various houses. If there were several parties on this line, one subscriber called another by giving the appropriate ring. This arrangement was similar to a modern country line except that the latter has the advantage of a central exchange. One neighborhood could not talk with another part of town unless a direct connection existed between them. This system was so crude that it was much better to set up a central exchange into which the wires from all the telephones would lead. Then the operator could establish a connection between one phone and any other on the switchboard.

Moffitt was so successful in enlisting subscribers for the proposed exchange that construction was begun by the Iowa Telephone Company during the winter of 1880-1881. The city council gave permission to use the streets for telephone poles by an ordinance passed on December 17, 1880, which stipulated the conditions that had to be met. Prior to this time, the wires

were strung from barns, trees, or any other support that was convenient. The newspapers printed frequent notices of the progress of the work, exhorting the crew to "rush up" the poles and "the more the merrier". In the meantime, the *Republican* was compiling a directory, and it advised all who desired phones to notify the company at once. This directory was a card listing the names and numbers of subscribers. As additional telephones were installed, the *Republican* promised to give notice to its readers to add the new names and numbers to their directories. On February 19, 1881, there were fifty-four names on the list, and more persons were about ready to join.

The exchange was formally opened on March 7th, with "about" thirty-five phones in working order and others to be attached soon. The newspaper reported that the exchange was a "grand success". D. H. Ogden of the Iowa Telephone Company told the *Republican* that everything was in good shape and business was thriving. By the end of the first month the central office reported an average of about a thousand calls daily among the seventy-three phones in use. Obviously those who proudly possessed telephones were making diligent use of them.

No copies of the first directory seem to have

been preserved, and the complete list of subscribers was never published in the *Republican*, but on April 1st these names were printed to be added to those already on the card:

- 68 — Star Grocery, W. J. Welch
- 51 — Saunders, S. L., store
- 69 — Hughes, W., residence
- 70 — Whetstone, J. H., drug store
- 66 — Close & Co., oil mill
- 62 — Hughes, W., music store
- 73 — Hinman, A. C., store
- 63 — Iowa City Glass Co.
- 65 — O'Hanlon & Son, grocers
- 67 — Rockey, Dr. A. E., residence
- 64 — Shrader, W. E., drugs
- 71 — Seydel, John, residence
- 72 — Thornberry, J. H., grocer

On April 29th the paper cautioned its readers not to forget to add these names to their card:

- 75 — Noel, J. B., confectionery
- 31 — Packing House
- 76 — Carson, T. C.

The use of the telephone in those early days was typically American, for it was an instrument for both pleasure and business. To give concerts over the telephone was a favorite indoor pastime until the novelty wore off. Charles Litzenburger, leader of the Light Guard Band,

was a favorite performer. When he played in Nixon and Brainerd's furniture store and funeral parlor for the listeners assembled in the *Republican* office, "every note was distinct and perfect and the harmony was never broken." In the estimation of the editor, it was one of the finest entertainments he had ever heard, well worth a substantial admission charge. The headwaiter at the Palace Hotel, Mark Fisher, was an "inimitable genius" on the harmonica. The *Republican* thought it only fair to point out for the enlightenment of persons who liked to have Mr. Fisher play for them over the telephone, that "he is a first-class savings bank for spare quarters". In short, these concerts were "all the rage".

The telephone provided other conveniences. The *Republican* thought marriages by telephone would become very popular, for the preacher could not kiss the bride. Fathers at their business establishments could comfort their crying children with assurances that they would bring home peanuts and popcorn. The *Republican* was confident that newsgathering would be facilitated and would also be devoid of risk because the inquiring reporter "can interview a pugnacious individual with perfect safety". This might work both ways, however, for irate readers could call the office, express their opinions about the news-

paper, and then hang up. The ease with which a radio can be shut off has also been considered a prime virtue.

Merchants were quick to grasp the advantages which the telephone contributed to the conduct of their business. Only three days after the exchange had opened, an advertisement announced that persons could telephone their orders to Tanner's mill from Fink's store or the express office. Bradley's grocery store had five telephone orders on the morning of March 11th. John Seydel reported that he simply couldn't do without a telephone — one man was busy taking orders, "and the way groceries were called for was a caution". Nixon and Brainerd, undertakers, advertised that if their services were required at night, call Number 17. The Star Grocery solicited orders by telephone, while A. C. Atwater, who had just received fifty cases of Milwaukee beer, assured thirsty patrons that "orders by telephone [will be] promptly filled".

Miraculous and beneficial as the early telephones might have seemed, they were still crude. The exchange was located at 110 East Washington Street, occupying the floor above the telegraph office. Frank Moffitt was the local manager for both the telephone and the telegraph companies. Luella De Wolf was the first oper-

ator. Frank Patterson was the night operator and Ada Carter the day operator between 1883-1885. The operators also took care of collections and other business connected with the office. A lineman in the employ of the company installed phones and had charge of general maintenance.

One of the greatest difficulties in the days before insulated wires and lead cables, was the prevalence of "crosses" in the lines. There being no cables, each phone was connected with the central exchange by direct wires. As the wires converged on the exchange they were strung close together. In a heavy wind the wires would blow against one another and become tangled, the conversations would then be jumbled, subscribers would be unable to get the proper connections, and general ill-feeling resulted. The lineman would have to climb the pole and "shake out the crosses" before order could be restored and tempers soothed.

To the early users of the telephone, however, the crossed wires, imperfect connections, and faulty reception were not serious drawbacks. The crude telephone was as miraculous to them as the radio set with its headphones and batteries was to people in the early 1920's. If it seemed fantastic that one person could talk with another a mile away merely by speaking into a mouth-

piece, it was even more like a tale from the *Arabian Nights* when one could carry on a conversation with a person in Tiffin, Oxford, or even Cedar Rapids twenty-five miles distant. Yet this impossibility was a reality before the year 1881 had run half its course. Only five years after the first telephone was a proven success, the residents of Iowa City were accustomed to talk with their neighbors in town or their friends in nearby communities without leaving their homes.

CARL B. CONE