

Chelmsford Early Telephone System

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In 1903 some merchants in Chelmsford Centre wanted telephone connection between their homes and their places of business. There was no organized company; meetings were called as needed. After investigating cost of wire, etc., they made a deal with a Boston concern to buy telephones through Mr. Crosby, who lived on Turnpike Road.

Wall phones, which used two dry batteries of the same kind as those used in the first autos, were hand cranked. As they were all on one circuit, when one rang, all rang.

By a sort of gentlemen's agreement subscribers were assessed proportionately for general expenses, such as line breaks, and central station installation.

Some wires which connected these first subscribers were strung on trees and buildings. The following places were connected: the Grain and Saw Mill run by H.C. Sweetser and George W. Day in Cushing Place with Herbert C. Sweetser's home on Boston Road (the Hatch House); E.W. Sweetser's Market in the wooden block by the railroad tracks (Vlahos Building) with his residence, 20 Chelmsford Street; and Eben T. Adams' Grovery, where the First Bank and Trust Company is located in the former Odd Fellows Building in Central Square, with his home on North Road, the site of St. Mary's Church.

Other phones were located in the Fred Hazen house, one of the oldest houses in town, and in 1964 occupied by William Harvey, Sr.; Joseph E. Warren's home at 91 Boston Road; Edwin C. Perham's home on the hill at 61 Westford Street.

From the Perham's the telephone lines ran across the fields to Littleton Road, where they were attached to the Chelmsford Ginger Ale Building. Most of the lines were carried on 3" to 4" diameter cedar poles.

Gradually others who wanted phones were allowed to join if they installed necessary wires. The system increased until there were perhaps fifteen phones in the Centre and a few in South Chelmsford.

In the Centre Harry L. Parkhurst, a coal merchant and station agent for the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad, had a phone in the depot and in his home (in 1964 the Dr. David Latham place at 38 Boston Road).

Arthur Dutton put up a line from his greenhouse in Pine Hill Road to his house at the corner of Locust Road and High Street.

From the Dutton's the line went up Locust Road to the corner of Robin Hill Road, and then to South Chelmsford. There John Emerson's grocery store was connected with his home on Maple Street beside the railroad track. Lyman Byam, Station Agent for the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad, had the South Chelmsford depot connected with his residence at the junction of Acton and Robin Hill Roads. Emile Piagnon had a phone at his slaughterhouse in South Chelmsford; George B. Wright had one at his nursery, 187 Acton Road; and Frank Byam had one at his residence.

The twenty to twenty-five phones so overloaded the Chelmsford system that when a phone rang and all the subscribers listened in, the signal was too weak. Two circuits became necessary; one in the Centre and one at South Chelmsford, with a central office in the second house on the right on High Street near the Acton Road intersection, with Mrs. Herbert Knowlton as central operator. Then anyone wishing to telephone to the South section from the Center section, and vice versa, called Mrs. Knowlton to make the connection.

The New England Telephone and Telegraph Co. installed more and more phones, giving out-of-town service; and at some time after 1909 that company bought out the subscribers to the local system. The earliest of the company telephones put in before the local system, were at Parkhurst's store at the Centre and at J. Roland Parkhurst's greenhouses.

When Arnold Perham's father, Edwin C. Perham, was animal inspector in Chelmsford, he walked from his home at 61 Westford Street to S.W. Parkhurst's store (later Erickson's) at the corner of Chelmsford St. and North Road, to telephone the Lowell Rendering Company to come for hides or carcasses.

Wherever there were New England Telephone and Telegraph Co. poles, the local company had been allowed to attach their lines, but there were not many, and no electric light wires. There were a few poles along North Road to J. Roland Parkhurst's greenhouses on Parkhurst Road (now Dr. Blechman's house) and there may have been a line along Boston Road.