

# A Step Back in Time

By Bobbie Sue Shelton-Lonas

## EARLY TELEPHONE COMMUNICATION – Part Two THE ROCKVALE HOME MUTUAL TELEPHONE COMPANY

While working on my previous Times article about Eagleville's telephone service I noticed the telephone service of Eagleville's sister community, Rockvale, wasn't a part of the same telephone service in 1954. Eagleville was a part of the Southern Bell Telephone Company and Rockvale was still owned by its approximately 122 subscribers, the Rockvale Home Mutual Telephone Company.

According to "The History of Versailles, The Tenth District And Its People: The history of the Rockvale telephone system dates back to 1916, when a few local individuals with initiative, learned the general procedures for establishing a telephone system. The Rockvale Home Mutual Telephone Association was organized under existing state laws and these same citizens, and others, actually

built the Mutual system. They cut the poles, dug the holes, strung the wire, sold mutual stock for \$30.00 a share, bought a Western Electric switchboard, and were in business. Mrs. Ada Rowland operated the switchboard known as "central" or "center" from 1918 to her retirement in 1943. Monthly charges seldom exceeded one dollar. Connecting agreements were later worked out with the Murfreesboro and Eagleville systems and no toll was charged to these areas. There were seldom as many as one hundred paying stock holder-users. Except to a few within about one hundred yards of "central", no private lines existed--all party lines and as many as eight on occasions. "Eavesdropping" was commonplace and acceptable. Numbers were two or three digits, such as 24-3, which meant three rings on line

twenty-four.

In the fall of 1933, in the heart of the great depression, the board elected by the users, voted a free months' service and reduced monthly residential service to seventy-five cents. This later proved to be the downfall of the system as an ice storm in March 1934 laid the poles and wires on the ground. It was rebuilt at wages of \$1.00 - \$1.50 per day with as much salvageable wire and poles as possible. The system never fully recovered due to lack of capital and operating funds for construction, maintenance, and expansion and for wages for usually two employees, the "central" board operator and the service man.

When the availability of capital and management direction from the Federal Government came into being through the

*Continued on next page.....*

ROCKVALE, TENN.	
Rockvale Home Mutual Telephone Co.	
ALPHABETICAL TELEPHONE DIRECTORY	
Adcock J F.....	24-5
Best C L Rev.....	314
Bowling Herbert.....	223
Bowman Ray r.....	31-1½
Brannon Grover C r.....	39-2
Brannon Jim r.....	29-3
Brannon Lee r.....	48
Brown G F r.....	26-1½
Brown Linnie Mrs.....	11
Brown R B r.....	23-4
Burns G W r Eagleville.....	10-5
Burns Horace H r.....	312
Burns I P r.....	25-2
Burns I P Granary.....	25-1½
Burns T P Sr.....	472
Burns Tommy Jr.....	473
Carlton Alf r.....	35-2
Carlton B W r.....	38
Carlton Bud r.....	15
Carlton Henry H Mrfrsboro.....	211-X
Clark Herman r.....	18-1½
Clark & Williams Groc.....	313
Clark Y L r.....	10-2½
Cooper Franklin T Mrfrsboro.....	215
Covington J N r.....	10-2
Covington Jeff r.....	36
Dalton H A r.....	186
Deilbridge Margaret.....	404
Douglas J C genl mdse Christiana.....	192-X
Evans Silas r.....	18-4
Farris D H r.....	18-2
Farris Dewitt Jr r.....	16-1½
Farris Garage.....	304
Farris J W.....	306
Farris Sam Cox r.....	353
Farris Tanner B r.....	18-2½
Free Robert r.....	29-1½
Frizzell Kenneth.....	253
Frost E L genl mdse.....	35-4
Garrett Holt r.....	28-6
Gordon Graham r.....	39-2½
Hale J C r.....	8-2
Hayes R R r.....	163
Heath Tom r.....	29-4
Hodes Wm Mrs.....	305
Holden F Gilbert.....	254
Holden T F r.....	23-2
Holden T F & Son genl mdse Overall.....	23-3
Holton Lee.....	355
Jackson Annie Mrs r.....	1
Jackson J R r.....	35-2½
Jarrett Aubrey r.....	16-2
Jarrett Bill r.....	23-5
Lamb E L Mrs.....	351-X
Lamb Minnie Mrs.....	43
Lamb Nat r.....	356
Lowe Neri.....	252-X
Lyon James r.....	39-1½
Manning C D r.....	25-5
Manning Henry.....	166
Manning Robt Earl.....	61-X
Manning Sallie Mrs r.....	16-4
Maxwell W Lake r.....	31-2½
McKnight Earl r.....	29-6
McLain Chas W r.....	492

* Private Branch Exchange	ROCKVALE	NAN—YEA	59
Nance H J r.....	24-3	Stegall B D Mrs r.....	32
Nance Otho r.....	24-2	Stegall Whitney r.....	32
Odom F R.....	262	Taylor Alf P.....	44
Patton Willie J.....	394	Taylor F I r.....	494
Pinkerton Clay.....	42	Useton W C r.....	294
Pinkerton Jno D r.....	244	Vaughn Talmadge r.....	18-5
Post Office.....	9	Vaughter W E Mrfrsboro.....	213
Powers Wash Jr r.....	39-5	West Ola Mrs r.....	106
Puckett W M r.....	4	Westbrooks F L Groc.....	196
Ralston G C r.....	10-3	Whitehead Sisters r.....	38
Read Hollis r.....	29-2½	Whitus T R r Mrfrsboro.....	212
Read T H r.....	292	Whitworth Leonard r.....	214
Rockvale High School.....	372	Williams E O r.....	26-4
Rowland Joe Mrfrsboro.....	193	Williams Jas M.....	282
Rowland W L farm.....	265	Williams L B r.....	27
Sandlin I D Christiana.....	195	Williams Oden Miss r.....	50-1½
Scott A A r.....	2	Williams R A genl mdse.....	7
Scott Howard r.....	14	Res.....	4-6
Sharber Bill r.....	41	Williams T Edwin r.....	502
Sharber Florence Mrs r.....	20	Williams T H r.....	504
Sharber Harold.....	183-X	Williams Willie Floyd r.....	28-3
Sharber Homer H.....	62	Wood Roy r Christiana.....	192
Sharber J R Dolphus r.....	183	Woodson Grady.....	34
Sharber Leslie F r.....	493	Woodson J D r.....	402
Simmons L H.....	503	Woodson Leslie F r.....	63
Smith H Norman Christiana.....	194	Woodson Louise Mrs r.....	6-4
Smotherman Jesse r.....	505	Wright Bill r.....	26-3½
Smotherman W D r.....	31-6	Yeargan C E r.....	33
Stegall W M r Mrfrsboro.....	45		

Subscribers of the Rockvale Home Mutual Telephone Company in 1954. Several business listed: I P Burns Granary, Clark & Williams Grocery, J. D. Douglas, General Merchandise, E. L. Frost, General Merchandise, T. F. Holden & Son, General Merchandise, F. L. Westbrooks, Grocery, R. A. Williams, General Merchandise



Mrs. Ada Rowland working on the Rockvale Telephone Switchboard

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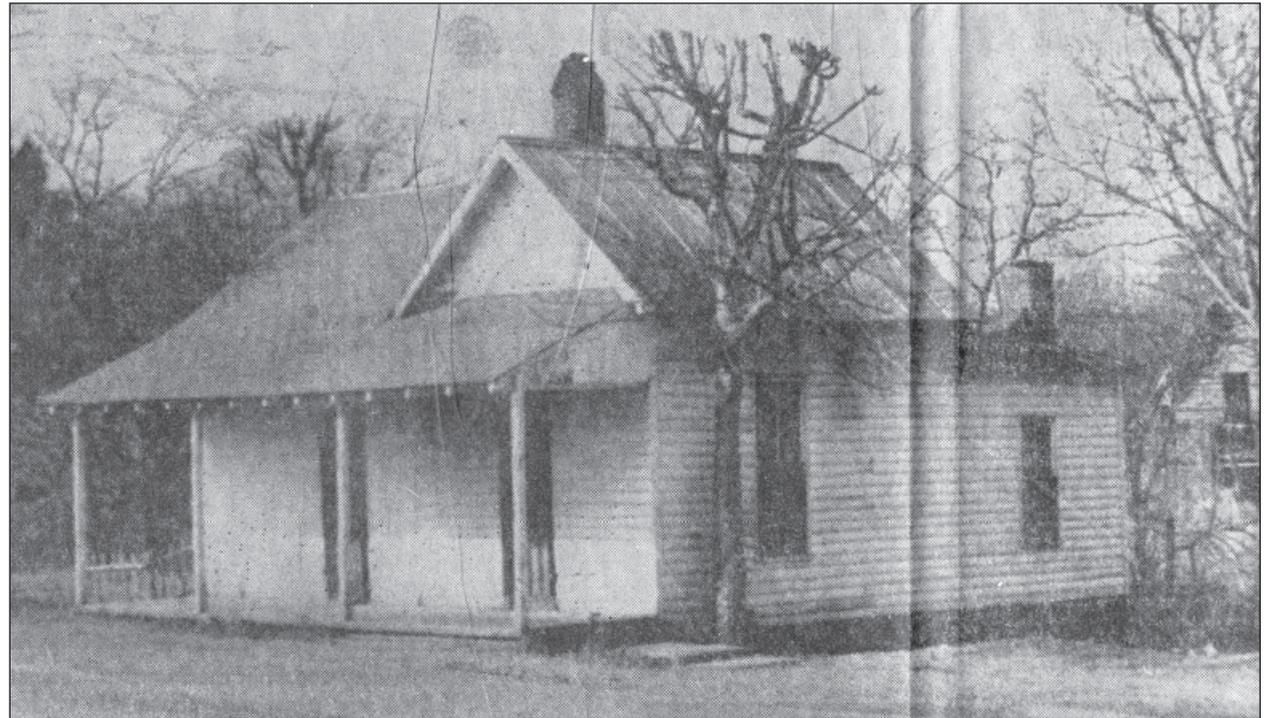
telephone Amendment to the Rural Electrification Act, which put competition in the telephone business, the local citizens chose to let South Central Bell have the franchise rather than continue a small system and non-profit basis with local ownership. Thus the locally owned telephone system appeared to go the way of the one-room schools into a much larger unit state

and nationwide. First eight party lines were tolerated; now only single party service is acceptable. \* \* \*

According to an article written in 1977 the late Mrs. Evie Lee Burns, daughter of Mrs. Ada Holton was quoted, "Mama would sit there hour after hour answering the calls. When there was a sickness or a death in the community, people made a lot of calls at night. Mama didn't mind. The next morning, she would be back at her stool in front of the switchboard. People would want to call their families and friends. Until Mama moved in the building where the switchboard was located, there was nobody there at night," said Mrs. Burns. "You just couldn't make a call at night." She also remembered there would be emergencies and somebody wouldn't answer the phone to get the message. If it weren't too far, her Mother would walk to give them their message.

In the years that have passed, switchboard like the one Mrs. Ada used is a thing of the past. In 1977 the old switchboard used by Mrs. Ada and other operators was located in a barn in Rockvale. Mr. and Mrs. Burns acquired the switchboard from the barn owners and Mr. Burns and Jack Scott, who had worked with the Rockvale phone company for a number of years as a troubleshooter, completely restored the old Rockvale switchboard.

This old Western Electric Telephone Switchboard was donated by Mr. and Mrs. Homer Burns, as a working switchboard to Cannonsburg, a pioneer village, in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Rutherford County is very fortunate to have several buildings and many rare and antique items from area communities preserved in a central location as Cannonsburg.



Home of the Rockvale Telephone Exchange in early years.