

"Carroll's Early Telephone History, Part I"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Although our high tech telecommunications industry is a modern achievement, it may surprise some readers to learn that telephone service came to Westminster in 1884. An early history of the telephone in Carroll County was written by Emma J. Grady and published in the May 28, 1937 issue of this paper:

"Some Telephone History of Carroll County"

On January 19, 1837, Carroll County came into being. Ten years later, on March 3, a baby boy was born in far-away Scotland. This boy, Alexander Graham Bell, was destined, indirectly, to play an important part in the development of Carroll County through the invention that he perfected to the point of usefulness in 1876, the telephone. The first telephone office in Westminster, the county seat, was opened during the week beginning July 12, 1884. The office was located on the second floor of the Wantz Building, East Main street. By the time it was ready for service, 26 of the citizens had subscribed for business and residence telephones. The two oldest newspapers in Westminster, The Democratic Advocate and The American Sentinel, were interested in the new industry that had come to the city and gave it space in news notes and editorials. From the beginning the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company advertised in both papers. The invention was only eight years old that year and it was, of course, considered news when its use was being opened to any community. The Democratic Advocate of June 14, 1884, in its local news column let it be known that: "Telephones were delivered to subscribers here yesterday. The lines will be put up as soon as possible. The exchange will be in operation by July 1, it is expected." In the issue of the following week further progress was reported: "Mr. Rhodes has put up about ten telephones in town this week, and has done some work in the exchange, in the old Lotus Club Hall, Wantz Building. The wires are now being put up between Emmitsburg and Union Bridge, and the work will be pushed rapidly..." The next news note advised the readers that: "E. L. Miller, General Superintendent of the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company, arrived here with sixteen linemen, and will commence at once to erect lines in this city. A number of telephones have been put up, and the exchange is being made ready. Work is to be continued in this county until complete communication is made, and the line will be run to Baltimore." The following week the news was not so good. There had been an accident and one of the construction men, George Bentz of Frederick, was injured. Better news came in the next issue. George was able to be out on the Sunday following the accident and would be allowed to go to his home in Frederick on Wednesday. That week another telephone man also had bad luck: "G. P. Lowe, Superintendent of the telephone construction, this city, lost a red pocketbook somewhere in town on Wednesday afternoon, containing about \$100 and some pay envelopes and vouchers. As Mr. Lowe is a man of family and can ill afford the loss, it is hoped the pocketbook has been found by some honest person who will promptly return it." New items appearing at that time comprise a history of telephone development. By July 6: "Westminster is now connected with Union Bridge by telephone, where the line meets the Frederick County system. By way of Frederick we have connection with Baltimore. The number of subscribers here is constantly increasing, several have been put up this week." Throughout the construction days the Advocate maintained its interest and kept its readers advised of progress. It tells the story so well that all we need do in reviewing is to continue with quotations. It is interesting to note the viewpoint of 53 years ago. Indeed, the editor's comments were more prophetic than he knew! Also, compare the dignified ceremony now followed in such an important event as the cutting over of a new exchange into service, with the element of humor indulged in at the Westminster cutover as described in the last paragraph of the following quotation. No doubt it was the trend of the times and it seems to have been accepted as performed. From an editorial of July 12, 1884:

"Although the telephone exchange here is not regularly opened, quite a number have been using the lines this week. Their convenience has been so well demonstrated that the number has been increased, and it is probable that when the exchange is opened regularly there will be more than twenty subscribers. Sixteen places were connected last Tuesday, and some have been put up since. As the people learn to understand and appreciate their convenience and utility, their number will be increased, and before a year is out scarcely an important business establishment, drug store or physician's office will be without telephone connection. (Note: The telephone's convenience was not thought of as a residential utility.) "The County Offices should be supplied. One at the Court House would suffice for all, and the investment would be repaid many times over. There should be a line to the waterworks, also, to be used in event of a fire. "In time-and not a long time, either-the lines will be extended throughout the county, and persons can converse with others at a distance as readily as if they were in the same room. "The importance of this rapid and accurate communication cannot be overestimated. When the lines are up business will be facilitated and increased; crime will decrease and law breakers will have less chance of escaping. To enumerate the advantages, however, would require great space, and we will only add that the business establishment that fails to have telephone connection will, to use a common expression, 'get left.' "On Tuesday all the lines were connected and all the subscribers rung up. There were a number of persons in the exchange, and every subscriber could hear all that was said by everybody. There was a great deal of fun and amusement, and voices could be distinguished. There was a good deal of talk about Butler getting the Democratic nomination at Chicago, and the mention of his name was a signal for a general laugh. Some of the subscribers sung, some whistled and there was a general clatter over the wires, which lasted for some time."

The selection of newspapers articles quoted by Emma Grady reveal that the local press played a role in popularizing the telephone. She also correctly noted that the telephone was originally seen as business tool rather than as a residential convenience. This same view was taken when other public utilities, such as gas or electric lighting, came to the city at about the same time. Next week's column will present the second half of Emma Grady's article.

Photo caption: Female operators at the Westminster Telephone Exchange operate switchboard equipment in this c1920 image. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.