

The Telephone Arrives in Chelmsford

In 1903 several merchants in Chelmsford Center wanted a telephone connection between their homes and places of business. The American Telephone & Telegraph Co. was in its infancy at this time, so these businessmen chose to do it on their own. Once they did their planning and cost analysis, they arranged through a Mr. Crosby, who lived on Turnpike Road, to buy telephones from a Boston company.

Wall phones at the time used two dry batteries, like those used in early auto ignitions to reproduce the voice, and a hand-crank magneto to ring the bell. Telephones were all on one circuit, so when one rang, they all rang.



By gentlemen's agreement subscribers were assessed proportionately for general expenses, such as line breaks, and central station installation. Some wires connecting the first subscribers were strung on trees and buildings.

Some of the earliest business to home connections were the Cushing Place grain and sawmill run by Herbert Sweetser and George Day with Herbert's home at 187 Boston Road; Ervin Sweetser's market in Central House with his residence at 20 Chelmsford Street; and Eben Adams' grocery in the Odd Fellows Building, with his home at 25 North Road, now the site of St. Mary's Church.

More homes and businesses joined into a single line system including the Fred Hazen house at 103 Boston Road; Joseph Warren's home at 91 Boston Road; and Edwin Perham's home at 76 Westford Street. From Perham's the telephone line ran across the fields to Littleton Road where it was attached to the Chelmsford Ginger Ale Building. Most of the lines were carried on 3-to-4-inch diameter cedar poles.

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

Chelmsford. In the Center Harry 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 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 at 320 Acton Road connected with his home at 23 Maple Road next to 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 305 Acton Road. Emile Paignon had a phone at his 66 Proctor Road slaughterhouse; George B. Wright had one at his 187 Acton Road nursery; and Frank Byam had one at his 19 Maple Road residence.

Once there were about twenty-five phones all connected on the Chelmsford system it became overloaded. If a phone rang and all the subscribers listened in, the voice signal was too faint. To fix this, two circuits were implemented: one for the Center and one for South Chelmsford, with a central office at 29 High Street and resident Minnie Knowlton as operator. Anyone wishing to call the South section from the Center, and vice versa, called Minnie to make the connection.

As time went on the New England Telephone and Telegraph Co. installed more phones, provided out-of-town Service, and sometime after 1909 bought out the original Chelmsford subscribers.

Reference: The recollections of Arnold C. Perham as dictated to Hazel Stevens and published in the March 10, 1968, issue of the "Lowell Sunday Sun"