

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, October 2, 2006

The Telephone Comes to Yorklyn: A famous country doctor in the 1880s was "Doc" Chandler of Centerville. Some time early in that decade, he had a phone line run along the Kennett Turnpike from Wilmington to his office. Soon thereafter, Walter Garrett, owner of the snuff mills, thought it important to have a phone connection from his office in Philadelphia to the Yorklyn mills and paid for an extension from Centerville to Yorklyn to provide this service. If illness, death, or important business matters required fast service, a member of the community could go to the snuff mill and be assisted in making the call. Incoming phone messages would be delivered to the designee by whomever was attending the mill's phone. It is assumed that soon after the Marshall brothers bought their mill on Benge Road in 1889 that a phone was installed there, but this is supposition on my part.

Soon after 1900, a phone exchange was established at Hockessin, and service for Yorklyn telephones came through that exchange. There was a company phone in the Fibre company's No. 1 Mill, usually answered by Homer Kratz. Most lines were party lines; that is, several families' telephones would be hooked to the same line, and the operator, called "central," at the exchange would designate the appropriate party by the number of rings he or she would apply by hand. Privacy was limited, as a curious person on a party line could listen to any conversation on the line, and gossip flourished. A private line was much more expensive, but we had one at Auburn Heights by the 1920s, although our service came through the mill. The only phone in the house was in the dining room, and our phone number was Hockessin 36. One morning in 1930 as I came down to breakfast, my father was standing by the phone, and he had just hung up. He told me my grandmother (his mother) had died.

Direct dialing came to the cities long before it reached the country. The large places such as Philadelphia and New York had a name before the number (remember Glenn Miller's "Pennsylvania 6-5000," which was the number of the Hotel Pennsylvania next to New York's Penn Station?). Wilmington was not large enough to need names before numbers, but eventually it followed suit ("Olympia" was the exchange for downtown). Newark was the first place outside Wilmington for direct dial, and not only could you dial other Newark phones, but Wilmington phones as well, and vice versa. Hockessin was the first "country exchange" in the state to have direct dial. All direct dial calls were free, but the first year or so, Hockessin could dial Newark and vice versa, but we could not dial Wilmington. If you had friends in Newark, you could call them, and they could transmit your message to Wilmington, all without charge, but it was awkward!

With the coming of the dial (rotary, of course), our phone number changed from 36 to 5131. Soon they decided 513 was enough, so the final one was dropped. Some time during World War II, it was changed from 513 to 215. In the 1950s, it seemed to become necessary for everyone to have five digits, so all Hockessin subscribers had 95 before their old number (Auburn Heights was 95215). Then, with long experience from the cities, the Hockessin exchange was called "Cedar," and our number was CE-95215. Why mix up letters and numbers? We were then 239-5215. When the Magic Age of Steam started in 1971, the phone company said I needed a commercial line, and I could not keep my old number; they assigned 239-4410. I think it was in the 1970s when touch-tone dialing became available, and I was an immediate subscriber. In the early '80s, when there was no good reason for paying a commercial rate any longer, they said I could not keep "4410," so they changed it to 239-6379, an awkward number that remained into 2006. I like 239-2385, the Friends of Auburn Heights Preserve number, much better.