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VALDOSTA, GEORGIA

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The City of Valdosta has agreed to lease the Lowndes County Historical Society the large southwest corner of Roosevelt and Oak streets, which is next to McKey Park with the branch between us. After signing the lease, we will be moving our old farm buildings and, hopefully, build our new building later. We want to thank Mayor James Beck and councilmen for this most generous offer and for the confidence in our Society. We will strive for a better Society and Museum and historical effort of our city and county. Just mere, "thank you", doesn't seem enough, but from the bottom of our hearts we do thank you.

Our last meeting was most interesting in that Joey Davis, teacher from VJHS was our speaker and gave a talk on "The Baptists". We promised other denominations equal time. At our meeting was a descendant of Rev. William H. Goldwire, second Baptist preacher at Troupville, and who made the move to Valdosta with others. No one knew of this lady's background, so at the end of the talk geneology of the Goldwires was given and Mary Anna Goldwire was asked to please stand up. It was Mrs. S. E. Goff Sr., teacher many years in the county schools and at S. L. Mason, now retired. We will be publishing information about the Goldwires soon. Mrs. Goff joined our Society as did Mrs. C. C. Knight. Mrs. Knight is writing about Webster street when she lived there with her family. She is doing this for the Society and we are eager to read it.

When are the rest of you going to write us something? Would you like to read some interesting items in microfilm? Dec. 8, 1894, First Ball of the Season; March 7, 1896, Old Indian War (this section); March 21, 1896, Shall We Go Forward? (about Valdosta); March 21, 1896, Lowndes County Teachers Association (meeting); Nov. 21, 1891, Tobacco Beds--When and How to Plant Them; Dec. 5, 1891, Tobacco in Lowndes; Feb. 4, 1893, Kola "ut as a Beverage; Feb. 11, 1893, Uneasy Hawaii--A possible state.

To Central -- Whoever She May Be

by

Albert S. Pendleton Jr.

On March 10, 1894 our local newspaper announced that the patent on the telephones had run out and that small towns who had been refused a plant before, could now have one. A Mr. Bentley and a Mr. Tillman had been canvassing the town for subscribers and the local folks could see no reason why they should not succeed getting the required twenty-five names. They almost had the number and the plant would likely be put in soon.

The beginning of the local telephone company here would seem, especially to us, to be a simple affair. But from the complicated instructions on how to use this new invention we could also assume that it was more a novelty than anything. Advertisements in capitals in old newspapers indicate everyone found someone new at whom to yell -- CENTRAL!

An article March 28, 1896 is headed, "Hello, Central!" And an ad on March 7, 1896 says this: "HELLO CENTRAL! Give me no. 31, J. B. Varn the grocer, I want something nice for dinner." There are dates before that of importance: February 16, 1895, Telephones For Valdosta; March 6, 1895, The Telephone System, Dr. N. A. Williams, President; and March 13, 1895, Work on Telephone Lines. On July 6, 1895 is the following: "Valdosta Telephone Line...Mr. W. S. Way, who has been in charge of putting in the telephone line has about completed the work...and will begin at once on fixing the instruments for subscribers. The work, so far, has been done with remarkable quickness." The article went on to say the company had about 50 subscribers for 'phones, and the outlook was bright for more. On September 21, 1895, however, the telephones were sent back. They did not come up to expectations on requirements. They would be replaced by 'phones from another company and better service was expected. By February 22, 1896, the new system was completed and working nicely.

On February 29, 1896 the telephone company issued instructions on how to use the telephone. They are as follows: "To call for a number -- Ring "Central" by turning crank and pressing button, turn crank three or four revolutions. Take off receiver and "push up" hook on which it hangs, then press down arm rest and presently you will hear "Central" say, "What number?", then give only the number you want, don't use any useless words for they only tend to confuse. Wait just a minute and the party will answer you. When through (the party who called) should ring off by pressing button and give crank a sharp half turn. To answer a call -- When your bell rings answer promptly by removing and pushing up hook (receiver) and pressing down arm rest and say, "here". In a thunder storm, it is not advisable to use 'phone while heavy lightning is playing, but distant lightning will not affect it. Telephones are both delicate and costly, so please take as good care as possible. Try and keep it clean, and dust it off often. Report all trouble promptly to the manager's office."

There are several more old articles. The one on "Hello, Central!", March 28, 1896, told plans to enlarge the telephone company, to add twenty more 'phones and marveled on the success of the enterprise. At first the company had ordered sixty 'phones with a switchboard capacity of 100. Orders came in so fast they could not supply the demand fast enough. As of that date 100 'phones were in and they had orders for more and another switchboard ordered which would double the present capacity. New connections had just been made, to Mitchell Jones, four miles out, and Messrs. Geo. R. McRee and Sons, six miles out. And news was then given that a long distance line was to be established with Valdosta as its center, reaching out to Sparks, Quitman, Nashville, Jasper, Fla., Homerville, Adel, Cecil and would not only benefit Valdosta, but all close points.

April 2, 1896, Valdosta Times: "The telephone company have one hundred and ten subscribers up to date and others who contemplate subscribing. Is there another small city in Georgia with a system, so young, yet so well patronized?"

April 11, 1896, Valdosta Times: "The Long Distance 'Phone. The Long Distance Telephone Company, which was recently organized here, have ordered instruments for their lines and more will be commenced at once establishing a line to several of the adjoining towns... Sparks, Lake Park...Melrose, and Ousley...The system will bring our neighbors in talking distance of us and will probably be of much benefit to the city in a commercial way."

Needless to say, the telephone did play a great part in the growth of our city, providing jobs for many people and one was the long distance operator -- the night long distance operator. Mrs. Avie Christie of East Magnolia Street was one of the first. Between school (from teachers as Miss Maggie McLeod, Miss Minnie Lane, Miss Sallas and Miss Mahone) and marriage, Mrs. Christie worked for the telephone company. The office was above Hall's Children Shop (the Mathis Building) with a stairway in the middle of the building opening on Patterson street. She was the night long distance operator and therefore had to stay awake all night and all alone in her work. Mrs. Christie was the first operator ever to begin at the new building, moved into end of 1913 or early 1914, and the change took place at midnight with only a few minutes interruption in the service. I asked Mrs. Christie to tell me some of the important calls, or famous people she rang, and do you know to this day she will not divulge any information or any people she called for the telephone company! She did say you could find out who you wanted to associate with, but no names were mentioned, even today. She remembers: her family's telephone number on Oak street was 233-J and the number at the cemetery where her father was sexton was 233-W, that there were many farmers on one line and that A. J. Strickland's office was number 1, situated on Wall street behind the old C & S Bank, vicinity of the new one. One of Mrs. Christie's happy memories, and rightly so, was the first Christmas in the new building. She was operator #1 and got business calls through in fast order, but couldn't tell her name. Presents poured in to Operator #1, a barrel of apples, four baskets of oranges, candy. The people were grateful and generous and she will never forget it. And what's better she divided with her co-workers. She later became supervisor and then married.

Back then, young men had to voice their comical opinion about the telephone. They announced in the newspaper that they had rather talk into their girl's ear in person, than over long, long distance. And a short personal mention Dec. 4, 1897 said: "The telephone is something of a demoralizer, after all. Persons who are courteous and polite for ordinary conversation will step to the telephone and yell, "Who is that?" or "Who are you?" without a blush at the break. Possibly they make the mistake of thinking they are talking to the

inanimate box on the wall, instead of a gentleman or lady at the other end of the line."

On March 22, 1902, it was reported that the Bell Telephone Company had reached the city with its poles and in a short time a long-distance telephone service would be operated by it. The poles erected along West Hill Avenue were taller than any other and the lines consisting of four in number were of heavy copper wires and came in from Quitman along the Troupville road. March 22, 1902, Mr. Ed McRee told how he patched up a telephone wire blown down in a storm. The damaged wire was so twisted he couldn't find enough to help repair, so he decided to try a plan in use in Texas, to tie the 'phone wire to a fence and let the fence carry the message. He found it worked, and for a month or more, every message between Quitman and our city had to skim along his wire fence for about "half a mile to make the trip".

A circular for Bell Telephone says, "Your 'link' with us at Southern Bell is the service representative -- one of many people trained to serve you in a helpful and friendly manner." Such a person was (and still is) Mrs. Berta Crosby. Mrs. Crosby went to work June 1, 1906 and was the only office worker until the 1930s, mastering the art of service representative, training many others who in turn did the same. Mrs. Crosby, of 312 East College Street, moved to Valdosta in 1900 with her father, G. W. Chauncey, and family. Mr. Chauncey, like Mrs. Christie's father, Mr. Giddens, was a sexton at Sunset Hill Cemetery. Mrs. Crosby remembers that sometime before she went to work, the telephone was above the corner of Central and Ashley and had 400 telephones in operation. When she did go to work, there were 500. She worked until 1955, and with a few years out for the birth of her only child, Virginia, she worked a total of 46 years. Virginia is Mrs. J. B. Rice of Gainesville, Fla.

There were two stores on either side of the upstairs door of the Mathis building, the Staten dress shop on the left side and Barton and Powell's Dry Goods store on right. Mrs. Crosby said that across the street on a corner, formerly the Strickland building was a picture show building. Upstairs of the Mathis building was the telephone company. Mrs. Crosby did the same work there as she did in the "new" building (200 West Valley St.). She was in the Commercial division, collecting from people paying bills, writing up orders for new telephones, recording long distance charges and anything walk-in customers and strangers wanted, usually asking for a pay telephone. In the beginning there were only two men who were outside workers. Flossie Matthews, Mrs. Crosby's sister, was an operator later and was one of the first to know the news of the end of World War I. One surprise for me was information about the Pioneer Club, whose members are the retired personnel of Southern Bell. They meet monthly, usually with the Waycross Cherokee Club and is most enjoyable, said Mrs. Crosby. There is a newsletter by Doris Knight who began with Southern Bell in 1935 and is continuing to work there. Her newsletter reminded me of ours.

Well, we've come a long way, or the local Southern Bell has. There are thousands upon thousands here now in use. The local dialing system went into use in 1957 and direct dialing May 1965. We call anywhere we please. The telephone was "born" June 2, 1875, and that's a lot of talking.

From the Valdosta Times, Jan. 21, 1893: "A Pioneer Dead. One of Lowndes County's Earliest Settlers. Franklin Swilley died at his home ten miles south of Valdosta last Monday night, after several months of extreme suffering from cancers.

Mr. Swilley was born Nov. 21, 1813 in Appling County. He married there and came to this county a few months after the birth of his first child. With his small family, and cooking utensils he threaded his way thru the unbroken forest and selected the tract of land upon which he spent his life. He suffered all the privations and hardships of the pioneer; but he claimed the land from the forest and prospered so well that as his large family of children grew to maturity he was able to give to each a tract of land and start him in life in comfortable circumstances. When the Indian war broke out he volunteered and served till the troubles were settled. He was also a soldier in the Mexican War. His well known honesty and his genial disposition made him many friends, and no man stood higher in the esteem of his neighbors. He was buried on Tuesday evening in his family burying ground on the spot where he built his first log cabin."

Don't forget the meeting Thursday night at 8:00. The program will be Thera Hambrick giving the History of Valdosta State College. Invite all your friends to come to the meeting and to join our Society.

Albert Pendleton