

THE EVOLUTION OF OUR LOCAL TELEPHONES

By Sally Smid

Today there seems to be an obsession for instant communication with Texting, Instagram, Twitter and more. Cell phones are often a cause for distraction and preoccupation.

In the mid-1800s communication involved letters and post cards carried on horseback and stagecoach. Then came the telegraph with offices in many railway stations. Telephones followed with the negotiations for bringing telephone service to Athens taking place in 1890, the year of its incorporation.

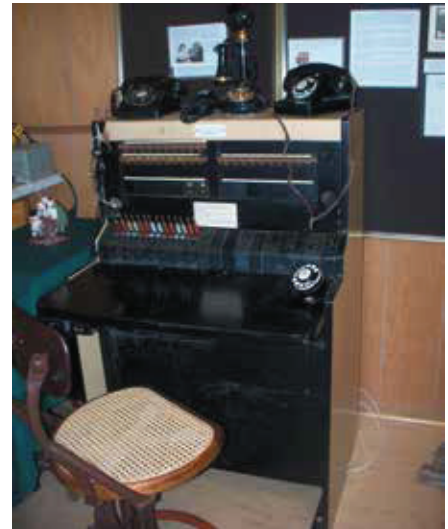
The first switchboard was installed at the store of Arza Parish. The Bell directory includes Athens in 1900 with James Ackland, named as local telephone exchange manager in 1902. "At a meeting of the Plum Hollow and Eloida Rural Telephone Co., it was decided to install a switchboard in Athens and to canvas for subscribers," notes the Athens Reporter in 1909. Early subscribers included Dr. Cornell, Spence, Foster, Thompson, the B&W Railway, then later, the Armstrong House, House of Industry, Dr. Lillie, and the Pierce Mill. Watson Parish installed a submarine cable, so his Charleston Lake cottage could be connected to his Athens business. By 1910 there were 100 subscribers with early records indicating that the charge for a call to Brockville was 25 cents. In 1911 the telephone switchboard was located in the Kendrick Store at 2 Main St. E. (the current Freshmarket) later moved next door along with the GNW Telegraph System, Coon's Shoe Store, and Earl Construction. All were destroyed by fire in 1917, the same year that a group of local farmers formed a district company to serve the area. Bell took over in 1958 with the exchange located in the brick building west of Crest Hardware, now Sundial.

The first phone service had a system of party lines with a different ring for each customer. There are stories of neighborhood busybodies listening in to find out "the local gossip", often the source of many rumors. It seemed that the weaker the signal, the more parties were listening in on the line. You could ask a party to hang up if you had an emergency call to make, but you could

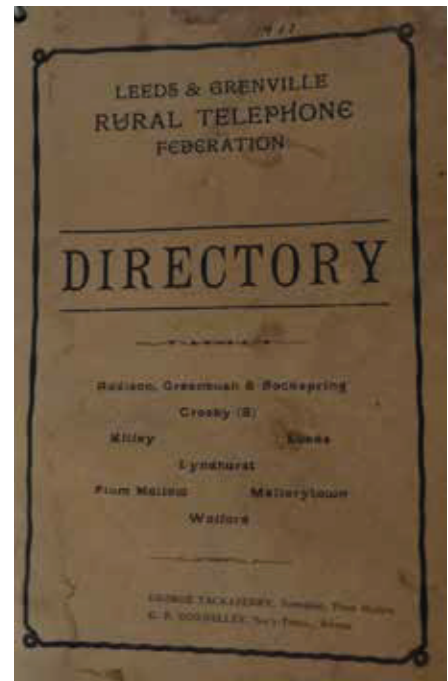
depend on that party picking the phone back up to find out just what that emergency was! The operators known for their courteous "number please" to customers, seemed to know everything that went on in the village and were often very helpful with advice and information, usually knitting between calls.

Ardie Parish was the manager of the telephone service. An entertaining story is told of a call going into the switchboard one night to request a call to the fire department after the caller discovered that the Anglican Church was on fire. "Which church is that," Ardie inquired. "The one across from Kerr's new house," came the answer. Ardie questioned further, "Kerrs have a new house now? I didn't know that..." "Ardie," the caller shouted. "Call the fire department!" The church could not be saved, nor could that last telephone office on Main St. beside the hardware store, which was eventually demolished.

Athens was one of the first in Ontario to change to a number plan with direct dialing in 1964, ending the need for the local switchboard. The Athens Bell building is now located on Church St. It houses the intricate dial service equipment. There are reports that a few folks are still on a party line and have rotary dialing. Amazing changes in communication and telephones have taken place over the years, and there are many cherished, community memories that have been made along the way! **LH**



This telephone switchboard is similar to the ones used in the area in the mid-1900s



One of the early telephone directories in the area.



Telephones have evolved in many ways over the years.

All photos courtesy of Athens and Area Heritage Museum