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In Cleveland County's Early Days

By MAMIE JONES *May 25 - 1952*

THE TELEPHONE COMES TO CLEVELAND

Seventy-five years ago, June 2, 1875, the idea for the telephone was born in the mind of Alexander Graham Bell. The next day he gave his assistant instructions for making the first telephone. The patent was issued in 1876, before Bell was 30 years old.

The first telephone exchange in the world was set up in New Haven, Conn., on New Year's day, 1878. Less than two years later, the first telephone exchange in North Carolina was opened in Raleigh in September, 1879.

According to a story by H. E. C. Bryant in The Charlotte Observer, a telephone exchange was set up in Charlotte about 1880, or maybe it was 1882. Two years later phone service was discontinued, and 50 miles of wire strung over the town was taken down and sold. However, within a few years another telephone exchange was set up.

The very first telephone connection in Shelby was between the residence of Dr. Victor McBrayer and his drug store. There was also some sort of telephonic arrangement between the hotels and the livery stables, so the livery men could know when the hotel wanted a conveyance sent up for a hotel guest. These were crude home-made phones.

SHELBY'S FIRST EXCHANGE

Will Shuford set up and operated the first telephone exchange in Shelby around 1895. The offices were over J. J. McMurry and company's store, the building now occupied by Cohen's department store. The first switchboard operators were Misses Hattie Durham, Luna Young, and Johnny Young.

Later, A. Webb Eskridge bought the equipment and the franchise from Will Shuford and moved the equipment to the Eskridge home (that great big house) on the cor-

ner of North Morgan and West Marion streets. About 1900 Mr. Eskridge appointed his son, Charles, then about 16 years old, to manage this exchange.

TRAGIC DEATH

It was at this telephone office on Sunday afternoon, December 1, 1901, that three teen-age boys, namely, Lee Pope, Guy Eskridge, and Frank Kendall, all of whom were telephone employes, were playing with a pistol.

Guy Eskridge put into the pistol what each of the boys thought was a blank cartridge. Lee Pope was handling the gun. The cartridge was not blank! Frank Kendall was shot and died within an hour.

PHONES AT LAWNSDALE

According to Dr. Everett B. Latimer and banker George Blanton, the very first long distance telephone communication lines in this

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county were between Upper Cleveland and Shelby, and were in use around 1890 or 1891. This was long before Shelby had a telephone exchange.

There was direct wire communication service between the offices of the Cleveland cotton mills, now Cleveland Mill and Power Co., the homes of Maj. H. F. Schenck and John F. Schenck, in what is now Lawndale, the office of Elias A. Morgan at Double Shoals cotton mills, and five phones in Shelby, which were: Western Union Telegraph office, the bank of H. D. Lee & Co. (in which Maj. Sam Greene was a partner), June Gardner's drug store, the offices of the Two-C's railroad, now Seaboard Air Line, and the office of the Three-C's railroad, now Southern.

FIRST LONG DISTANCE CONVERSATION

I have been told, though I cannot verify it, that the very first long distance telephone communication lines in this county were set up between the offices of Elias A. Morgan of Double Shoals cotton mill, and the Shelby office of the Western Union Telegraph company of which Sam Harris was manager.

When the electricians, Lector Eskridge and his assistants, had completed the installation of the

necessary apparatus in Shelby they went to Double Shoals to install Mr. Morgans' phone. As I have just stated, there was no telephone exchange here, and very few people in the little village knew how to use a telephone, and it was necessary to have some one in the Western Union office who did know how to talk over a phone in order that the workmen at Double Shoals might test the wiring and connection. David St. George, a 16-year-old boy who lived in Wilmington and had learned how to use a phone, was left in Western Union here to answer when Double Shoals should call.

The workmen were delayed getting the phone installed at Double Shoals, and darkness came on and the moon was shining before they were ready to put the call through. Lector Eskridge suggested to Mr. Morgan that he have the honor of making the first call over the new phone. Mr. Morgan had never talked over a phone. He didn't know what to say. In fact, he was quite embarrassed and, for a second, forgot that the distance from Shelby to Double Shoals was just 10 miles, and seeing the full moon shining over the river, he spoke into the mouthpiece and said, "David, is the moon up down there yet?" These words, I am told, constitute the first long distance message in Cleveland county.

ALL PHONES ON SAME LINE

Those early phones were quite crude, box-like affairs which were nailed to the wall. To get connection with the residence or office desired, it was necessary to give a certain number of rings with a bell that was part of the phone, and then take down the receiver. When one phone was wanted everybody's bell on that line rang.

George Blanton tells this story on Jack Beam, the Negro janitor at the bank, more than 50 years ago. Jack was not at the bank during the daytime and did not understand the multiple rings. One evening while Jack was sweeping, the phone was ringing and he didn't know how to answer it. He went to it and without taking down the receiver, spoke into the mouthpiece: "Dey's done all gone. Aint nobody here to answer de phone." The telephone kept ringing. Jack went back and again, without taking down the receiver, spoke into the mouthpiece: "I done told you ain't nobody here to aswer. Whut you keep a rigig for?"

According to Z. J. Thompson, the Will Shuford referred to at the beginning of this article, was originally from Belwood, but worked for many years as conductor of a passenger train in Florida before he established the telephone exchange here.

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