A Step Back in Time   By Bobbie Sue Shelton-Lonas

Bell Telephone Company - 130 Years Old

My grandson, Blake Hodge after finding an old, September 1954, telephone book hanging in our log house, suggested the subject of this article. Much older books exist but while looking at the names in the Eagleville section of this one, memories of people listed, brought back some childhood memories and hopefully will do the same for you who were living here during this time. The old book also included instructions of using a dial telephone, which was a recent update from the operator's switchboard and also information on calling a number on a shared party line. (There were 2 and 4 households on party lines). I'm sure most of you will remember talking (or listening) on a party line. News got around pretty fast by that method. In 1954 Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company provided telephone service in Eagleville, Smyrna and Murfreesboro. Bradyville, Fosterville, Lascassas, Milton, Readyville and Rockvale received telephone service managed by private companies, often owned by the community subscribers.

While reading some history on the telephone, an invention developed in 1876, I thought it was very interesting that this year will be the 130th anniversary of the first telephone company. The "Bell Telephone Company," was founded in Boston Massachusetts July 9, 1877.

The telephone was discovered almost by accident. History tells of a race of inventors looking for a way to make the telegraph work faster and more profitably - by sending distinct musical notes or tones simultaneously along the wires with a separate message sent on each frequency. But they soon realized it could also include the human voice - a speaking telegraph. And if you could talk down a wire, wouldn't that be an entirely new and better way of communicating? Although several were in this race, it's noted that Alexander Graham Bell only won this race. Over the years, individual parts of the telephone were discovered and developed by different people at different times.

In 1860 Philipp Reis a German science teacher began work on the telephone. Reis was let down by his apparatus - it could reproduce continuous musical notes well but produced indistinct speech. His telephone was shown in demonstrations all over Europe, including one in Scotland while Alexander Graham Bell was there, visiting his father.

Timing is everything. Elisha Gray knew that all too well. On February 14, 1876, the day that Alexander Graham Bell applied for a patent for his version of the telephone, Gray applied for a caveat - a document indicating that he intended to file his own patent claim within three months.

But Gray was a few hours too late - Bell had already filed an actual patent application - and the courts later ruled that this took precedence.

Even so, Gray's claim has its merits - Bell first transmitted the sound of a human voice over a wire, using a liquid transmitter of the microphone type previously developed by Gray and unlike any described in Bell's previous patent applications. He also used an electromagnetic metal-diaphragm receiver of the kind built and used publicly by Gray several months earlier.

Although Mr. Reis and Mr. Gray came very close to the discovery of the telephone, the important break came one summer afternoon, as Alexander Graham Bell was working in his workshop in Boston. He heard an almost inaudible twanging sound from his prototype telephone - a sort of crude harmonica with a clock-spring reed, a magnet and a wire. This was connected to a similar device in another room where his assistant Thomas Watson was working.

Watson had snapped the reed on one of the instruments and from the other device Bell had heard exactly the same sound. It was the first time in the history of the world that a complex sound had been carried along a wire, and reproduced perfectly at the other end.

After hearing their telephone first transmit a sound in June 1875, Bell and Watson spent the next 40 weeks making their telephone actually speak. Finally, on March 10, 1876, Watson heard Bell's voice distinctly in the receiver saying: "Mr. Watson, come here, I want you." Watson, who was in another room, declared that he had heard and understood what Mr. Bell had said.

Within a year of making the first telephone call, Bell and his financial backers - Thomas Sanders and Gardiner G Hubbard - had formed the Bell Telephone Company in the United States.

Unsurprisingly, early demand for the telephone was not great and prior to forming their company Bell and his partners had struggled in their attempts to promote the new invention. At one point they even offered to sell the Bell patents to the Western Union Telegraph Company - Elisha Gray's employers - for $100,000. The offer was spurned - a decision the Western Union was soon to regret bitterly.

America's telegraph company's saw right away that Bell's telephone posed a powerful threat to their businesses and they tried to fight back. The Western Union Company called on Thomas Alva Edison to develop an alternative to Bell's invention. The American Speaking Tele-

phone Company in New York (a Western Union subsidiary) then went head-to-head with The Bell Telephone Company of Boston.

Within months, Bell sued Western Union for infringement of his patents. Western Union argued that it was Elisha Gray who had invented the telephone - but lost the court battle and had to hand over Edison's telephone rights and withdraw from the telephone

Later in 1878 James M. Ormes, a Bell Company employee, was sent to the Southeastern states by Bell Telephone company to survey the potential for telephone expansion in that region and to head off the growing competition of Western Union Telegraph Company which was entering the telephone business. He negotiated the famous "Ormes contract" which bound Western Union to withdraw from the southern territory and on December 20, 1879 Southern Bell Telephone & Telegraph was founded in Atlanta, Georgia covering the seven states of Kentucky, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Florida and Alabama.

History of the many telephone companies is very complex with consolidations and new companies being formed in different sections of the United States and worldwide constantly.

The above information is just the highlights of the Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company that eventually served and made a vast difference in our small community. In 1954 Eagleville's 260 telephone subscribers filled 2 ½ pages in the telephone book. In our current book there are 6 pages of telephone numbers and only the 1st page has approximately 230 numbers. (Quite an increase in the last 53 years.)

Mr. R. E. "Bob" Bain, a local resident, served as the Eagleville Telephone Manager for Southern Bell Telephone Company. Over the years, several different telephone operators worked in t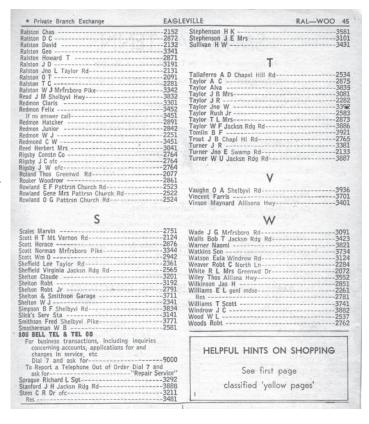he telephone office located in the Bank of Eagleville building on Main Street until the dial–up system was installed. The first operator was Gertrude Elmore. The last call on the old telephone system using an operator was made by a local merchant, Green Hay and the first call on the dial system was made by Mayor W. H. "Buck" Dyer.

Some of the local business's with telephones listed in 1954 were: Bank of Eagleville, Bellenfant Service Station, Blanton's Mobile Garage, Blanton's Auto Parts, Crosslin Motors, Crosslin Supply Co., (Groceries & Furniture), W. H. Dyer Feed & Coal Company, Eagleville School, H. D. Floyd Insurance Agency, Flamingo Motor Court, R. G. Hay Hardware & Harness Shop, Isom's Beauty Shop, Ralph Jones M. D., Lou and Sue Gift Shop, A. S. Lynch Grocery, Lytle's Beauty & Gift Shop, Marshall Bros. Grocery, Puckett Bros Food Market, Rigsby Construction Co., Shelton & Smithson Garage, Slick's Service Station, Dr. C. R. Stem Dentist, E. L. Williams, General Merchandise.

I hope as you look at the names of the subscribers you will also recall good memories of days gone by in our hometown Eagleville.

R. G. Hay making the last call on the Operator-Switchboard Telephone System. L to R: Dr. Robert C. Garrett, W. H. Dyer, R. G. Hay, Jim Marlin, Robert E. Bain, Dr. E. L. Williams, Mr. Lott, (phone co. rep.)

W. H. "Buck" Dyer making the first Dial-Up Telephone Call.