

The History of Telecommunications in Cowan

By L. Jarod Pearson

The first telephones in Cowan were installed by the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railroad in the early 20th Century. According to Mark Womack, a railroad historian, the railroad installed a loop connecting a telephone booth at the Cowan Depot with individual telephones in three other locations: the railroad office (where the Pushers originate), the hotel, and the platform on the Sherwood side of the Cumberland Mountain Tunnel. The primitive system was primarily used to contact and dispatch railroad workers between these four locations.

Cowan received its first telephone exchange in 1918. The central office was located in the Holland house on East Cowan Street that is today the home of Mr. and Mrs. Timothy Shelton. Mrs. Anna Brock was Cowan's telephone operator for many years and she connected dozens of calls every day using a manual switchboard. In those days the telephone numbers were only two-digit.

To place a call on the manual system, the caller had to pick up the receiver and turn a hand crank to signal the operator. The caller would tell the operator the number (or name) of the party he or she was trying to reach and the operator would connect the circuits to complete the call. To place a call from Cowan to another exchange, such as Decherd, the operator had to connect to one of few outside lines, ring the outside exchange, place the caller on the phone with the other exchange operator, and allow that operator to ultimately connect the call.

Calls to cities and exchanges further away required the assistance of multiple exchange operators. Some callers would have to wait anywhere from five minutes to two hours to complete a long distance call. In some situations, it was more practical to send a telegram from the local Western Union office. Cowan had a Western Union Telegraph office as far back as the 1880's.

Following World War II, Cowan residents were eager to adopt a newer and more advanced technology. Mr. B.E. Cochran, owner of the local lumber yard, was the principal investor in a new automatic telephone exchange service for Cowan businesses and residents. In 1948 a new central office was built on East Cowan Street (about a block and half from the Holland house). This was commonly known as a "Step-by-Step" building because it used an electromechanical stepping switch to route telephone calls.

When the system was constructed and activated, Mr. George Thorogood placed the very first automated telephone call in Cowan history. On November 4th, 1948, Mr. Thorogood picked up a new rotary telephone in his office at Bank of Cowan and called Mr. Dick Baker at the National Store a few doors up the street. Mr. Howard Coulson, having just opened a photography studio inside the old hotel building, commemorated this very special moment in Cowan history.

The speed and convenience of the rotary telephone made it a popular new feature for Cowan residents and businesses. The mechanics of the rotary dial would send electrical pulses through the telephone wires and activate the electromechanical stepping device. This action would physically direct the stepping device to connect the proper circuits and complete the call

automatically. The electrical relays in the central office gave off a beautiful and distinct dial tone and ring tone. Even the busy signal was a relatively pleasant sound.

Two-digit telephone numbers were incompatible with the Step-by-Step system, and the growing popularity of the telephone made them

impractical as well. With the new dial system Cowan received a new numbering system and our very own telephone prefix. Telephone exchanges were given nicknames to make them easier to remember. The nicknames consisted of a simple word in which the first two letters formed the first two numbers of the prefix. Cowan's exchange was nicknamed "WEst-2", which formed the prefix "932". All residential and business numbers were followed by the number 7 while all pay telephones were followed by the number 9.



Cowan's telephone exchange consisted of internal trunk lines. This meant that calls within the Cowan exchange did not require dialing all seven digits. For example, a Cowan resident could call WZYX radio by simply dialing 2-7471 or call Flowerland by simply dialing 2-7602. The first-two digits – 93 – were unnecessary because of the internal workings of the dial system.

In the 1960's, the Bell System introduced a new technology known as Dual-Tone Multi-Frequency, also known by the trade name "Touch Tone". This new technology allowed faster dialing compared to the older pulse design and also paved the way for telephones and computers to communicate with one another through shared equipment. In the 1970's a widespread effort was made to upgrade as many rural telephone exchanges as possible to the Touch Tone system, but the push met some very real challenges.

Given our area's small population, it was not feasible to upgrade the telephone exchanges in Cowan, Dechard or Winchester. It was imminently more practical and cost effective to combine Cowan, Dechard and Winchester into a single exchange in order to make the switch to Touch Tone. In 1976, the Bell System laid new aluminum cable, installed new computerized dialing systems, and cut all telephone subscribers in Cowan, Dechard and Winchester over to a brand new exchange with only a brief service interruption.

Touch Tone meant that Cowan, Dechard and Winchester were on-line with the latest technology, but there was a downside as well. The beautiful, nostalgic electromechanical sounds were replaced with newer electronic sounds. All calls required dialing all telephone number digits, even calls within the same exchange. Perhaps worst of all, Cowan lost its own unique prefix with the WEst-2 nickname. Sometime in the early 1980's the old Step-by-Step building was demolished and replaced by a small concrete structure on the same property.

The telecommunications industry continues to evolve, and Cowan has been in a very good position to witness new developments firsthand. Our location on a railroad mainline meant that we were among the first to see high capacity fiber optic cables. Cowan received high-speed internet in reasonable time compared to other communities our size, and Cowan moved quickly into the 21st Century with a new cell phone tower in the middle of town.

Cowan residents have seen a great deal of progress in only a short amount of time. For most of us, it seems only yesterday we could hear the electromechanical dial tone and place a call using only 5-digits. It was only six decades ago that all calls were connected manually by an operator we knew by name, just like we see on the Andy Griffith Show and other television sitcoms from that era.

So, the next time you pay a bill using your tablet, the next time you send a text message from your cell phone, or the next time you log in to your Facebook page, think about the days when none of that existed. Think how interesting life would be if we still needed Mrs. Brock to manually connect us with the outside world! Or, for that matter, think how nice it would be to still have our very own WEst-2 prefix!

A Day in the Life of David Bohannon

David Bohannon, a life-long Cowan resident, had a 36-year career in telecommunications and he has plenty of good stories to tell!

David remembers when Cowan's rural residents were on party-lines with as many as eight households sharing the same telephone line! More than once he had to ask certain residents to please be more considerate of their fellow neighbors so that they too could make and receive phone calls.

He recalls some very unusual service requests that turned out to be almost laughable. One elderly resident called the Bell office to complain that people could not hear her voice on the telephone even though she could hear them. An equipment inspection revealed that her telephone mouthpiece was clogged with chewing tobacco!

Another request came from an elderly resident, Mrs. Maggie Mae Kuehn, who complained that her telephone was making a loud buzzing sound. David arrived at the woman's home and indeed heard a noise like he had never heard before. But it wasn't her telephone, it was her smoke alarm! Fortunately, there wasn't any smoke or fire; it had a low battery!

David also remembers when Sherwood residents received telephone service through the Cowan exchange, albeit through lead-covered and paper-insulated cables strung across the railroad utility poles. Fixing these wires is not one of his fondest memories! Interestingly, when Cowan upgraded to Touch Tone, Sherwood's telephone service was transferred to the Sewanee exchange. Sewanee was one of the very last exchanges in Tennessee to use a Step-by-Step system and did not upgrade until the early 1990's.

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A Sampling of Cowan Telephone Numbers in the mid-1940's

Clark's Cash Store	10
Clenin Taxi Service	47 day, 50 night
Copeland's Café	47
Cowan Beauty Shop	59
Forgy's Federated Store	42
Grant's Food Store	26
John Terry Insurance	51 or 77
Lacy Lumber	32
Rex Theatre	99
Sunshine Dry Cleaners	56

A Sampling of West-2 (932) phone numbers in 1975

Cowan Public School	932-7753
Cumberland Presbyterian Church	932-7431
Flowerland	932-7602
WZYX Radio	932-7471