

MEMORIES

Charles J. Glidden — pioneer in 3 fields

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(George A. Parkhurst, a resident of Hildreth Hills in Westford and a longtime journalist, has dipped into his own museum and archives for this tidbit on an accomplished Lowell native.)

By GEORGE A. PARKHURST

LOWELL — Citizens of an eastern European city gazed in amazement — and possibly fear — at the first horseless carriage driven along their streets.

Thousands of miles away, in Lowell, a small group of men looked on during the opening of what's believed to be the world's first general telephone exchange.

And just after the turn of the century, several Lowell citizens gathered in a field near the gas holders on School Street to witness the filling of a large gas balloon.

All of these events had one thing in common: In each instance, the starring performer was a local man of vision, a pioneer.

Charles Jasper Glidden was born in Lowell on Aug. 29, 1857. He attended public schools in Lowell until the age of 15, when he entered the business world as a telegraph messenger for the Northern Telegraph Company on Central Street.

At 16, he was appointed night manager of the Franklin Telegraph Company in Springfield, remaining only a month before being transferred to a management position in the company's office in Manchester, N.H. When the Atlantic and Pacific Telegraph Company was organized in 1873, Glidden was appointed mana-



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ger, a position he held until A&P's consolidation with Western Union in 1877.

Successful test

In 1876, while working for Alexander Graham Bell, he arranged for a test of Bell's telephone between Manchester and Boston over the lines of the Atlantic and Pacific. The test was successful.

In 1877, Glidden suggested the organization of an exchange system to the Bell Company. He was told that if he could sign up 50 subscribers in Lowell, an exchange would be organized.

Glidden secured the 50 subscribers and in Lowell he set up the first telephone exchange in the world. He also arranged the first long-distance telephone connection between Lowell and Boston in 1879.



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That same year, the exchange was sold to a syndicate composed of William A. Ing-ham, Charles J. Glidden and others. This group expanded their telephone interests to include exchanges in Maine, New Hampshire and all of Massachusetts (except Boston). With the later addition of Boston, the whole was organized into the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company.

In 1883, the syndicate purchased the telephone and telegraph interests of Minnesota, South Dakota, Arkansas, Texas and Cuyahoga County in Ohio, which included the city of Cleveland. At one time, Glidden controlled one-sixth of the Bell system in the United States.

In 1892, Glidden took an active part in organizing the Traders National Bank, of

which he was elected president.

Balloon enthusiast

He was an avid gas balloon enthusiast in the early years of the 20th century, making three ascensions in Paris, at least four in England and more in the U.S., for a total of nearly 50. His balloons were inflated with lighter-than-air illuminating gas, unlike the hot air balloons we see today. He felt that gas from the holders on School Street was the best he had used.

Excerpts from the Sept. 9, 1909 newspaper report of the ascension of "The Balloon Boston," Glidden's 34th, tell of a typical flight. Mayor George H. Brown was a guest passenger on this ascension, which started near the gas works on School Street.

"The 'Boston' is one of Mr. Glidden's lesser-sized ships, although it is a big affair, taking 35,000 cubic feet of gas. The filling began about noon and continued to about 3 o'clock before all was satisfactory to Mr. Glidden and his corps of experienced assistants."

The balloon lifted off at 3:56 p.m. and returned to earth about two hours later. Although the crew had expected to be in the air for about three hours and land near Seaboard, the unpredictable currents carried the balloon to Graniteville.

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