**Early Telephone Service in Herndon**

By Barbara Glakas

Telephone lines were first run in Washington, D.C. from 1877 to 1878. A 1928 *Herndon News Observer* newspaper article reported that telephone service was initially provided to Fairfax County by the Northern Virginia Telephone and Telegraph Company, which was first organized in 1897. At the outset, the plant consisted of a single line that ran three miles between the Fairfax Courthouse and the Fairfax Station on the Southern Railroad. There were six subscribers. The line was later extended to Vienna and then to Herndon.

People quickly began to recognize the value of the telephone service. Soon there were a dozen or more subscribers, some of which were from the Herndon area. Among the first telephone subscribers in the county were R. Moncure, Walter Peyton, F. Smith, Louis Oliver, Dr. Alfred Leigh, Dr. Max Wiehle, Dr. Edwin Detwiler, Dr. Ben Detwiler, W. Floyd Middleton and Walter Oliver.

In 1901 the telephone company was acquired by M. E. Church and was consolidated with a Falls Church Telephone company, which operated there as well as in the Arlington and Rosslyn areas. By 1916 that service was sold to the Chesapeake and Potomac (C & P) Telephone Company.

Dr. Edwin Detwiler and Dr. Ben Detwiler came to Herndon in 1887. Both were prominent residents in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Ben was a respected dentist who lived on Elden Street. Edwin was a beloved Herndon medical doctor, town school board member, Master of Herndon’s Masonic Lodge, Senior Warden at St. Timothy’s Episcopal Church and, later, Fairfax County’s coroner. Ed and Ben were among the earliest subscribers to Falls Church’s first telephone service that started in 1888.

Ed Detwiler’s home and office were both originally located at 711 Pine Street, which is now Brush Strokes Hair Salon & Boutique. He later moved his residence to 800 Third Street -- which was called “The Summit” -- keeping his office on Pine Street. Today The Summit is a professional office building.

The first telephone pole in Herndon was erected on Station Street around 1897. Ed Detwiler’s medical practice required him to make house calls, using horse and buggy, which sometimes took him away from his office. Dr. Detwiler had a telephone installed on the front porch of his Pine Street office so patients who could not find him at his office could pick up the phone on his porch and ring up to his home on Third Street. Dr. Detwiler suffered an untimely death while making a house call in 1916, shot and killed by the unstable son of one of his patients.

In 1917 Herndon’s C&P Telephone office and switchboard was located on the second floor of the Crippen’s Furniture Store, formerly located on Station Street near the present day location of The Closet. This building was burned during the 1917 “Big Fire,” a fire which destroyed many buildings on Station and Pine Streets. The C&P Telephone Company made fast repairs after the fire. According to a 1917 news article in the *Herndon News Observer*, the Alexandria telephone office sent out a group of linemen with a new switchboard. Temporary telephone service was back on line by the next day. They set up an outdoor telephone station on a telephone pole on Station Street. Two days later a more permanent switchboard was set up in the front room of the National Bank. That old bank building can still be seen on Station Street today.

The switchboard was later moved to the home of Mrs. Edith Patton (nee Reed) at 715 Pine Street, currently the location of Herndon Clock and Watch Company. A 1937 *Herndon News Observer* article said the switchboard had been operating in that location “for several years.” A new “crankless” system was installed in 1937. Mayor Russell Lynn made the first call using the new system. The new system allowed users to simply lift the receiver to signal the operator, without having to crank the phone.

In an interview, lifelong resident Elizabeth Ellmore remembered her experiences with crank telephones.

*“There wasn’t a dial, you rang. The phone was a box on the wall with a receiver hanging on the side and a transmitter on the front. Two longs and a short was our call. And our grandmother was two longs and two shorts. I guess there were about six or eight folks on our line. If there was someone else you wanted to call that wasn’t on the party line, you had to go through the central office. One long ring and that got the office and you would tell her who you wanted and she would plug you in.”*

In 1928 there were 200 telephones in Herndon. By 1937 there were 314. Subscribers could buy two-party or four-party lines. A four-party line was less expensive but required more users to share the phone line. One resident who was born in 1930 and grew up in Herndon remembers that before they had the dial tone system, some of the telephone numbers would be just one single number. This can be seen in early newspapers ads which show that the telephone numbers for some Herndon businesses were one digit.

Phones were considered a real luxury in the early days. Given the nature of shared party lines, many people used them only when necessary, not for long chats.

Some long-time Herndon residents hold fond memories of Edith Patton and the early operators, who would always seem to know how to find people in Herndon. Doctors would always tell Mrs. Patton where they were so that they could be found if necessary. Mrs. Patton would always know if the doctor was at someone’s house or if he had gone to the hospital. If there was a fire, she would know where it was because she was the one to get the information and report it.

Some private residents also shared their whereabouts with Mrs. Patton as well. One Herndon resident recalled that she could call Edith and ask, “Do you know where Mrs. Hutchison is?” Edith would say, “Yes, she is having lunch at the Bready’s.” People also recall how Mrs. Patton would often wear a head set over her ears while working in her front yard, enabling her to tend to her garden while also being able to hear if a call was coming into the switchboard. Mrs. Patton moved out of the Herndon area in the early 1940s.

Over the years several different people served as switchboard operators at the Pine Street location, including Bessie Costello, Sylvia (Wenzel) Bridges, Alice White, Becky Jackson Williams and Janet Allder. Mrs. Allder still lives in Herndon today.

Mrs. Allder started working at the switchboard on Pine Street in 1946. She recalled how the switchboard was in operation around the clock with the operators working seven to eight hour shifts, getting paid extra for working the night shift, Sundays and holidays. They earned about $27.50 per week. It was vital that the operators were always on duty. Mrs. Allder recalled one very bad snow storm in the 1950s, snow which came up to her waist. She was taken to work on horseback. The townspeople were very appreciative of the all the operators’ work, and they often received Christmas gifts from the grateful town residents.

Herndon telephones went to dial tone circa 1960-61. The switchboard on Pine Street closed down, giving way to a dial center that operated on Elden Street.

*About this column: “Remembering Herndon’s History” is a regular* Herndon Patch *feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon’s past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of “Remembering Herndon’s History” columns is available on the Historical Society website at* [*www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org*](http://www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org)*.*

*The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society’s website at* [*www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org*](http://www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org)*, and the Historical Society’s Facebook page at* [*https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory*](https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory) *for more information.*

*Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact* *HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com**.*