

I Remember Old Tuscaloosa

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By Fred Maxwell

TUSCALOOSA'S first telephone was put in commission in 1883 with 20 subscribers. I do not know the corporate name or structure of the first telephone system but I did know that Mr. Don Roman was its manager and, as far as I was concerned, the owner in the late 1890s.

The office and plant were located just east of the present Druid Theater. The business office was in the front but the rear room held the equipment for the telephone system which was so fascinating to me as a small boy.

The "exchange" was in the center of the equipment room. A "central" (they now use a four syllable word, "operator") sat in front of the switchboard to answer the incoming calls and to connect the caller to the desired number. This was long before dialing, so the call was placed through central.

There was room for just one central at the switchboard and Mr. Roman served as a standby central. There were not too many telephones in the city at that time (my father's wholesale grocery had Number 5 as its call number) and central served as information also.

It was not uncommon for callers to call by name instead of by number. As an example a caller would ask to speak to Mrs. Smith. The operator might reply "I'll call her number if you wish but she is over at Mrs. Jones' house right now."

Mr. Roman was a kind man. On a few occasions he connected a receiver (ear piece) to the central connection so I could hear both sides of incoming calls. Some calls were very interesting. I was also the recipient of some discarded pieces of equipment and short pieces of copper wire.

How "tempers" do "fugit." About 10 years later there were many more

telephones on the system and several cities within the state could be reached by long distance. And my interest changed from switchboards to centrals. Although I did not know central personally I did know her voice and I appreciated her help when I called my girl friend and the line was busy. Central volunteered to call me just as soon as the line was available.

On one occasion after I had played a phonograph record (Edison cylindrical record) to a friend over the telephone I received a call from central asking me to replay one of the records for her. She suggested that I play again on Sunday morning and she would connect the phones to her friend who was a central in Selma, stating that Sunday morning was a very quiet time for a central.

I told my Uncle Will about the appointment and he suggested that I bring my records to his apartment and use some of his records also.

On Sunday morning after we started our program of phonograph music over the telephone we were informed that Selma central was now on the line. Then other cities reported on the line until we had a seven city hookup.

I submit this as probably the first statewide broadcast of music in our state.

The broadcasts were continued for three or four subsequent Sunday mornings. Why they stopped so abruptly I never knew, but I did suspect that the management objected.

On Jan. 1, 1902, Mr. R.P. (Dick) Prowell sold the privately owned Tuscaloosa telephone system to the Southern Bell Telephone Co. for \$7,500. The following indicates the growth in telephones in Tuscaloosa.

1883, 20 phones; 1900, 190 phones; 1905, 400; 1970, 56,000.