

Lorton History: Number Please?

When Lorton had its own phone company

By Irma Clifton

Who could have envisioned something like Internet service or the World Wide Web in the 1930s when Lorton had a little telephone exchange on Lorton Road staffed by a pleasant voiced operator who handled all of your outgoing calls? No dial tones, no call waiting and, mercifully, no voice mail. Just a straight forward give 'em the number and the next thing you know you've got your party.

Telephone service started in Fairfax County about 1897 when the Northern Virginia Telephone and Telegraph Company was organized. The system consisted of one line between Fairfax Court House and Fairfax Station. At first there were only six subscribers but that soon grew to more than a dozen. Telephone service in the Lorton area was not many years away once stockholders formed the Lorton Telephone Company. By August of 1912, reports at the annual stockholders meeting held at Springman Hall in Lorton "show the company to be in a flourishing condition." The company president, N. C. Davis was supported by a board of directors that included family names such as Holt, Cranford, Wiley, Mayhugh and Ward; all prominent men during that period of Lorton's history.

By December of 1912 the Lorton Telephone Company had purchased a plot of land "about a quarter of a mile west of Lorton, on the Telegraph Road from Mr. John T. Dixon, is improving the same by building a two story building to be used as their central exchange and wareroom." A statement in the Fairfax Herald of December 6, 1912 said, "The company is owned and controlled by local people, and we are glad to see it forging ahead."

In 1924 it was reported that the Lorton Telephone Company had increased its rates and was supplying service to a large number of customers in an expanded Lorton area. Regrettably, there are no known records regarding how many calls were placed each day in the Lorton Exchange or how many operators were employed to handle them. It is interesting to note, however, that by 1928 the Northern Virginia Telephone and Telegraph Company subscribers in the Fairfax area were making 800 calls a day.

By 1936 the Lorton Telephone Company was owned by Sid Wiley, who since 1925 had served as deputy collector of internal revenue for Northern Virginia and was also prominent in the Republican Party. He had been, at one time the Republican nominee for the House of Representatives. By now, according to newspaper accounts, the telephone company was serving a "considerable section of Fairfax and Prince William counties, and is a connection of the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company of Virginia." Wiley retired from his deputy collector duties that year, according to the article, "to devote his time to the company's upbuilding."

The Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company of Virginia was formed in 1903 and began incorporating many small private phone companies under its umbrella, Lorton Telephone Company among them. The Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company of Virginia was one of the operating companies of the Bell system. For many more years

the Lorton company operated out of the small exchange on Lorton Road.

Sections of the Lorton community, mainly to the west along Ox Road, never had service through the Lorton Telephone Company, but were served by Central Mutual Telephone Company from its Prince William location. My family was one of those customers. Like everyone else in those days, we were on a party line. One thing I find most interesting today is that our phone, which consisted of a wooden box with a crank that sat on a shelf below the candle stick-type phone with no dial, remained the property of the phone company. Today you can just buy a phone and plug it into the wall jack. What progress!

As the old Lorton Telephone Company was absorbed by Chesapeake Telephone and Potomac Telephone Company, that later became part of Bell Atlantic who then merged with GTE which has now become Verizon, its identity has been lost to the ages, and a few ancient newspaper articles. Although all traces of the Lorton Telephone Exchange building are long gone, there are still a few left in the community who remember that it was located near the intersection of Sanger Street and Lorton Road (once called Telegraph Road) and that it was a two-story white frame building which stood at least, into the 1950s. In my memory I can still see the building from the window as I bounced toward Lorton Elementary School on the school bus. And I can still remember our first telephone number—65-W.