

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Hello Central, Give Me Hemlock**

"Kids today are always on their cell phones, e-mailing on their iPhones or Blackberries, texting and twittering away."

This is a common complaint today from mothers and fathers in this highly sophisticated world of communication, but it's hardly anything new.

"Children today are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers."

The above quote was by the Greek philosopher Socrates over four hundred years before Christ. And where did it get him? On a day in 399 BC he stood before an Athenian jury of 500 fellow citizens accused of "corrupting the youth". Go figure. The verdict was guilty, and the penalty was death by drinking a cup of poison hemlock.

Constant phone use may be poisoning the youth of today all these years after the Athenians poisoned Socrates, but hemlock also played an important part in the early days of telephone service in New Orleans.

Stanley Clisby Arthur wrote of a stately structure on Esplanade Avenue with the appearance of a feudal castle. Built in 1838 by Sampson Blossman, the building had also been home to Edward Pilsbury, once Mayor of New Orleans, among others. But the most unusual purpose for this intriguing edifice was that it once housed the Hemlock Exchange of New Orleans' early telephone company.

It all started when the first telephone was put into service in the Crescent City. Brought from the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876 by a member of the firm of Horter and Fenner (manufacturers of saddlery and harness), the firm connected its salesroom on Magazine and Gravier with their factory on Poydras and Church Streets.

Then in 1879, W. H. Bofinger, president of the American District Telegraph Company, started the New Orleans Telephonic Exchange at 47 Camp Street (after obtaining a license from the American Bell Telephone Company). The first directory contained a mere ninety-nine subscribers who (in order to make a call) would call the Exchange, give a long ring with the bell crank and wait for the operator to signal back. After that happened, one would remove the phone from the hook, announce the name of the subscriber desired. The instructions after that were, "When called by the Exchange give a ring back, then remove the telephone from the hook and say Hello! Hello!"

The reason for this protocol is that Edison preferred "Hello!" to Alexander Graham Bell's preferred greeting, "Ahoy!" He wrote a short note to that effect on August 15, 1877, stating "Hello! can be heard 10 to 20 feet away." Ironically, "hullo" or "hello" had not appeared that often in the written English language. Dickens used "hullo" in 1850 and Mark Twain "hello" in 1872. "Halloo" had been used to call the hounds or shouted in a hunt when the quarry was first seen. "Halloo me like a hare" wrote Shakespeare in *Coriolanus*. When the "Wizard of Menlo Park" first discovered the principle of recorded sound with the invention of the phonograph (on July 18, 1877), his first word into his device was "halloo".

It is believed that "halloo" originated when English wolves were hunted. Since French was the language of the court, they cried "*Hab le loup!*" or "*Au loup!*", which soon became "a-loo!" and later "Halloo!" "*Loup*" is "wolf" in French. All whoops tend to sound the same after a while, and two hundred years ago a publication revealed that that the English fox hunters' cry was "Tallio, Hoix, Hark, Forward", a corruption of "*Thia-hilaud a qui forheur!*" or "*Tya-hillaut a qui forheur!*". These cries from an old French book printed in Paris in 1573, "*La Venerie de Jacques du Fouilloux*", were later simplified into "Tally-ho!"

Soon telephone jargon was part of popular song. "Hello! Ma Baby (Hello Ma Ragtime Gal)" was written in 1899 by Emerson, Howard & Sterling, and Charles K. Harris (composer of "After the Ball") wrote "Hello Central, Give Me Heaven" in 1901. The "central office" was another name for the exchange one called.

According to Leonard Huber, the first telephone operators at "central" were soon known as "hello boys", but it was determined that they were "temperamentally unsuited" for their jobs (especially for leaving their posts during a heavy snow storm to make and throw snowballs). The boys tended to be impatient and rude with customers, while the young women operators were calm and gracious. Goodbye, boys. Hello, "hello girls".

In 1880, the phone company became the Louisiana Telephone Company and their system was known as the Magneto System. The

first conversation held over the phones of this company was actually a concert with one instrument at Camp and Gravier Streets and the other at the Magazine Market. Singers were hired to serenade into the receivers for the entertainment of those at the other end. The company was sold to the Great Southern Telephone and Telegraph Company in 1883, and circuits were moved from rooftops to cross-arms on poles. On January 20, 1883, the boy operators of New Orleans were history.

The first private branch exchange was installed for the Cotton Centennial Exposition of 1884, and in 1885 a multiple Western Electric switchboard was installed. By 1897, there existed 1,641 New Orleans telephone subscribers, and two years later there were two phone systems: the People's and the Cumberland (who then bought out the People's). In 1903 a new exchange split off, the Uptown Exchange on Foucher Street, from the original exchange called Main. An exchange was described in "The New Orleans Book" (1919) as "a wonderful sight" with walls "lined with switchboards" that have boards "covered with tiny holes like a bee's honeycomb".

1906 saw the arrival of the Hemlock Exchange, serving the downtown area (meaning below Canal or downriver from the CBD served by the Main Exchange). Algiers got their exchange the same year, and the Jackson Exchange came on the scene in 1909. Many numbers still carry 524 and 525 prefixes, which correspond with JA-4 and JA-5.

The Walnut Exchange was created in 1910 and Galvez in 1911. The Cedar Exchange covered Metairie (later to be replaced by Vernon). To give the reader an idea of phone numbers in 1911, the New Orleans City Directory of that year lists Herman Kahle's number as Hemlock 857-L (a party line number), and Theodore Dimitry's as Main 4744. Line numbers could be one to four digits long and party lines had a letter tacked on to indicate the different parties sharing the line.

In 1913, Southern Bell took over Cumberland Telephone & Telegraph, a consolidation that was complete by 1926 (a year in which all of the city had gone manual).

Many young people today have never experienced the use of an exchange. They understand area codes or "let me get your digits", but have no memory of past exchanges. Pennsylvania 6-5000, immortalized in song by Glenn Miller, is believed to be the oldest continuing phone number in New York City. Belonging to the Hotel Pennsylvania, it's been around since 1919.

Each bygone exchange from New Orleans has its special memories, too. This author's past telephone number was Evergreen 6609 (out by the Lake), and he once had a Chestnut number for his office in New Orleans East. The Franklin Exchange replaced Hemlock, and

RAYmond came along in 1928. There was CRescent, AUdubon, MAgnolia, BYwater, CRescent, AMherst, VALley, TEmple, TYler, VIctor and CAnal. On June 21, 1948, the UNiversity Exchange was introduced uptown (all those 865 and 866 numbers). 1951 saw EDison hit the Westbank, and 1952 brought the Eastbank TULane, FAirview and EVergreen. Then came FOrrest and FILLmore.

Between 1955 and 1960, all two-letter exchanges became two-letters and a digit. This period brought TWinbrook, WHitehall, HUnter, ATwood and VErnnon. There were phones in custom colors in those days. Soon people stopped mentioning the exchanges entirely. It all became numbers. Today it's a world of portability with almost everyone toting a cell phone.

In 2005 BellSouth spent \$700,000 (about \$47,000 per phone) to bring phone service (the last in the United States) to Mink, Louisiana, about 100 miles south of Shreveport. The rest of the state paid the bill, working out to about 28 cents per phone for each Louisiana phone customer. Why not just bring out the hemlock?

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