



TELECOMMUNICATIONS
HISTORY GROUP

CONNECTIONS *news*

www.telcomhistory.org
Summer 2019, Vol. 24, no.2

(303) 296-1221
Jody Georgeson, editor

A Message from Our Director

We are excited that Summer has finally arrived, and it brings a lot of celebrations. THG would like to celebrate the winner of our Special Award for Best Project on a Telecommunications Topic at the National History Day Colorado [NHDC] competition. Grace Bielefeldt, a 10th grader at STEM School Highlands Ranch, won for her website “The Influence of Invention: The Triumph and Tragedy of the Automatic Telephone Exchange” (<https://64573521.nhd.weebly.com/>). Congratulations Grace! NHDC is one of our favorite events to support and we continue to be inspired by the students who are our future leaders.

We are also excited to announce the first THG Challenge Grant. A generous anonymous donor has provided a \$20,000 grant and every donation you make between now and August 1, 2019, will be matched up to a total of \$20,000. Read more about it in this edition of the newsletter.

Summer is a great time to take a tour of our Connections Museum Seattle which is open on Sundays from 10am to 3pm. Or call 303-296-1221 and make an appointment for a tour of our Connections Museum Denver and THG Archive.

Enjoy your Summer.

Warm Regards,

Lisa Berquist
Executive Director

A Trip to the Capehart Communications Collection

By Sarah Autumn

Back in February, Ed Mattson and I visited Don and Rita Capehart and their incredible collection of telephone history in Corsicana, Texas. The collection has been around for quite some time now--Don and Rita started collecting historic telephone equipment as early as 1984. Don was an installer for Western Electric, and he loved his job, and the company he worked for. Once the AT&T Divestiture was announced, he knew that he wanted to start saving the equipment that he spent so much of his life working on.

The Capeharts haven't always lived in Texas. Before his retirement, they were in New York. As Don tells the story, one day he realized that he was "acting like a damn Yankee and started talking like one too!" Wanting none of that, he went home and told Rita that he wanted to move back home. When Rita asked him when he wanted to leave, Don said, "How about next Thursday?" Rita agreed, and they packed up and hit the road.

They started looking for a place to keep Don's already big collection, and they finally found a closed Coca-Cola bottling plant in Corsicana, about an hour south of Dallas. It was the perfect place to house their massive collection. They then built themselves a beautiful house inside the old plant building.

Having been an installer, Don was not shy about putting up frames, and doing the work in order to turn the old bottling plant into a proper display space. He and Rita continued to drive around the county reclaiming things whenever a phone company would tear out an old central office or when a Western Electric repair shop closed.

But now Don and Rita are going to retire for the second time and move into a place that is a bit easier to manage. Sadly, they could not find anyone to buy the entire collection and keep it together, so they reluctantly decided to auction it off piecewise. The auction site is here, if any THG members want to try their luck and bid on something. <https://amtauctions.com/capehart/>

Fortunately, THG was able to acquire two frames of very rare panel equipment from the Capeharts before the auction process even started. These will be shipped to THG's Connections Museum in



Ed Mattson is feeling great after a long day of building crates in Don's garage

Seattle where they will be added to our panel switch, which as most of you know is the only remaining working panel switch in the world. The two new frames are a coin control frame and floor alarm board. We don't know much about the coin control frame yet, so if any THG members have information about it or remember working on one, please share it with us! Since we don't currently have any coin control equipment in our museum at all, we are very excited to finally get some.

The story of how people used to carry nickels and dimes in their pockets

instead of a smartphone, is one we love to tell museum visitors.

On a personal note, I would like to express my thanks to Don and Rita for their kindness and hospitality during our stay with them. As a volunteer for THG, I have been fortunate to have spent time with many amazing folks, who are both knowledgeable and kind-hearted. The Capeharts are undoubtedly among them. I feel that it is important to mention that while their massive collection is truly incredible, what really stuck with me was how they treated us like family while we were there. I want to thank Don and Rita for their love and generosity, and I wish them the very best in the next phase of their lives.

THG members can look forward to a future story in the Connections News about the challenging process of getting these new (old) panel equipment frames into our museum and bringing them back to life.

The Travels of Golden Boy



Golden Boy, AT&T's mighty Greek god-like statue, may be donated to the New York City Parks department, if they can find a spot for it.

It was commissioned by Theodore N. Vail as *Spirit of Telegraphy* (changed later to *Spirit of Electricity*) and was sculpted by Evelyn Beatrice Longman. It stood on AT&T's Corporate Headquarters at 195 Broadway in New York City, from 1916 to 1984. In 1984, Golden Boy took up residence in the foyer of AT&T's new headquarters at 550 Madison Avenue, in midtown Manhattan. Then, in 1992, it made the trip to AT&T's building in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, where it stood until 2002 when it moved eight miles down the road to Bedminster Township.

In November 2005, SBC (once a wholly owned subsidiary of the AT&T Corporation—a *Baby Bell*) acquired AT&T. In a move designed to capitalize on the national and global name of its former parent, San Antonio, Texas-based SBC renamed itself AT&T Inc. In 2009, the new AT&T removed the statue from the Bedminster

Township, New Jersey location and installed it in the lobby of its new headquarters at the Whitacre Tower in Dallas, Texas.

Faced with \$50-100k in anticipated restoration expenses, the corporation is hoping to find a new home for their lightning bolt-tossing 16-ton hero.

The Last of the Bell System Palaces Turns 90



The telephone building at 931 14th St, Denver, Colorado. (THG archives)

It was finished shortly before the 1929 Crash of Wall Street and the beginning of the Great Depression. Never again would a company build such an homage to the power of industry and technology. Located at the corner of 14th and Curtis streets in downtown Denver, Colorado, the building is on the National Register of Historic Places. It was built from Colorado materials and features Art Deco murals depicting the history of communications by Colorado artist Alan Tupper True.

By the 1920s, Denver's manually operated system was overloaded and costly, and the Bell System decided to offer dial service in Denver. This would automate most of the local calls and require fewer operators to make connections. It also sped up the whole process and cost less to operate. The catch: the switches for the new service would take up quite a bit of room and weighed over 2,000 tons. There was no way to accommodate such equipment in an existing phone building in Denver, so the Bell System decided to build a new central office to house the new equipment and to act as headquarters for the entire Mountain States territory. When completed, the building housed enough equipment to serve half the city's phones.

The building served as headquarters until the breakup of the Bell System in 1984. It still serves as Main Central Office in Denver.

And, we're celebrating its 90th birthday. Connections Museum in Denver will host a series of exhibits, tours and events designed to commemorate this monument to the telecom industry. Check our web site [www.telcomhistory.org] and watch this newsletter for more information about how you can join the festivities.

Allan Tupper True's mural, "Mountain Construction" is one of thirteen that grace the MST&T Headquarters Building



Person to Person - Telephone People

by Don Warsavage

We were a culture.

Through the years of developing and maintaining the Bell System, our dedication to service defined us. We were called, "Ma Bell."

Perhaps that quality started with our founder. After growing up in Scotland, with a mom who was nearly deaf he became a teacher of people with hearing impairments. He taught in three schools for the deaf in Massachusetts and Connecticut.

As a scientist he pursued the unique theory that the words from our mouths might be carried to the ears of distant listeners by the phenomenon known as electricity. Of course, we all know it was Alexander Graham Bell.

And, through our history, millions of us were employed by the 22 operating companies, Western Electric, and Bell Labs under the umbrella of AT&T.

The hard wires that connected the whole country together; the central offices and the machines inside; and the very telephones that sat in our homes were all owned by "Ma Bell."

Our achievements were significant. Astronomers can see the shape of asteroids. They know the precise orbit of the planet Mercury around the sun. They learned many secrets about our universe that could not be revealed by traditional telescopes. It is because of the work of Karl Jansky of Bell Laboratories. In the 1920s he was researching why static interference was obstructing telephone transmission when he discovered the field of Radio Astronomy.

In New York City, on April 7, 1927, AT&T President Walter Gifford squinted into a tiny screen less than 3 inches square. He was watching the black and white image of the Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover. Hoover was speaking from Washington D.C. Gifford watched and listened as Hoover said, "Today we have, in a sense, the transmission of sight for the first time in the world's history." It was called "radio vision," and it was developed by Bell Laboratories.

In 1948, William Shockley, John Bardeen, and Walter Brattain of Bell Laboratories were awarded the Nobel Prize for the development of the transistor that launched the age of solid state electronics.

Many telephone technicians were granted deferments from the draft in World War II because they were regarded as essential to maintain our telephone network for national security.

During the Cold War, telephone people by the hundreds worked with the U.S. Air Force to build over fifty radar stations, all north of the Arctic Circle. It was the famous D.E.W. line (Distant Early Warning System.)



In addition to having been our own culture, we were also a monopoly.

All the front-line workers - the service reps, the telephone operators, the linemen, installers, cable splicers, combination men and repairmen and their bosses - were keenly aware of that fact. When service was interrupted, customers had no other place to go.

Attempts were made to help with customers who had difficulty paying their telephone bill so they could avoid being disconnected for nonpayment.

One telephone exchange manager in a small town stood in a muddy beet field, talking to a local migrant farmer. The farmer's ordinary nominal monthly bill for a single phone on a four-party line had ballooned to over three hundred dollars with excessive long-distance charges. The farmer spoke very broken English. The manager had only a limited knowledge of Spanish. They worked hard at trying to understand each other. After many hand gestures, repeated phrases with different words the manager learned what had happened. The farmer's troubled teenage daughter had run away to Mexico. Homesick and afraid, she called her frantic parents back home many times. As it turns out, neither the farmer nor his wife understood what the operator meant by the word, "collect." A deal was worked out. The farmer kept his service with the agreement he would pay five dollars per month extra until the charges could be paid off.

Another exchange manager developed a unique collection strategy. On Friday evenings he stuffed his pockets with unpaid bills and his "paid" stamp and headed out to the town's most popular bar. There he would collect cash from some of the locals as they shared a few beers. He was very popular and had success in clearing up balances.

The following tale exists in rumor only. It has not been verified. The exchange manager in a small New Mexico town had constant difficulty with a wealthy resident who always resisted paying his bill. He had shut off his service several times always resulting in an angry row. When the bill was several months late again the manager had reached his limit. He drove out to the man's house. He loaded the man's brand-new motorcycle onto his pickup and hauled it back to the telephone office. He contacted the recalcitrant customer and told him if he wanted his motorcycle, come down to the office and pay his bill.

Over the years, poles fell and wires were broken and tangled by floods, storms and other disasters. Thousands of heroic efforts have been recorded of telephone people in their attempts to restore service. Rescue workers worst fears were realized as they searched west of Fort Morgan, Colorado. They found the body of Frank Atkinson, combination man. He gave his life trying to fix the Omaha-Denver toll line in a 1940 blizzard.



In June of 1940, the residents of Winnebago, Nebraska were awakened during the night by the howl of the town's warning siren. One by one each of their phones began to ring. It was Nellie Lazure, the all-night operator telling them in a hurried voice, "Leave your home! A flood is coming at us down Omaha Creek!"

Nellie was calling from her switchboard. It was in a one-story house in the lower part of town. Some residents called Nellie back and urged her to leave, but she didn't. She stayed, operating the siren and calling residents when the flood struck with force. It filled Nellie's house with water up to one and a half feet from the ceiling. It collapsed one part and tore the rest of it off its foundations and pushed it up against some nearby trees. Rescuers

entered the wreckage after the water subsided to find Nellie safe. She had climbed on top of her switchboard to ride out the calamity.

Oftentimes telephone people were involved in heroic and creative efforts that were not connected with restoring telephone service.

Newspapers showed photographs of ten- and twenty-foot snow drifts in the town of Cheyenne, Wyoming. It was the infamous blizzard of 1949 that stopped everything across the plains of Colorado and Wyoming. Autos were stranded with people still in them; trains were snowbound; farms and ranches were isolated. Imagine how those stranded people felt when they heard the whine of the telephone company's snow-buggy and saw it gliding toward them over the drifts. The employees of Mountain States Telephone Company operated the snow buggy for several days, shuttling back and forth carrying stranded people to safety and to hospitals.

In 1928, the pilot of a small single engine U.S mail plane flew into a sudden blizzard over western Nebraska. He knew he couldn't make it to his regular destination of Sidney. He was low on fuel and his plane was bucking against the wind and snow. It was night-time and he descended, looking for a place to make an emergency landing. He kept circling at the lowest possible level, fearful of descending too low and yet unable to make out anything, let alone a flat space that would be safe enough to touch down. Then he almost couldn't believe his eyes. It looked like a flare being lit below, on the ground. Then there was another, then another. Flares were being lit in numbers. He could see they outlined a small flat field that he could attempt his landing.

Mabel White was the only operator on duty in Potter, Nebraska that night. She heard the plane circling low overhead. The mail plane's regular flights passed over Potter. Mabel figured out that he was in trouble and called the airfield in Sidney. She got instructions of what should be done and called a local garage mechanic who hustled out and organized the "flare party." The pilot landed safely. The next day he was able to refuel and take off, continuing his mail deliveries to Sidney and North Platte.

The people in the four stories above were each awarded a Vail Medal and a cash award for their extraordinary efforts. There are thousands more documented stories like these and probably even more unrecorded except in the memories of the people affected.

We were a culture. We were a monopoly. We were Ma Bell. We contributed to the wellbeing of our neighbors as we did our work—*person to person.*



"Spirit of Service" by F. L. Merrill

Introducing a THG challenge grant!



We volunteers keep busy!

THG's volunteers are the heart and soul of our operation. Without them, none of the important work we do would happen. In 2018 alone, volunteers collectively donated close to 10,000 hours to further THG's mission—this included everything from preserving precious archival material and giving public tours to making the coffee and vacuuming the floors.

But even though THG is a volunteer-driven organization, cash is needed too. Volunteers cannot continue their good work without at least some financial support from THG. Parts and materials (including the coffee beans) must be purchased. And we pay for essential services (including, if you can imagine, our telephone bills).

But now we have an exciting new opportunity... A generous donor has provided a \$20,000 challenge grant. **Every donation you make between now and August 1st 2019 will be matched one-for-one up to a total of \$20,000.**

But wait... there's more good news! if you contribute at least \$60, THG will count \$35 of that as a renewal of your 2020 membership—and our challenge donor will match your entire contribution.

You may use the enclosed envelope to send a check. Or you may make a donation online at <http://www.telcomhistory.org/donate/> If you donate online, please type "Challenge Grant" in the personal note box to ensure the matched amount is applied.

Thank you!



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