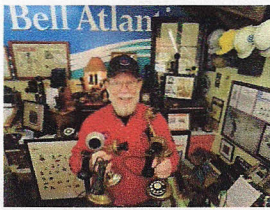


Georgetown museum devoted to vintage telephones

Brice Stump, DelmarvaNow 4:12 p.m. EDT June 6, 2014



(Photo: Brice Stump)

From floor to ceiling, there are phones, phones and more phones. Inside a former feed building, just 20 by 36 feet, are 345 phones (plus several hundred more in a storeroom), six telephone booths, two switchboards, 25 signs, hundreds of photos, vintage telephone directories (the earliest from 1910) and a complete set from 1936 to the present.

Jim Bowden is curator of the Delaware Telephone Museum at the Nutter Marvel Carriage Museum complex at 510 S. Bedford St. in Georgetown. Bowden, who is also president of the Georgetown Historical Society, has collected almost 90 percent of the artifacts on display.

"About 90 years ago, my wife, Christine, wanted me to get the stuff out of our garage so she could put in more Longaberger baskets. I have been collecting since 1970 and started the museum in 2002," he said. "Telephone Pioneers retirees would come by my house and tell me they had this or that around their house, attic, shop or basement, and I was welcomed to it.

"I still have the first wooden wall phone from the 1910 era. I bought for my collection. I purchased it on Woodpecker Road at the Butternut Gift Shop in 1970, and it still rings. I find phones and related material at flea markets, antiques shows and shops, and I'm still looking. My wife says I can't save them all, but I'm on a quest to try. There is some stuff in here so expensive even my wife doesn't now how much I paid for it," he said, his eyes nervously shifting side to side.

Not only is the collection unique, so, too, is the museum.

"There probably are not 30 telephone museums left in the country. The closest one I know of is in Richmond," he said. "The (Verizon) telephone company loves that I'm doing this. Even the former president of what was Diamond State Telephone gave me things to be included in this exhibit. The collection here is on a permanent loan basis from my family."

Not only does Bowden know how to use every piece in the museum, he has also installed or serviced most of them during his career. In May, Bowden retired as a Verizon system technician who installed and maintained all the 911 emergency phone systems in Kent and Sussex counties. He began his 45-year career with the former Diamond State Telephone Co. as an installer.

There are phones to make the visitors laugh, such as the Snoopy and Mickey Mouse phones of the 1970s "design line." There are also three phone booths, one an all-wood 1950 model, typical of those commonly found in stores and pharmacies of the 1920s through the 1980s. Even the booths that seemed like they were around just yesterday have become museum pieces.

"The first payphone booth in the Rehoboth Beach Convention Center, installed 1960, was a rounded glass unit, very unique and very rare, few still around. One guy down South turned the booth he owned into a barbeque smoker, an awful thing to do with such a rare thing," Bowden said.



Brice Stump photo. The Model 202, introduced in the 1920s, became the phone company's most popular model. It was available only in black. Movie stars and the rich could buy custom-made gold or silver plated and colored phones for a premium price. (Photo: Brice Stump)

Surprises in slots

Also in the collection are the iconic crank wooden box wall phones, the earliest dating to 1898. It was the rapid turning of the crank and bell that alerted the operator that a customer wanted her to connect a call.

The earliest "pay phone" featured is a "candlestick phone," so named because of its shape, from about 1900. Attached to it is a little tin box. Each time a patron used the phone in a public place, they were expected to drop a nickel in the box. In later years, the coin activation mechanism and coin deposit box became one unit.

In the 1970s, Bowden was surprised what he found in coin slots and boxes.

"I found notes stuffed in the coin return chute, all kind of things jammed in the coin slot, bubble gum, coins from every country in the world. Some people even tried to push bugs into the slot to activate calls. Some even put a coin through, with a string on it, and then tried to pull it back out once the call was 'paid for' and the system activated," Bowden said.

There is also an extensive collection of dial phones from 1922 to 1983. Push button touch tone service was introduced in 1962.

Some offer the distinct, nostalgic, smooth, clickety-whirl of a vintage heavy and solid dial phone. Those also had a sharp, loud, ring that was eventually heard around the world, a ring tone that millions came to know. Each model of the early dial phones had a unique sound as the dial was turned and released. Some moved smoothly and spoke with a comforting mechanical purr. Others had a sound much like that of a course zipper going up and down as the number was dialed. Some movements were light and delicate, others coarse and brash.

Bowden laughed as he explained that teenagers who come to the museum are universally stumped on how a rotary phone dial works.

"I want them to have a hands-on experience here, so we have some phones on display that they can really dial," he said. "The interacting phones are real antiques, valuable, but I'd rather have them used to educate kids and adults so they know just how far we have come in phone communication."

The highlight of the collection is one of the first cellphones. Made by Motorola in 1983, it is called "The Brick," which then sold for \$4,000 (almost \$10,000 now). He even has a collection of car phones which were introduced in 1946.

"Very popular with police departments. Popular, but very expensive," he said. "My grandfather was chief of police in Seaford and he got their first car phone in the late 1940s. It worked off an antenna system with two channels."



Brice Stump photo. Jim Bowden, curator of the Diamond State Telephone Museum in Georgetown demonstrates the use of a 1960's curved glass phone booth, taken out of service in Rehoboth in 1993. It is a rare surviving unit as most were removed from service in the mid-1980s. (Photo: Brice Stump)

The super switchboard

Bowden has rigged the internal system so a visitor can dial a number from a 1930s vintage phone that goes through a switchboard which carries the call to another phone in the museum by way of an "open wire system."

"For a long time the company used a bare copper wire secured on glass insulators on telephone poles to carry calls" he said "Some were still in service in Kent and Sussex counties in the late 1970s. I have installed a genuine 10-pin (line) horizontal cross arm on top of a section of a wooden telephone pole in the museum."

Even from the earliest days, it was the switchboard that made calls possible over telephone lines and poles.

"The first switchboards were often in someone's home. Coincidentally, when Mr. Marvel was a young man, he worked as a nighttime telephone operator. In the early days of telephone history, it wasn't thought proper for a single young woman to work the late shift. The reason that male operators fell out of vogue was that company officials found out young boys would talk back ("sass") the customers," he said.

The switchboard was behind the scenes equipment that virtually no customer ever saw, yet it was crucial to every phone call made at the time. In the earliest days, a customer cranked the wall phone to alert the operator, who in turn connected the caller to the party requested, using incoming "trunks" — dozens of flexible lines — to connect calls. Lines were marked with colored tags, yellow for a pay phone, red for an emergency line.

"Everything was done by hand by the operator," he said. "The operator used the 'calculagraph' to time calls and hand stamp a ticket for the start of the call to the end of the conversation. It was every time-consuming and very labor intensive."

Georgetown museum devoted to vintage telephones

In addition to knowing what went where and when, each operator had to know how to place party line calls.

"At one time, party lines were the norm, not the exception. This meant that a line could service up to 24 parties," he said. "Each individual customer had a specific ring pattern, such as two long or one short ring, and every ring was generated by hand by the operator and later by pressing a key. To be real efficient, she had to eventually memorize all those ring patterns for each of the 24 customers."

All those, well, "inquisitive" folks on a line could pick up the receiver and listen to their neighbor's conversation. Because the operator was connecting all those calls, she could also listen in, though it was against company rules to do so.

"She knew everything that was going on in and around town," Bowden said.

Party lines finally were discontinued in the mid-1980s in his part of Delaware.



Brice Stump photo. Rosalie Walls began working for the Diamond State Telephone Co., in Georgetown, in 1951 when she was a junior in high school making about \$25 a week. She stayed with the company until 1965. (Photo: Brice Stump)



Telephone Museum image. Telephone operators in Georgetown posed for this photograph in 1928. At the time young single ladies did not work at night, and the company employed teen-age boys to man switchboards during the night "trick" shift. (Photo: Brice Stump)

The Bell way

As more and more customers were added to the system, the phone company came up with a unique and homey way of identifying local communities

"By the 1950s, the proper Bell way of doing things meant that each community — nationwide — had a specific number which was incorporated in a name. The earliest Salisbury exchange was known as Pioneer, or, in telephone talk, PI-9, which became the familiar 749 exchange. Georgetown was Ulster, UL-6, and Seaford's exchange was identified as National, or NA-9." Bowden said.

Those calls were routed through local switchboards. Rosalie Walls, 79, was just a junior in high school in 1951 when she began her telephone switchboard training. The six-week course included proper pronunciation of numbers.

"When I spoke the numbers, I was doing fine until I got to nine," she said. "Our instructor told me to 'Hold it right there.' Nine, she said, was to be pronounced 'ni-ann.' "

Walls became a full-time operator after graduation and spent the first 14 years at the switchboard. The darkest day at work was the day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

"The switchboard was lit like a Christmas tree with so many calls coming through. And yet it was a somber time, I could hear some of the other operators crying as they handled calls," she said.

Walls, honored as Delaware Volunteer of the Year in 2003, Georgetown Volunteer of the Year in 2007 and the Delaware American Mother of the Year in 2012, serves as a museum tour guide.

The tour is not about a course in communication technology, but about the evolution of the most-recognized and most-used device in mankind's history. It is an enticing collection that begs to be touched and discussed.

The museum experience for the visitor has everything to do with memories and little to do with the technical mechanics of the miracle of communication that made it possible to talk live to folks across the street and around the world. Folks visiting here smile and laugh, sharing stories of party lines and memories of that ever-so-important, to die for phone call, from a boyfriend or girlfriend in the first blush of young love, or the life-altering call that came one day or night.

The museum is all about memories and experiences of a lifetime. The old-style black dial phones, so associated with our grandparents, instantly conjure up homey, nostalgic memories. A telephone was a special, magical device for them, and, like the installment of electric lights in their home, having one was a milestone in progress that distinctly divided their past from the present. Life thereafter was segmented into two periods — before and after telephone and electric service.

bstump@dmg.gannett.com410-845-4653

Arrange a visit

Free tours of the museum may be arranged through the Marvel Museum by calling Walls at 302-855-9660. Information and a virtual tour is also available through the museum's website, delawaretelephonemuseum.com.

Read or Share this story: <http://www.delmarvanow.com/story/news/local/delaware/2014/06/06/museum-phones/10088755/>

Chincoteague student wins
News Leadership Award