

A HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TELEPHONE IN ABILENE, KANSAS, 1879 – 1975

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Despite setbacks, lines continued eastward and by April 21, 1904, work was complete. The *Reflector* heralded the event in an article entitled “Hello Kansas City.”

The new Union long distance telephone line was completed to Kansas City today and the first telephone call went over the wire at 1:30 p.m. This line is a direct one from Abilene to K.C. and is built in the most serviceable manner with the best material possible. All northwest Kansas will talk over this line, the switch being in the Brown Telephone office, Reflector Block.

Before the month was over, C.L. Brown realized that the facilities over the Reflector Publishing Co. were too confining. Abilene’s telephone service now exceeded 400 customers. More than 1,100 phones in Dickinson County were owned and operated by the Brown Telephone Company. With the added burden of long distance toll switching, Brown’s small, obsolete switchboards were overflowing.

T.E. Dewey was the owner of the Brady Building, located on the northwest corner of Third and Cedar. Since the building had been badly damaged by flood, when Brown expressed interest, Dewey eagerly sold the property. Two days later, Brown announced the forthcoming move and began remodeling of the vintage structure. C.L. intended to use only the second floor of the newly named Brown Building. To help meet expenses, the first floor was rented out. Davis Shoe Store occupied the corner rooms, while Abilene Plumbing Company took the north display rooms and part of the basement.

Cutover from the old office to the new Brown Building took more than half a year. At the heart of the change was a new switchboard manufactured by the Kellogg Company of Chicago, Illinois. This was the first convertible switchboard manufactured by that company to be installed in the United States. The Installation made the Brown Company one of the most up-to-date independent systems in the country. The board was, in reality, two No. 4562 cabinets set side by side. The four local positions and one rural position consisted of 690 drops with trunks between the positions. A chief

operator's desk, a two-position toll board and a wire chief's desk rounded out the new office's equipment. Operators were able to use breastplate transmitters for the first time and the improved equipment made telephony much more pleasant.

Outside construction was necessary to make such a radical move. All business subscribers were to have metallic lines instead of the old grounded circuits. Additional cables were stretched throughout the entire downtown area. The new Brown central office was wired into the system at the southwest corner of the telephone building. A wooden ramp extended from the mainframe to the heavily wired pole outside the window.

Abilene's *Reflector* took time out from commenting on all the hard work to poke some fun at the telephone's influence on love.

The telephone company is arranging for a patent by which the young man who attempts to spark his girl over the phone will receive a shock. The patent is in the nature of a dictionary of cuss words, which the manager at central is supposed to commit to memory, and when the conversation reaches the most interesting stage, the manager is supposed to butt in and let them go. If that doesn't cause a shock the patent is a failure.

On January 26, 1905, official cutover to the new telephone offices was made. The \$5,000 [\$121,951 today] worth of new equipment was the talk of the town. When a specialist came all the way from Chicago to install the final wires, Abilenians knew they had "arrived." Within the same month an agreement was reached with the Holland Mutual Line near town. In return for a fixed sum per month, farmers in the Independent system could call into Abilene.

By this time, the cardboard lists of telephone numbers hanging by each phone were getting a bit dog-eared. People wanted and needed a new telephone directory so Brown went to work on it. All persons were asked to verify their names and addresses so the correct entry would appear in the new book. Those people thinking about installing phones were encouraged to do so so their names would also appear. By the end of April, the directories were out.

Courtesy of Dickinson County Heritage Center

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