

NEW HAMPSHIRE TELEPHONE MUSEUM

"It's For You!"

Article and photos by Carole Soule



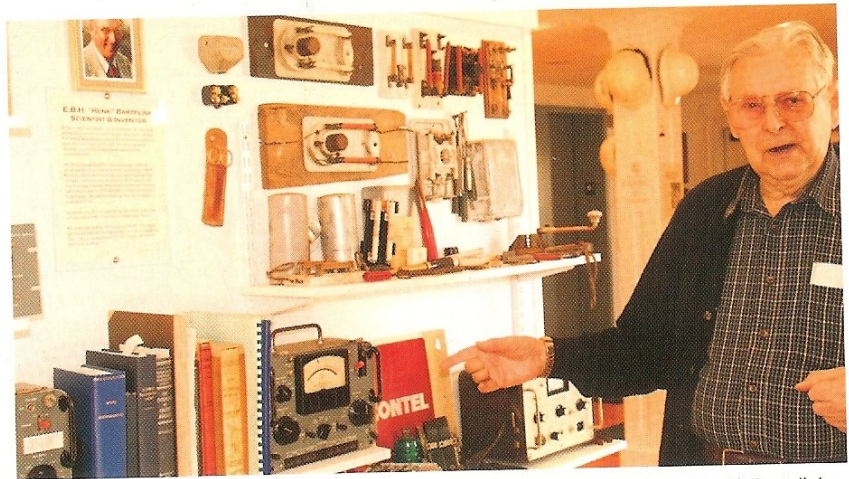
It's hard to imagine life without a cell phone. Need to remind your spouse to pick up milk on the drive home from work? No problem with a cell phone. But communication has not always been so easy. It wasn't long ago that the telephone, invented by Alexander Graham Bell, started the "communication revolution" that many of us take for granted today.

We may take the telephone for granted but the New Hampshire Telephone Museum in Warner Village has not. An entire museum dedicated to telephones might seem excessive to some, but one visit and you'll be convinced that the founders, Dick and Paul Violette did the right thing. Alderic O. "Dick" Violette started as an apprentice lineman at the Merrimack County Telephone Company on April 1, 1946, when he returned from serving in the Army during WW II. He eventually became chairman and president/CEO of the company. His son, Paul Violette, followed the same path years later. From the beginning, Dick collected telephones and related equipment; he kept

everything. What he did not have, people gave to him or he purchased or traded for with other collectors. In 2001, the New Hampshire Telephone Museum, Inc., a non-profit educational corporation, was created. After years of planning, the museum opened in October 2005.

The Museum

A visit to the New Hampshire Telephone Museum begins with an introductory video, featuring interviews with an operator and a lineman recalling the early days of the telephone. The tour begins with a replica of the first telephone, which carried inventor



Alderick "Dick" Violette discusses the test equipment designed by EBH (Hank) Bartelink.

Alexander Graham Bell's words to his startled assistant, Thomas A. Watson ("Mr. Watson, come here, I want to see you!"), to fairly recent models. The museum contains a wall to wall collection of telephones with approximately 700 to 800 artifacts, photos, and other items in the museum.

All telephones need power. Early phones were powered by hand-cranked magneto boxes. Callers generated their own electricity by turning the crank to call the operator. Batteries eventually replaced hand-cranks. But these weren't like the small cellular phone batteries we use today. These batteries could be a foot tall and when they died your phone stopped working. When batteries died, the phone company made a service call to replace them. Customers who talked a lot often thought their phones were broken when all that was needed were new batteries.

Number Please

Operators used a switchboard to connect an incoming or outgoing call to its destination. The museum has several switchboards, one of which is setup to connect calls within the museum. This working telephone switchboard is a wooden desk with a riser full of flaps (called "drops") and plugs. When Paul cranked a phone across the hall, a flap dropped on switchboard exposing a jack. I pulled a plug cord from the desk, plugged it in and said, "Number please," in the same way operators have done since the 1870s. I plugged a second cord into the destination number and the call was connected to another phone in the museum.

Most telephone operators were women because they were more courteous than the telegram delivery boys who were first employed. According to the book, *Merrimack County Telephone Company: The First 100 Years*, written by Dick Violette, "Operators had to be familiar with people and places. They called out the firemen by operating the fire alarm switch that was in the central office then called the volunteer firemen unable to hear the siren. They located the doctor when he was out making house calls." The book continues, "The telephone operators were the local answering service. They even provided



Always staying connected to her work, Carole Soule works the switchboard!



Operators were familiar, friendly voices, who often offered helpful household tips along with the community services they effectively provided. Notice the roller skates on the woman to the right!

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New Hampshire ToDo

advice on how to cook a turkey or how long to bake a cake. Many of these services performed were beyond their primary duty of answering calls from subscribers and connecting them to another party."

And of course the switchboard had to be attended both day and night. The book informs us: "Night operators were not required to stay at the switchboard all night; they slept in an adjoining room and could be awakened by a bell alarm that sounded when a call came in. Some people who had to go to work early in the morning would have the night watchman at work call for a 'wake up call' on a regular basis—waking the operators, too!"

Pay Phones

Originally the phone company provided telephone service "to the subscriber and the subscriber's household." If the operator heard someone else's voice (remember all calls were manually switched by the operator), an extra charge of 10 cents was billed for that call. Payments worked on the honor system and the guest was supposed to leave 10 cents with his host for each call made.

Pay phones became available later. A coin collection box fastened to the phone chimed as the caller dropped coins into it. The operator could hear and identify the coins as they dropped and would not place the call until the correct payment was made.

Dial Phones

Dial phones allowed callers to make direct calls without operator assistance. The dial phone was invented in the 1880s but only became popular as telephone call volume increased in the 1950s. The museum has a working Strowger Automatic Electric Company phone system. I dialed seven digits on the Strowger and watched the mechanisms rotate and slide as they found a line, selected the exchange, and then the subscriber number.

Dial phones were convenient and eventually replaced operators and switchboards. As the operator-assisted calls ended, many customers missed the friendly, "Number please," greeting as well as the community service each operator supplied.



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New Hampshire Telephone Museum

22 East Main Street, Warner
(603) 456-2234
www.nhtelephonomuseum.com

Summer hours:

May 1 through October 31
10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday

Fall and winter hours:

November 1 through April 30
10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday and Saturday

Free for kindergarten students and younger;
\$3 for students in grades 1 through 12;
\$4 for seniors, age 60 plus; \$5 for adults,
ages 18 through 59

Memberships are available. Schedule group
tours in advance. The museum is fully
accessible to people with disabilities.

Directions: Interstate 89, take Exit 8 or 9 to
Route 103 (Main Street) to the center of
Warner. The New Hampshire Telephone
Museum is at 22 East Main Street in
Warner Village.

Merrimack County Telephone Company: The First 100 Years

Alderic O. "Dick" Violette puts it on the line as he describes the history of "how and why" telephone service was developed in his book. He writes of the evolution of phone service, beginning the journey in 1884, and includes information from original records and files from the phone companies as well as personal stories and incidents. Stories about linemen risking their lives to reconnect telephone service, and recollections of operators make this book a spicy slice of telephone history.

Did You Know?

Because he lacked the funds to develop and exploit the commercial potential of his new invention, Alexander Graham Bell tried to sell the rights to the telephone patent to the Western Union Telegraph Company for \$100,000 in 1878. Western Union's president, William Orton turned him down saying, "This electrical toy has far too many shortcomings to ever be considered a practical means of communication."

Emma M. Nutt, World's First Woman Operator

On September 1, 1878, Emma M. Nutt, a former telegraph operator, applied and was hired as a telephone operator for the newly organized Boston Dispatch Company, which served about 60 business telephones. Initially, its operators were young men—noisy, boisterous, and frequently rude. Her sister, Stella, was hired the same day, some hours later. Stella remained with the company for a few years, but Emma devoted 33 years and five months to the telephone business before she retired in 1911.



"That's an amazing invention, but who would ever want to use one of them?" said Rutherford B. Hayes (19th President of the United States), 1876, after witnessing a demonstration of the telephone.

Test Equipment

The magic behind the phones was the equipment that made it all work. The museum contains samples of test and installation equipment, including a test box built in collaboration with inventor, E. B. H. "Henk" Bartelink, founder of Northeast Electronics Corporation in Concord, NH. There are many pieces of test equipment in the museum donated by Mr. Bartelink's estate.

There were no Joint Pole Agreements in the early 1900s and poles belonged to various companies: Contoocook Electric Light Company, New England Tel & Tel. Co., and Merrimack County Telephone Company to name a few. Unlike today, where power lines share the same poles as phone lines, in the early 1900s, separate poles were placed for telephone and power. What a tangle of poles and wires that must have been!

The museum is more than just about phones—it's a building that has preserved telephone communication and its evolution. The early wooden phones can be considered works of art, but the stories of the operators, linemen, and even the callers make a trip to this museum required. It's all very fascinating. You might remember making an operator assisted call or, if you are younger, you might not know how to use a rotary dial phone. Wow, have things changed! No matter, a trip to the New Hampshire Telephone Museum will re-ignite memories, teach about the past, or instill a sense of gratitude for how easy we now have it.

ToDo

