Harlingen Telephones and Directories

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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 Manhattan 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 Pletcher; O. E. Stuart; Duval West Jr.; C. H. Witenbach, 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 proprietors 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 rend