

LOCAL

Then & Now: When the telephone came to Ithaca

Gene Endres Special to the Ithaca Journal

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Not long after Alexander Graham Bell received a United States patent in 1877 for what we now know as the telephone, it became clear that this device would prove very useful, both for business and even as a social medium of communication.

As early as January, 1878, 21 subscribers in New Haven, Connecticut, were paying \$1.50 a month to be able to connect to any of the other subscribers.

Rather than just connecting one place to another, like the “tin can telephone” used by children, the idea of a central office was proposed. It contained a “switchboard”: an array of incoming and outgoing telephone lines. It was the job of a telephone “operator” to connect an incoming caller to an outgoing one using a simple connecting cable.

The incoming and outgoing lines were attached to a matrix of “jacks” — holes on a panel into which the cable plugs could be placed. Initially, businesses ran their own sets of connections and hired young men to do the connecting; they were easily trained and would work for relatively low pay.

Following Bell’s own suggestion, they would answer an incoming call with “Ahoy!”, but it is reported that they often made jokes or inappropriate remarks due to their youthful energy. In September 1878, a woman named Emma Nutt was hired by Bell himself at the Boston Telephone Despatch Co. as an operator to answer and connect incoming calls.

With a clear and gentle voice and good manners, she set a standard for future operators, not to mention that she was able to memorize all the available phone line numbers in use by the company at that time.

Professor William A. Anthony, at Cornell, reportedly acquired the first telephone in Ithaca in 1878. At that time, Ithaca already had a multiple connection of telegraph circuits that had first been established in 1872. It basically amounted to a switchboard. Professor Anthony and

W. C. Wykoff owned this service and established it for telephone service in the Rumsey Block at 214 N. Tioga St., serving about 40 customers. They employed two operators.

Ithaca had roughly 100 subscribers in 1880, a very large number for a town this size. By around 1928, the Bell Telephone System, a consolidation of many earlier telephone companies to become a near-monopoly, encompassed roughly 18.5 million telephones in the U.S. Ithaca itself had over 7,000 phones by then. The local company employed 36 women.

A report outlining the history of telephone personnel (issued in 1963 by the Department of Labor) notes: "Women were not hired as operators until the early 1880's. Ten years later, they were operating practically all the switchboards in the major system during daytime hours. Boys and men on night duty were still common as late as 1904."

As telephone systems grew, automatic switches took over much of the chain of connecting one line to another. But even in the 1950's, it might take as long as four minutes to make all the links for a coast-to-coast long distance call using actual operators since the entire system wasn't yet automated.

In 1918, Ithaca had two telephone companies: Federal Telephone Co., with an office at the first location on Tioga Street, and the Bell System in a building at State and Aurora streets, shared with Western Union Telegraph Co. Outlying towns and villages had smaller, independent telephone companies, such as Trumbull's Corners Telephone and the Trumansburg Home Telephone Co.

A partial result of the acquisition of the Federal Telephone Co. by the Bell System in 1918 led to the City of Ithaca becoming an early adopter of the dial telephone. Ads in The Ithaca Journal in early 1921 alerted telephone subscribers to a change that would not take place in many other locations until the 1950's. Users were given instructions on how to "dial" a telephone: a rotating switch with holes for the numbers from 1 to 10 would automatically generate pulses corresponding to the number a person wanted to call.

Some still speak of "dialing a number" even though the system now uses push buttons that generate complex electronic tones to make the connection. The ads instructed users on how to work this new "dial." All this equipment was at 214 Tioga St., across from the downtown post office. Ithaca became an automated dial telephone system on Jan. 29, 1921, when the Bell and the Federal Telephone systems were combined within the city. Only Dunkirk and Geneva had similar dial systems at the time.

That meant telephone users were deprived of a friendly female voice asking “Number, please?” when they picked up the phone. Women were still employed on larger private systems, with many telephones using a private switchboard called a PBX system. But automation continued on. In the 1960's, special coded audio tones replaced the clicks emitted by the dial, and push-button phones became the norm.

Now, we can “dial” practically anywhere in the world from a telephone device we carry in our pocket. Chances are, we will only reach either a robotic or a recorded voice (often female) telling us to leave a message or to have patience since “All our representatives are busy and your call is important to us.”

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