Harlingen Telephones and Directories

Norman Rozeff

Part I: Introduction to Primitive Technology

This article is generated by a donation to Downtown Harlingen and Cheryl LeBerge from a former Harlingen resident, now retired in Georgia. She is Madeleine Spankler. This lady is the daughter of a former Harlingen Interstate Theaters manager, later to be a long-serving Harlingen postmaster, Robert Edward “Mike” Gilbert, and her mother was a daughter of famed Robert Runyon. What was mailed to Cheryl was a 1922 American Telephone and Telegraph Co. Southwestern Bell Telephone Co. directory for Harlingen for the year 1922.

What makes this directory unique is the fact that until its receipt the earliest directory on file in the Archive Room of the Harlingen Public Library was a year 1930 one. The 1922 directory has four pages, but only two have Harlingen Exchange names and numbers, the rest being the cover and business advertisements. These latter include, on the cover “New Manahtten Cafe-- the best on the market at the lowest prices”. This was a very popular eating and club meeting place in business for many years.

On the bottom of the page is an ad for “C. H. Liston THE TAILOR”. Along with the number listings are block ads for “South Texas Lumber Company –WE BUILD HOMES” and another “EVERYTHING TO BUILD ANYTHING”; H. H.Burchard DRUGGIST --Quality, Accuracy, Quick Service”; “Pupkin & Wunderman Men's, Women's and Children's Wear, Shoes, Etc.” The last page is a full page ad reading “Ford, The Universal Car L. R. Hollingsworth authorized Ford and Lincoln Sales and Service Using Genuine Ford Parts “Service” Our Motto. This firm was located in a relatively new two story building at 220-222 W. Harrison where the family lived upstairs over the showroom. In 1930 he would erect the handsome art deco showroom building directly across the street at 221-225 W. Harrison (now White Cleaners).

The directory contains all of 213 telephone numbers listed by name in alphabetical order, along with some misspelling of surnames. A number of businesses were established this year and prominent movers and shakers were among those listed in the directory. These included, along with Lon C. Hill (town father), E. W. Anglin; H. H. Burchard; (J.T.) Baker of Baker Garage; physicians, brothers Casper and Alfred Letzerich, N. A. Davidson; A H. Weller; A. L. Brooks; mayors to be Finley Ewing and Sam Botts; O. N. Joynes (?Joyner); George Fletcher; O. E. Stuart; Duval West Jr.; C. H. Wittenbach, L. M. Chaudain (?ChAUDoin), and, of course many more too numerous to note. Above what is now the Downtown Harlingen office at the corner of W. Jackson and Commerce was the satellite office of famed lawyers, (J.T.) Canales, (Harbart) Davenport and Rabel.

The very first telephone in the town is installed in connection with the 9/7/07 Harlingen Canal pumps scheduled start. To keep an eye on this important operation Hill will have a telephone line strung about 18 miles from the pump house to Harlingen. Long-thought to have 1 as his number Hill, in fact, is listed with 32 in 1922. The number “1” is Harlingen Meat Market. The proprietor may be Guillermo Lozano, whose market was on the west side of the railroad tracks along Commerce between Jackson and Van Buren.

In 1909 a small telephone exchange connects to Brownsville via Mr. Hill's private line to the pump station on the river. This line likely utilizes the poles of the Military Telegraph System which parallels the Military Highway (US 281) named after it. The exchange opens in the home of its first operator, Mrs. Hoffman, the mother of Leroy and Hilbert. It later moves to the upstairs back room of the Hill Building.

Technology in remote South Texas and Harlingen must have had its challenges for this is what transpired on 8/20/13 at a city commission meeting. It was resolved: "That the telephone service
rendered for several weeks has been totally inadequate and demoralized for several weeks, and no improvement in sight. That unless immediate steps are taken by telephone company to render the same efficient, action be taken by the City to cancel their permit to do business in Harlingen."

City growth overcomes earlier adversity and by 1928 the city is attributed to have 1,759 telephones. On 4/11/29 Southwestern Bell transfers the remaining six ownerships, including the Harlingen exchange, there being 15 in all across the Valley, to the Rio Grande Valley Telephone Company. By June 1930 key statistics put Harlingen telephone connections at 1,550.

It is in 1930 that the Interstate Directory Company of Springfield, Missouri publishes one of the first, if not the first, comprehensive telephone directories of Harlingen. It is termed comprehensive because it not only lists names of individuals and businesses and their telephone numbers but provides considerably more data gleaned by company surveyors in 1929. In the hard-covered book there is an alphabetical list of all individuals over 18 years of age, street addresses, number of children under 18 in each family, ownership or rental of property, ethnicity, occupation and telephone number if applicable. Names in bold type denoted patrons of the directory that were usually the leading firm in each line of business.

A section in the book was a reverse directory. It listed street names alphabetically then structure or vacant lot street numbers in order with the applicable occupant's name and telephone number. Yet another section listed telephone numbers in numerical order with their customer. To make it even more useful the directory had a classified business section by business type—"abstracts" to "yeast, wholesale." In addition its "Where to Buy It" section carried a directory of "National Brands of Merchandise sold by Our Advertisers."

For a number of years the directory additionally noted Harlingen's population broken down by ethnicity. For November 4, 1929 the politically incorrect breakdown was as follows: American 6,440, English speaking Mexican (em) 1,486, non-English speaking Mexican (m) 2,792, and Colored (c) 353 with a total of 11,071.

On the beginning pages of the directory were several pages of useful information such as city government offices and pertinent individuals, fire department, city officials, state officials of Texas, apartment buildings, churches (also, separately, those serving Mexicans), clubs and organizations (Boy Scouts of America, Business and Professional Women's Club, Chamber of Commerce, Medical Society of Cameron County, Girls Reserve, Harlingen Ministerial Alliance, Harlingen Polo and Riding Club, Harlingen Real Estate Board, Kiwanis Club, Lions Club, Los Amigos Club, Lower Rio Grande Reserve Officers Association, Rotary Club, Texas A & M Ex-Students Association, Valley Chamber of Commerce, Valley Illinois Association, Valley Mid-Winter Fair Association, Woman's Chamber of Commerce, Women's Christian Temperance League), justice of the peace, libraries, lodges and societies, parks, railroads, schools, and post office. Calendars for the years 1928, 1929 and 1930 together occupied a separate page.

The company followed the same format for its 1931-32 edition. The price of the directory was $10. This is considered expensive for the period but would stay the same until 1944 when it rose to $12, followed by $17.50 for its 1948 offering, $25 in 1950, and $35 in 1958.

In 1936, Harlingen with 1,560 telephone connections has largest percent per capita of phones in the Valley.
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Part II: A Steady Evolution

By 1935 B. A. Wilmot and his Wilmot Publishing Company of Mission will take up the reins of this unique publication. The firm also offers directories for McAllen San Benito, Weslaco and one for the Lower Rio Grande Valley. (Mission and Brownsville editions would also be printed in 1939.) By 1937 the company will have its main office in Harlingen with a satellite one in Mission. Son B. A. Wilmot now directs the company. He and his wife Nannie Belle reside at 909 E. Tyler while his retired father is esconced in the Gilbert House on E. Van Buren.

1938 Utility connections in 1938 Harlingen are recorded as follows: electric 2,760 gas 1,696 telephone 1,921 water 1,938.

Upon the start of WWII and a year later Harlingen number of telephone statistics were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Electric</th>
<th>Gas</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>Water</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12/31/41</td>
<td>2,568</td>
<td></td>
<td>3,135</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/31/42</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Wilmot publication continues practically inchanged for almost three decades when in the 1965 edition it is noted that the central office is now in Odessa, Texas. It has become a subsidiary of the Johnson Publication Company of Odessa. By 1971 Johnson will have relocated its main office to Loveland, Colorado with branches in four other cities. After the 1971 edition, the library has but one other Harlingen directory of this type. This is the 1980 one published by the Mullen-Kille Company Con Survey of Chillicothe, Ohio.

While Harlingen and other Valley cities likely had individual Rio Grande Telephone Co. directories, they weren't, of course, as inclusive as the Wilmot ones. Beginning in 1925, the Rio Grande Telephone began publishing a directory with Valley-wide telephone numbers, only later to break out the individual cities separately. In one 1936 directory it had Harlingen numbers separated at the beginning of the book and Valley-wide numbers with Harlingen numbers again included in the Valley-wide index.

Because telephone operator rates were still required for long-distance calls the rates for these were relatively expensive. However calls made after 7 p.m. each day and all day Sunday were more economical. Daytime station to station rates in 1936 were $1.60 for the first three minutes, 80 cents the next minute, then 40, then 20 thereafter. Evening rates were reduced to 90, 50, 35, and 20. If you desired to speak to a particular individual (person-to-person), this involved more work on the part of the operator and the charges reflected this. Daytime rates were $2.00, 1.15, .55, and .30 while evening rates were $1.30, .85, .50, and .30.

By 1930 the Harlingen office of the Rio Grande Telephone Company was already at its present site in the 400 block of East Van Buren Avenue. It would continue to grow in 1937 and eventually take up the whole north side of the 400 block. John H. Tucker was the branch manager of the exchange in 1930 and would have long tenure in that position. He was still there in 1952, but by 1954 he and his wife Alice, who had raised three children at 913 E. Filmore, were no longer to be located in Harlingen. In fact, his successor, R. N. Watson, his wife Bernadine and four children had moved into the former Tucker abode on Filmore.

Before the 1937-38 directory was published the Rio Grande Telephone Company had been incorporated into Southwestern Bell Telephone. In its 1938 directory it offered its Valley-wide directory and also a classified business section. By 1944 the listings were broken down by city and in 1955 with the transition to automatic dialing, prefixes were assigned to the various Valley cities. The origin for the sometime mysterious prefixes may come forth from some knowledgable reader, but I know not myself.
the answer. Harlingen was GA = Garfield; Brownsville was LI=Lincoln; Donna HO=Hobart; Lyford/Sebastian DI=Dickens; McAllen & Raymondville MU=Murray; Pharr- San- Juan- Alamo ST=Sterling; San Benito EX=Express; Rio Hondo RI=Riverside; Edinburg DU=Dudley; Mercedes LO=Logan; Mission JU=Justice; and Weslaco WO=Woodlawn.

From 1964 on, each year the directory's pages grew in number as the Valley population rose, telephones became indispensible, and more affordable. In its March 1969 directory Harlingen's prefix, GA-, was dropped and the three-digit prefixes 423- and 425- came into use. Other Valley cities also saw their long-standing prefixes changed over a two year period.

At least by 1959 Cole's of Houston had started a reverse directory for the Valley. Broken down by city it listed street names alphabetically, the street addresses in numerical order, then an occupant's name or business and telephone number. These directories have been issued yearly through the present.

The Archive Room of the Harlingen Public Library has a good collection of the directories noted in this article. They constitute an excellent tool in researching family history and genealogy.

In August 1972 Southwestern Bell spent nearly $2 million on microwave equipment for its central plant in Harlingen and several repeater stations. A tower of 185' costing in excess of $300,000 was erected along with an addition to the current building on Van Buren. Some TV channel signals were to be received on this tower.

Telephones have evolved much from the days of wall-mounted crank models and later rotary dials. They took on many styles, fashions and colors to suit the discerning user. The changes and options are too numerous to describe here. Telephones also became a source of irritation as solicitors increasingly utilized them to obtain donors and sell products. Harlingen, however benefited economically as a number of large call centers located in the city. Of course, with the revolution that took place with the advent of cell phones the nature of the communications industry has once again changed in a way that makes all that has preceded it look, at times, ancient.