

Terrell County Memorial January, 2015
Sanderson, Texas

Museum News

Telephones in Terrell County



Photo: wikipedia.com

The first telephone call was made on March 10, 1876. Alexander Graham Bell and his assistant, Thomas Watson, were trying to transmit sound electrically through a wire. When he accidentally spilled acid on himself (as in the 1940s' Franchot Tone movie) he

screamed into the transmitter, "Come here, Mr. Watson, I want to see you!" Bell had invented the first practical, commercially viable telephone.

Bell Telephone Company was organized in July, 1877. Though others had also been experimenting, Bell owned patents for his telephones and successfully fought over 600 lawsuits for patent infringement, locking out his competition.

Giant Western Union designed a telephone and entered into the business. The fledgling Bell Telephone Company, tiny by comparison, successfully defended its patent infringement suit against WU.

The Bell patents, however, ran out in 1893-94, opening the door for independent phone companies to open by the hundreds across the world.

As the telephone spread, the citizens of Sanderson were very interested in the new invention. As yet, there was no transcontinental phone service, and no hope for a line extending to Sanderson. But, as the phone system expanded it became more likely that Sanderson would have a line to the outside world.

The first telephone line in Sanderson was strung in 1899 by George Haseltine, the local telegraph operator,

from the Hancock and Hancock Store to the Dull Ranch, located northeast of Sanderson.

In those days, ranch phones used the top wire of the fence line to transmit the signal, with the other leg of the circuit being a wire running to a metal peg driven into the ground. It worked, but the reception was very noisy, with much interference. Soon, telephone wires were hung in pairs from glass insulators on poles, greatly improving the reception.

The early phones were hand-cranked, each phone having dry cell batteries inside the case to carry the voice transmission and the crank attached to a small electric generator to operate the bell signaling system.

In the case of ranch or farm phones, all the phones were linked to the same line for economy. A code of long and short rings was used so that the patron could identify an incoming call, i.e., one long and two short, one long and one short, etc. Anyone down the line could listen in on conversations, and, apparently, this happened often.

In the towns, each telephone had its own dedicated line, all hooked to a central telephone office where an operator made the connections using a switchboard. The switchboard contained an outlet and a plug for each phone in the system. The patron would crank her phone to ring the operator, who would plug her phone into the patron's outlet, usually signified by a flashing light or a piece of red metal that would pop into view by the outlet. The patron would request a number or person to whom she wished to speak. The operator found the plug for that number and inserted it into the outlet for the patron. Then the operator rang



The Stansell home, first location of the Sanderson Telephone Company, 1909-1914, on Persimmon across from the Sanderson Clinic. The home was built ca 1908-09 and still stands. The phone office was located in the room to the right with an outside entrance.

the intended's phone, and if they were home, the connection was made. As in the case of my father's cousin in Marathon who was the phone operator there for many years, many operators would not disconnect themselves from the call, but would eavesdrop on the conversation. Consequently, the operator knew everyone's business in town.

When the first switchboard was invented in 1878, it was run by teenage boys. They were so rude and impatient with customers that they were banished after a few years and replaced with calm and polite women. It was almost 90 years before men were allowed to be phone operators again.

The Sanderson Telephone Company was started in February, 1909, when J. Calvin Stansell, the local agent for the G. H. & S. A. Railroad, petitioned the County Commissioners for permission to build a telephone system in Sanderson. The Stansells moved to Sanderson in 1899 and watched the experiments in early telephony with much interest. Stansell was a man of means, having also established a ranch in the area.

As his family increased, a large two-storey home was built for them on Persimmon, across from today's Sanderson



Photo: Alice Evans Downie

The McKee home on Oak, just east of the present-day Sanderson Bank, second location of the Sanderson Telephone Company, 1914-1925.

Clinic. It was here that the Sanderson Telephone Company was born. Mrs. Stansell and her daughters served as telephone operators. As the girls left home, town girls were hired. This exchange had no access to phones outside of Terrell County...it was purely a local operation. For \$2.00 per month you could install a phone in your house or business, but service was available only for a few hours per day.

Around 1912, Mr. Lew Rust and his Del Rio and Winter Garden Telephone Company began building a telephone line west, hoping to have long distance service to El Paso. By November, 1912, they had arrived at Langtry and were continuing on to Sanderson. A company in Marfa was building a line east to Sanderson. By 1913 the lines

were completed and Sanderson was connected to the world.

In 1914, Stansell sold the business to Jack and Sidney McKee, who were looking for a business to own in Sanderson. Stansell had upgraded the lines, phones and switchboard and the recent connection to the outside world encouraged the McKees to seal the deal.

The McKees lived in a house on Oak Street, just east of the present-day Sanderson Bank, and the phone office was moved into this house. The McKees' business prospered as residents desired to be connected to friends and relatives across the country.

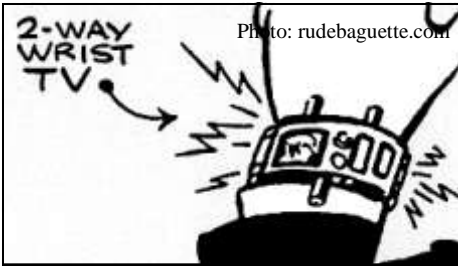
In 1925, the McKees sold the business to the O. H. McAdams, who, with their two daughters, moved to Sanderson to assume ownership.

The McAdams bought the historic Dr. Hudson home just west of the "Doc" Anderson home at 1st and Pine Streets. It was a two-storey home with plenty of room for family and the telephone office. A few years later, the McAdams sold to the Del Rio and Winter Garden Company, which now owned 23 exchanges in West Texas.



Partial view of the Hudson home, left, and the Doc Anderson home, right. The Hudson home was the 1925-1956 location for the Sanderson Telephone Company. The present phone exchange sits on the back of that lot, the Hudson home having been razed in 1956.

Photo: Alice Evans Downie



Dick Tracy's video telephone, ca 1964.

McAdams continued as manager and the family worked with other girls from Sanderson as operators. In 1952, the Del Rio and Winter Garden Telephone Company sold the exchange to Southwestern Bell.

Southwestern Bell had the resources to modernize the Sanderson exchange. In 1954, Bell replaced crank telephones with dial phones. The local switchboard was eliminated and long distance service was handled at regional centers; local calls were dialed by the patron. A new exchange building was erected in 1956 and the Hudson home was razed.

Southwestern Bell instituted direct dialing for long distance in 1974 and offered a wide variety of attractive new phone styles, including the Princess phone, with a lighted dial in the base and coming in a multitude of decorator colors, and the Trimline phone, with a lighted dial in the handset.

When the government successfully prosecuted Bell for price-fixing and monopolistic control of the world's phone systems and manufacturing companies in the 1970s, it was forced to divest itself of smaller exchanges. In 1981, Southwestern Bell sold the Sanderson exchange to Big Bend Telephone Company of Alpine, some 472

residence accounts and 73 business accounts.

Big Bend Telephone began in 1960 as a mobile communications company, with 17 customers. It acquired



Trans-Pecos Apple wristphone, 2008 telephone exchanges through the years and by 2012 owned 13 exchanges and served nearly 6,000 customers, with a service area covering some 17,600 square miles, larger than the state of Massachusetts.

Through the years Big Bend Telephone has moved to fiber optics and satellite and wireless for data transmission. It has added wired and wireless broadband internet services. Wireless phones offered by other companies have taken a portion of their business, but, theoretically, competition for equipment and services keeps the rates down.

Today, phone services in Sanderson are a far cry from the archaic fence line phone to the Dull Ranch in 1899. Just in the last 50 years we have taken a giant leap in technology. In the 1950s and '60s we wondered if the far-fetched Dick Tracy video wristwatch would come to be. If has, and now, we wonder, what else could they possibly invent?



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