

*Lake Forest-Lake Bluff Historical Society Newsletter*  
ALPHABET STORY- T

**Telephones:** From Operator to Direct Dial  
By Margie Juedes, Board Member

The history of the telephone begins in February 1876, when two inventors, Elisha Gray and Alexander Graham Bell, both independently designed devices that could transmit speech electronically. The two men rushed their designs to the patent office within hours of each other. However, Bell patented his design first. Elisha Gray (who lived in Highland Park) has a connection to Lake Forest, as he was a lecturer in physics at Lake Forest College between 1882 and 1892. He was a founding partner of what became Western Electric Company, the manufacturing arm of Illinois Bell (now Lucent Technologies.)

Phone service in our area began in 1895, when a City ordinance granted three men “the right to erect and maintain a telephone system in the City for 15 years.” John Chapman representing the Chicago Telephone Company installed the first phones in Lake Forest (25 in the first year). It was a difficult sell as so few people had them that there was no one to talk to! Winding streets and deep ravines made it difficult to erect poles and string wires, which also limited the growth of phones locally. Chapman became the first night switchboard operator and lived in a little room in the back of Hogue’s Drug Store. When Mr. Hogue, the pharmacist became the manager in 1896, a direct line to Chicago was established and the number of telephones doubled. Calls were placed through the druggist. Lake Bluff’s toll station was located in the J. Irving Pearce hotel and offered “summer service only.”

In 1899, George T. Gibbons became manager of the phone company and had to handle a special project—providing additional equipment to serve participants at the National Golf Tournament held at Onwentsia Club in July. By then total subscribers had increased to 113, according to historian Edward Arpee.

A site for a telephone building was purchased and the new exchange was completed at 235 East Deerpath in 1903. Phone books kept pace with the growth of the telephone. The 1903 Bumstead’s Waukegan City and Lake County Directory listed the name, profession and street of each telephone owner. For example; “Panowski, Joseph (Mildred wife) horseshoer and Oak Ave.” Other vocations listed were domestics, butlers, and teachers. There was no need for street numbers at that time.

Then as now, phone service was not without problems. The Chicago Tribune reported on October 9, 1906 that phones failed in Lake Forest. “At least 100 phones were out of order including the telephone of the J. Ogden Armour residence.” The problem was that there was only one man employed to repair phones in Lake Forest, Lake Bluff and several other towns on the north shore.

In the early years, a dialer would call the operator and ask for the person or business they wanted to reach by giving their exchange name and number—for example, Lake Bluff 327. Most calls

through the operator were simply Lake Forest or Lake Bluff followed by three numbers, some businesses were two numbers, for example, Henry Strenger Plumbing was Lake Forest 94.

These switchboard operators occasionally were found “listening in” on conversations. The Chicago Tribune reported on June 20, 1916 that two Lake Forest switchboard operators overheard a conversation linking the accused, Will Orpet, to the possible murder of Marion Lambert of Lake Forest. Two operators testified at his trial “they heard Lambert refuse his (Orpet’s) offer to give her something to fix whatever was making her sick.” Orpet was later acquitted.

With the growth of the telephone came the growth of the telephone exchange names—a word that was used to represent the first two letters of a seven-digit phone number as spelled out on a telephone dial. For example in Lake Forest and Lake Bluff, CEdar was the exchange. Highland Park was IDlewood, Deerfield was WIndsor, Fort Sheridan was FS. Long-time residents may recall that CE 4 fostered a sense of community for years.

An article in the *Chicago Tribune* in April, 1950 read “Naming a Baby is Easier than a Phone Exchange.” As the use of the telephone expanded new exchange names were created. There were lots of possibilities that wouldn’t work: PH words were easily confused with F, Cramer vs. Kramer, Duglas or Douglas. Some choices had local significance (HYde for Hyde Park, FIInancial for the La Salle street area) but as you can see with Cedar, that was not always possible.

In 1960, Lake Forest switched to a dial system with Western Electric expanding the Deerpath building to house the equipment. There were 9,500 subscribers in Lake Forest and Lake Bluff. Then a customer could dial direct locally using the CE 4 exchange with the 4 digit number. Some operators were still needed to transfer calls, provide information and connect to out of town calls that could not be dialed direct.

Exchange names and switchboard operators are long gone but they gave a sense of community during their day. With the growth of the Chicago metro area we have progressed through several area codes—312 (established in 1947), 708, and now 847. With the introduction of the overlay area code of 224, we now have to dial a 1 before the area code locally.