

Livermore Heritage Guild

“Help Save Yesterday For Tomorrow”



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January/February 2005

Vol. XXXIV

No. 2

THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS OF TELEPHONE SERVICE IN LIVERMORE

By Gary Drummond

Livermore is known to have been the 24th town in California to have telephone service. The first instrument was installed in 1884 by J. O. McKown, a local druggist, who was also a stringer for a San Francisco newspaper. McKown was looking for some method faster than a telegram for getting news items to the paper. He was connected through the railroad lines that ran along the tracks.

News about telephone system expansion for the next ten to fifteen years is scant. Only random notes appear in either the *Livermore Echo* or the *Livermore Herald*. The *Echo* reported on January 7, 1892 that a new telephone line had been completed as far as Livermore the previous day. The paper noted also in October 1895 that “(T)he telephone office will shortly be removed to a building next to the Livermore Hotel. . . . Arrangements have been made whereby communication can be had through a telephone at the hotel from 8PM to 8AM with any of the night offices on the line.” The *Echo* also advised its readers at year-end 1897 that “Brown and Beck have caused a telephone to be placed in their place of business, and customers may now order goods without the trouble of going down town.”

At the turn of the century, the Sunset Telephone Company provided service. The company had two switchboards identified as Main and Black. The assigned num-

bers were switchboard-prefix and two or three digits: for example, Rev. James Stone was Main 381; J. H. Dutcher was Black 283. Later the very small number of rural connections were put on a Suburban exchange. Businesses and professional people generally did not include a telephone number in their newspaper advertisements so those provide no clue as to the popularity of the telephone. The exceptions were Day’s Livery at Black 35, the Livermore Hotel at Main 34 and the local cigar factory.

C. H. Acker, who was available at Main 61, ran a messenger and buying service, traveling to San Francisco each day to deliver messages and to buy any merchandise his customers ordered provided he could carry it back to Livermore. In the early days, a customer could ring “Central” and she could often track down the person being called, following him around town, and when she eventually found him, deliver the caller’s message. Although there had been no notices of new telephone connections in the previous five years, the *Herald* reported in 1906 that the telephone company needed only a few more subscribers to reach 100, the minimum number required to qualify for night service.

Rival telephone companies began springing up in 1907. The first was Livermore Water and Power Company, followed in 1908 by the Midway Telephone Company, and in 1909 by the Home Telephone Company. These small companies, including Sunset Telephone, were absorbed by Pacific Telephone and Telegraph (PT&T) in 1915. PT&T eliminated the third digit in a telephone

number, so that Main 771 became 77, and at the same time did away with all three of the old exchange designations. Businesses were on single-line service. On two-party residential lines, the first telephone had a suffix “W”, and the second one a suffix “J”: “W” was one ring; “J” was two. If a subscriber was on a four-party line, in addition to the “W” and “J” suffixes, “T” and “M” were used. With the change in telephone numbers, callers were told to ask for a number, not a name; otherwise “Central” had to look up the number in the directory which would delay the caller’s connection. Most rural lines provided up to ten-party service. In addition to the two numbers and a suffix, such as 25F (the “F” identifying it as a farm line), another digit was added so that a rural number might be 25-F-6, that indicated when “Central” rang six consecutive times, the call was for you.

The number of telephone service subscribers grew from 100 in 1906, to 200 connections by 1910, and 350 by 1917. In the fall of 1926, PT&T made major improvements to Livermore’s telephone system. It replaced the old magneto (hand-crank) exchange with a battery system and installed five sections of new switchboard capable of providing for 445 lines and 765 subscribers. Six hundred and twenty old-style crank instruments were replaced with the newer pedestal model. Subscriber numbers were unchanged: one house on Sixth Street had the same telephone number, 2-W, from 1916 until 1956, when dial service started here. (A neighbor in the same block had telephone number 2-J; let’s hope they were friends.) One more improvement to report: as of February 1st 1929, the telephone operator provided a time of day service.

Have you noticed the uncovered letters on the building at the corner of Railroad and N. Livermore Ave.? Formerly housing Valley Brake & Auto Repair, this building is currently being earthquake retrofitted. After sandblasting the building, the letters slowly appeared: PIEROTTIS MACHINE SHOP. In the Livermore Herald dated February 9, 1923: “Mrs. Annie H. Schrader states that she has renewed the lease held by V. Pierotti on the machine shop located on Livermore Avenue near the Southern Pacific tracks.” from the Livermore Herald dated June 24, 1927: “Z. Toma and Wm. H. Twisselmann announced Wednesday that they had purchased the garage and machine shop of Vincent Pierotti on Livermore Avenue and would succeed him in the management of the business. The former has been a mechanic in the shop for the past nine years and Mr. Twisselmann has been the firm’s book-keeper for two years. Both are well qualified in their respective branches of the business and will do well. Chas. Kincaid will continue as a mechanic in the shop.” Mr. Pierotti passed away in September 1927.



B. V. ZABALLA,

Telephone Main 14

IMPORTER and
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: CIGARS :

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Livermore, Cal.

LIVERMORE CIGAR FACTORY 458

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HERITAGE GUILD HAPPENINGS

DOCENTS NEEDED: Are you interested in becoming a docent at the Museum on Third Street? No experience necessary, we will gladly train. If you are interested in Livermore history, this is a great way to get involved with the Guild and also become acquainted with the various research tools we have available so you can even do your own investigations into Livermore history. Museum hours are Wed. through Sunday 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. If interested, please contact Larry Mauch at larrym49@comcast.net or phone 449-9927. Please leave a message with your name and contact number so we may contact you.

Are you interested in receiving notifications of upcoming events by email? If you would like to receive notifications by email instead of snail mail, please send your email address to the President and newsletter editor Larry Mauch at "**larrym49@comcast.net**". Include "LHG events notification" in the subject line; send your name as it appears on your membership and the email address that you would like future notifications sent to. You will receive a confirmation email that you have been added to the email list. Note: At this time we are not able to send the newsletter by email.

Did you know?:

There are more than 6 volumes at the History Center about the history of Veteran's Hospital. These were compiled by Barbara Groth who has done a wonderful job.

Downtown Walking Tour:

If you would like to sign up for either a downtown or residential **walking tour**, you may now register by either calling the History Center at 449-9927 or by visiting the History Center and completing a preference card. When several people have signed up for one tour or the other, a Walk Tour Guide will contact you with a time and date to meet.



Picture on the masthead is circa 1960 of First Street in Livermore when telephone poles were the most prominent feature on the sidewalks.

CALENDAR

Thursday, February 10 @ 7:00 p.m.
LHG Board Meeting, Recreation Center

Thursday, March 10 @ 7:00 p.m.
LHG Board Meeting, Recreation Center

Agenda for Future History Colloquiums:

All presentations are held 7 to 9 p.m. in the community meeting room of the Livermore Civic Center Library on South Livermore Avenue

February 16, 2005:

Barry Schrader, Mudslinging and MUCKRAKING between Valley newspapers. Barry's column appears in the Independent, Valley Times and Herald. He has been involved in the newspaper business 16 years and 23 years in public relations/PIO work for Sandia/LLNL.

March 16, 2005:

Don Nolte, retired Director of the Livermore library, will talk about his experience serving in the US Information Service in the years 1951-53 in Cairo, Egypt during a period of political unrest.

\$2 suggested donation. Coffee, tea and sweet breads provided by the Library Cafe. The Library Cafe is open until 8:00 p.m. providing sandwiches and drinks

A Word From the Chair

A new year begins and it is time for resolutions to be made. The Heritage Guild is in the process of finalizing our goals for 2005. After they are approved by the Board we will post them in the next newsletter. One major change for this year is Barbara Bunshah is preparing to step down as Curator for the Carnegie Library Museum on Third Street. Barbara has spent countless hours over the last 25 years as Curator manning the front desk, answering questions and recording the history of Livermore. Her knowledge is irreplaceable. Barbara has earned a well deserved rest and

will be reducing her hours. Over the next several months Barbara will be helping document her filing systems and assist in developing written procedures for the docents. We recently purchased a new Dell Computer and PastPerfect museum collection management software so we will be doing some reorganization of the archives as well. Barbara's intentions are to work Sundays the next several months if you would like to stop by and say hello. We will plan a big party for Barbara in the next month or two, stay tuned!

