An Upstate Telephone Tale

## Businessman's Convenience Became Rock Hill Institution

Alexander Graham Bell displayed the first telephone at the Philadelphia Centennial in 1876. Nine years later, the first telephone exchange in the Carolinas was set up in Charlotte.

John Gary Anderson, who owned Rock Hill Buggy Co., was always intrigued with the idea. He tried to get the Bell Telephone Co. of Charlotte to set up an exchange in Rock Hill. Anderson was told Rock Hill was too small. Nor would the company sell Anderson the two phones he wanted.

Never one to take no for an answer, Anderson found a Mr. Mason in Sumter, "a mechanical genius," who had been able to copy Bell's invention, and bought two magneto telephones from him. They worked quite well. This was about 1888.

"I strung up a wire from my office to the depot, using fences, trees, houses, and as some humorist said, jimsonweeds for poles." Anderson had only one wire and grounded it in the earth. It worked — that is, until the electric power plant started up and created interference with the sound. However, the power plant generally operated only in the evening.

Anderson saved many trips to the depot. Other businessmen took note and came in to use the marvelous new instrument. Soon the depot agent was using Anderson's line to send messages to others.
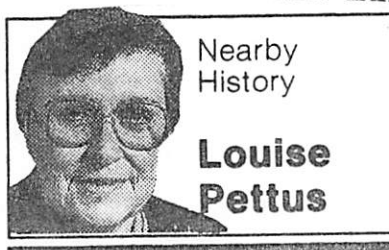
Nearby History

Louise Pettus

Anderson then got the idea to set up a telephone exchange. He initially signed on eight subscribers and ordered a 25-station switchboard from Mr. Mason. By that time Chester had a telephone exchange (Chester was larger than Rock Hill).

J.E. Pryor, the installer of the Chester exchange, came to Rock Hill to install Anderson's exchange. Mary Harrison was hired as the operator for $10 a week. The hours were from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Anderson later recalled that Capt. W.L. Roddey was his first customer to put a phone in his home. His residence telephone number was "One." Roddey also had a phone placed in his store and another in his bank.

It was no time before Anderson replaced the 25-station exchange with a 50-station exchange and not too long before he needed a 100-station exchange. People discovered that the telephone could be used for more than business calls.

Anderson took two partners, James M. Cherry and A.R. Smith. They incorporated the Rock Hill Telephone Co. on Dec. 21, 1894.

In 1907, Anderson and Cherry sold their shares in the Rock Hill Telephone Co. to Paul Workman. By 1910, the company had more than 300 customers and had switched from magnetos to common batteries.

A.R. Smith died and Mr. and Mrs. E.L. Barnes purchased the Rock Hill Telephone Co. from Workman. At that time, there were 433 subscribers. Two years later, Barnes enlarged the telephone building and the switchboard. The new capacity was 1,600 lines and eight operators.

In 1931, E.L. Barnes turned over active management of the company to his two sons, Frank and L.A. During the Depression years there was little growth, but World War II and its aftermath saw the company growing by leaps and bounds.

Mary Sherer Connolly, who began work as an operator in 1919, at the time of her retirement said that the biggest single change she witnessed was the switch over to an automatic dial system in 1949. Gone were the days when an operator did the dialing for you and nobody's number exceeded four digits.

•

Louise Pettus is a retired history professor at Winthrop College. Her column appears Sundays.