

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

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pp. 17 – 22 (Setbacks & Innovations)

The *Reflector* praised the progress of Brown's company when the new phone directories were issued in June 1909. A large part of the goodwill was probably the result of the lucrative printing contract between the two. According to the newspaper:

About 2000 new telephone directories for the Brown Telephone Co. have been printed by the Reflector and are ready for distribution. The book contains over 5000 names and is the best telephone directory that has been put out by the company. There are over 1000 Independent telephones in Abilene and 1250 miles of telephone wire. There is also four miles of lead covered cable. About 6000 telephones are scattered over Dickinson County. It takes about 7500 miles of wire to connect these phones.

The Brown Telephone Co. has 11 telephone girls at the board during the day who answer over 7000 calls daily. The long distance operator handles about 250 long distance calls a day. The company has about 40 employees on its pay roll monthly and in this way it is able to give the public excellent service considering the amount of work to be handled daily.

In July, Abilene was visited by the most severe windstorms in its history. Trees were uprooted by the hundreds, barns collapsed and

the corn crop was virtually wiped out. The Brown Telephone Company suffered a serious setback. Miles of line were torn down and scattered. Of all the city telephones, only twelve remained in operation. Brown scoured the town for men and collected fifty who were paid from \$3.50 [\$81.39 today] to \$5.00 [\$116.27 today] per day to help with repairs. Several merchants even volunteered to help. Unbelievably, within five days all the Abilene phones were working. The loss was estimated at \$2,000 [\$46,511 today].

Even though the Missouri and Kansas Telephone Company had been operating at a loss since 1903, Bruce Gemmill, the local superintendent, still had hopes for a competing exchange. Early in 1910, Gemmill received word that the Bell exchange would soon have to vacate its central office location at Third and Broadway. The Abilene National Bank, having purchased the property four years earlier, was ready to raze the old building and begin construction on a new one for itself. The only vacancy Gemmill could find in town was on the second floor over the Minick and Taylor Hardware Store. This new office was located on the southwest corner of Third and Cedar, right across the street from the Brown Telephone Company. In fact, the competing operators could stare at each other through the second story windows.

C.L. Brown's telephone system had become so lucrative by late 1909 that he began thinking about establishing a second company for long distance lines. Thus, on January 1, 1910, the Home Telephone & Telegraph Co. was formed. This new firm, with Brown as secretary, conducted its business from the same offices as the Brown Telephone Co. and the Union Telephone and Telegraph Co. In March the Home Company received franchises to set exchanges at Peabody and Halstead. During the first three months of its business, The Home Company increased its revenue more than 25 per cent. Businessmen considered that remarkable, especially during the winter months.

Brown continued to add telephone property to his growing empire. When Salina granted a franchise for an independent telephone exchange, Brown eagerly purchased all the material of the new company and began running toll lines into the city. In March, a large portion of the stock in the Concordia Telephone Company was purchased by C.L. Brown. Abilene citizens were asked to buy securities and help finance these corporate moves. A typical ad ran like this:

Is your money earning anything for you? Why not put it to work. We will pay 6% on every dollar you invest. The security is absolutely guaranteed. It is free from taxation or assessments. And is a lien on a company's property. It is convertible into first mortgage bonds. For particulars ask Home Telephone and Telegraph Company. A Kansas State Public Service Corporation.

New experiments in service and equipment were constantly being conducted. For years, telephone crews had to dig pole holes by hand using special long-handled shovels and picks. The hottest thing in town, the summer of 1910, was a mechanical auger that was rumored capable of digging a three-foot hole in three minutes. Then there was Clyde Sweet, Abilene boy who made good. Clyde had made rapid progress in telegraphy, starting as a messenger boy and working his way up to first-class operator. He was to be the chief operator in the new post office being established in the Brown block

Brown realized that by offering to put all downtown wires under ground, his company was in a good position to ask for a rate increase. The City Council compromised and, in doing so, issued Ordinance No. 358. By the terms of this document, the Brown Telephone company would be allowed to install only central

battery phones in the future. For central battery service, Brown was permitted to charge \$2.50 [\$55.55 today] per month for businesses and \$1.50 [\$33.33 today] for residences. Desk sets and continental receivers cost an additional 25 cents [\$5.55 today]. Furthermore, when the population of Abilene reached 6,000, Brown could raise phone rates by another 25 cents per month.

In return for these concessions, Brown agreed to begin underground work immediately. His conduits were to be in by December 1, 1910, and all wires were to be installed by December 1, 1912. The underground line was to run east and west on Third Street from Walnut to Olive streets. Laterals were placed on all north-south alleys and several major north-south streets. In the construction, over 2,000 pieces of tile were used, each with two to six openings. The system was placed three feet under the surface, and connections were made accessible by man holes. A consulting engineer from Omaha was even brought in to supervise the work.

As street construction continued, several other events took place. A new telephone book was issued, listing almost 1,200 phones in Abilene and over 5,000 in the county. In this book, four-digit phone numbers were used for the first time, making the old numbers such as "R34" obsolete. Brown created still another sensation when he introduced the "Brownies." These boys wearing snappy brown uniforms, could be seen riding all over town on their bicycles, delivering packages and messages from the Brown building.

The shocker of the year occurred when Miss Bertha Benignus, a Brown company telephone operator, was found dead in her bedroom, killed by chloroform. She was to have been married the next day, a fact which seemed to compound the tragedy. Foul play was at first suspected, later authorities admitted the possibility of suicide. Unfortunately the case was never solved.

Courtesy of Dickinson County Heritage Center

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