Telephone History

Remember party lines? Heavy black Bakelite phones? Asking the operator to place a long-distance call? Public pay phones and the sound of coins dropping?

With today's ubiquitous cell phones, it is hard to imagine what telephone communication was like "back in the day."

Union County and surrounding areas were once served by The Buffalo Valley Telephone Company, organized in 1904 (a successor of the earlier Home Telephone Company started in 1895).

In 1905 trunk lines went from Sunbury to Winfield, to the Lewisburg exchange, then to the Mifflinburg exchange and on to Glen Iron. Wires, strung on poles, ran from the exchange to homes and businesses. Calls were routed at the switchboard in Lewisburg or Mifflinburg.

Initially, service was from 7 in the morning until 10 at night, Monday through Saturday, and night service was provided by boys aged 12 to 16 who slept at the company.

The yearly cost for phone service to private residences was $18, for farms $20, and for businesses $24 (about $400, $440 and $525, respectively, in today's dollars). Private lines, instead of multi-party lines, were an extra $5 (current equivalent $100) per year. There were 81 phone subscribers in 1905.

Today we punch in some numbers, or pull up a name on a contact list, and we are instantly connected. Until the 1930's, you had to crank a magneto phone to generate an electric signal which alerted the operator, who connected you to the person you wished to call. Often you just gave the person's name; operators had to memorize the telephone numbers in order to qualify for the job.

Farmers were employed to put up the telephone poles (cut from nearby trees) for phone installers, who worked during good weather, March to November. By 1913, the Buffalo Valley Telephone Company employed eleven women as operators, one night boy, six men as installers/repairmen, laborers and foreman, and one manager.

In 1928, a windy snowstorm knocked over most of the poles from Lewisburg to Mifflinburg and it was months before the damage was repaired - with newer cable replacing open wire circuits. In a 1932 storm, the cable lines held up, proving a good investment.

In 1933, the company initiated the conversion from magneto phones. Dial service began June 1935 with John P. Ruhl (phone company manager) of Lewisburg calling Charles R. Ruhl of Millmont. They were the last surviving original investors in the company.

During World War II there was a shortage of material and equipment - all being channeled to the war effort - and few new phones were put in. Installation picked up in the mid-50's and exchanges were added in the Hartleton-Laurelton, West Milton-New Columbia areas.

Do you remember phone numbers beginning with Jackson, Woodlawn, Warwick or Locust? JA was the exchange at Lewisburg, WO at Mifflinburg, WA at Hartleton and LO at West Milton.

In 1966, direct distance dialing was made possible via line connections to Williamsport, area codes were used for long distance calls, and local switchboard operators were no longer needed. The rest is *recent* history.

Early Switchboard Operators