

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, February 5, 2018

**Evolution of Communication:** Printing presses dated from the 1500s in Europe, and Benjamin Franklin was one of the first in the American colonies to make full use of them. Newspapers and printed broadsides provided important news. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, literate people wrote lengthy letters, both for business purposes and for personal correspondence. With the coming of the telegraph and the Morse code of dots and dashes, emergency information could be sent *fast* from one telegraph office to another, usually in a station along a railroad. It was not cheap to send a telegram, however, and this means of communication was used only in emergencies. By the end of the century, early typewriters with two-fingered operators were taking over for business correspondence, and even the telephone was reaching a very few customers outside the large cities.

Partly because it had long been done that way, and partly because other means of communication were too expensive, family information would be transmitted by female members of the family to relatives and friends in beautiful longhand script, which they had learned in school. A letter of several pages could be sent anywhere in the country for 2 cents. Within 300 miles or so, it would be delivered the day after it was mailed. Lizzie Marshall corresponded regularly with her sister, Sadie Passmore, who lived on a farm just two miles from Auburn Heights. When my mother first lived at Auburn Heights, correspondence between her and her family in Middletown and her sister in Ridley Park was frequent. That's how it was done when I came into the world.

The first telephone in Yorklyn was at the snuff mill in the late 1880s. It served as a community phone but was used only in emergencies. The fibre mill office in No. 1 Mill had a phone by 1905, usually answered by Homer Kratz (Homer owned a Model 72 Stanley about 1913, and he accompanied my father on many Stanley trips from 1947 through 1956). By the late 1920s, we had a single phone in the dining room at Auburn Heights with a phone number of Hockessin 36. With no dial telephones outside the large cities, there was an operator or "central" at Hockessin, who knew everyone with a phone in the area. Many customers were on a "party line" which was cheaper. There was little privacy on a party line as everyone on the line could listen in on conversations on that line. Sometimes, it would take a while to "get through," as others would be tying up the line. To make a call, you simply asked the operator for "Hockessin 36" or whatever. Ours was a private line with an increased cost.

By the early 1930s, Wilmington phone customers all had rotary dial phones. A few years later, it was tried in Newark. Hockessin was the first country exchange to be dialized, and our number at Auburn Heights changed to 5131. We could dial Hockessin and Newark without charge, but we still had to dial "O" and ask the operator for numbers in Wilmington and Kennett Square. By 1940, I think we could dial Wilmington numbers, but the cost was 10 cents, and we needed to go through an operator for a Kennett call, which was 5 cents, since it was closer.

The U.S. Postal Service was still the most practical way to communicate. About 1932, the rate for a first class letter went from 2 cents to 3 cents, and postcards were a penny until 1948. Packages were usually sent "Parcel Post" at a reasonable rate, and books and magazines went at a "Book Rate," which was very nominal. Western Union and Postal Telegraph were the primary telegraph companies, having convenient offices in cities and country railroad stations. Charges were usually "per word" and were very expensive compared with U.S. mail. Night Letters were popular, whereby a message sent before midnight would be delivered by 8:00 the next morning, and the rate was about half that of a regular telegram. While telegrams were often delivered by boys on their bicycles, those of us too far from the Wilmington telegraph office would be called on the phone and the message read to us. Outgoing telegrams could be sent the same way. While local use of the telephone had become very popular, long distance phone calls were very expensive and used only in emergency. To illustrate, when I was called to active duty in the AAF in 1943, an 11 P.M. phone call from the Western Union office in Wilmington delivered the message, "Report for active duty at Brown University, Providence, RI, immediately." When I was afraid of being transferred to the infantry six months later, I phoned my father from a Providence pay phone and talked about 15 minutes at a cost of \$3.75 (not much today, but I was being paid \$50 per month).

As the dial telephone system spread to all of Delaware and across the country, phone numbers had to be standardized. Large cities had always preferred two letters and then five numbers, thinking it was easier to remember than seven numbers. Remember Glenn Miller's "PA 6-5000," the phone number for the Pennsylvania Hotel in New York? The Wilmington exchange was OL for "Olympia," the same as "65." Hockessin was CE for "Cedar," the same as 23. So, our new number at Auburn Heights was CE 9-5215 (after interim numbers of Hockessin 5131, 513, and 215). Soon it became evident that people preferred all numbers, so "Cedar 9" became 239, and so it was throughout the Bell Telephone System. Soon we could "direct dial" to anywhere in the world. Expensive at first, the telephone is a very reasonable way to communicate today.

Someone my age finds it difficult to keep up with modern communication, which changes rapidly. The electronic and computer age has taken over. How much further can we go? Young people will figure out huge advances in communication still unknown today. Lost is the beautiful handwriting of the 19th century, and most of that which came between.