



E. D. HICKS

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THE STORY OF THE TELEPHONE IN OKLAHOMA

One of the inventions which has been the result of our modern civilization and which has in turn made a contribution to that same civilization is the telephone. In this day of easy communication by wire, by air, by steam, or by automobile it is fitting that we pause and wonder by what means messages were sent from one point to another a short half century ago, but the imagination fails to bring to our vision conditions of that period. Only those who lived and worked then and who have kept the memory of those days intact amid the hustle and bustle of the present, can give this story to us.

In our own state of Oklahoma, in the period immediately following the War between the States, there was a gradual transformation from the strong governments of the Indian Nations to a government controlled more and more by the United States.

The seat of this control so far as the Cherokee Nation was concerned was at Muskogee. The only means of communication between the Cherokee National Council meeting at Tahlequah, the capital of the Cherokee Nation, and the United States Indian Agency at Muskogee, thirty-five miles distant, was by mail three times a week, or by courier. When the Council was in session, it was often necessary to send two couriers a day with messages to Muskogee. These means of communication were unsatisfactory. In addition to being slow the couriers were often delayed by the congestion at the ferry-boat crossing of the Arkansas River. The nearest telegraph line connected Old Gibson Station, which was located between the present towns of Okay and Wagoner, with the army post at Fort Gibson, hence had little value in local communication.

It remained for a young Cherokee boy to solve the problem giving more satisfactory means of communication between Tahlequah and Muskogee. At the age of sixteen this Cherokee youth,

E. D. Hicks, visited the World's Fair at St. Louis in 1882 where for the first time he became interested in the telephone. February 1, 1934 he retired after forty-eight years' service as manager of the telephone in Tahlequah and the surrounding district. During this half a century vast changes have occurred: the Cherokee Nation is merely a name and a memory; the old Agency Building at Muskogee is now one of the buildings of the Veterans' Hospital; the Creek Indian settlement of Muskogee is the third largest city in the state of Oklahoma; a Federal highway connects Tahlequah and Muskogee, so that a courier could make the trip now in less than an hour; the ferry has been replaced by a modern bridge; the army post has long since been abandoned; Gibson Station is merely a location; the mails come in not three times a week but three times a day; every section has ready access to the telegraph; and a telephone is in practically every home in the state of Oklahoma.

Who can tell which of these changes may be due in whole or in part to the imagination, ingenuity, and determination of this sixteen-year-old Cherokee lad. Few stories of romance and adventure are more interesting than the story of the life of Mr. E. D. Hicks. He was born in Fort Gibson in 1866, lost his mother while he was yet an infant, made his home for a few years with his grandparents, lived a few years with his father and step-mother, and at the age of six came to live with an aunt in Tahlequah. The aunt, the late Mrs. Jane Hicks Stapler (Mrs. John W. Stapler), taught the Cherokee boy to speak English and educated him in the public schools of the Cherokee Nation until he had completed the work offered in the grade schools. He was then sent by his father, Daniel Ross Hicks, to the University of Arkansas, where he remained until his father's death in 1883. That same year Hicks went to live with an uncle, Major D. W. Lipe, on a ranch near Claremore, where he had charge of the commissary. With a friend or two Hicks decided to attend the fair at St. Louis. With about twenty-five dollars, some of which he had earned and some of which was given to him by his uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Stapler, he left Vinita for St. Louis. So far as the Cherokee lad was concerned the outstanding exhibit at the fair was the telephone. He studied it, trying to understand the intricate workings of the unusual piece of machinery which enabled people to talk over wires to each other although they might be separated by several miles.

The idea seemed most uncanny to Hicks and when he returned home, he read everything he could find concerning the telephone. Soon after his return to the ranch at Claremore he made friends with the agent of the St. Louis and San Francisco railroad which had recently extended its line to Claremore. Working with this agent Hicks studied telegraphy, and incidentally gathered considerable information on the subject of telephones.

During the summer of 1886 Hicks was in Tahlequah to organize a company to finance the construction of a telephone line from Tahlequah, to Muskogee, through Fort Gibson. He was able to interest several friends and relatives in the project. The original company was composed of Mr. Hicks, C. W. Turner, J. B. Stapler, J. S. Stapler, John S. Scott, and L. B. Bell. Mr. Hicks is the only one of this group living, J. B. Stapler having died only a few weeks since.

The next problem was to secure a permit from the Cherokee Nation for the construction of the telephone line. This was no easy matter, for the Indians opposed every move which might lead to the opening of their country to the outside world, or lead to the establishment of railroads or encourage the coming of whites to their lands. Finally the Cherokee National Council granted the permit and the grant was approved by Principal Chief Dennis W. Bushyhead, and Hicks and J. W. Stapler went to St. Louis to get the telephones. They called on the electrical supply house of A. S. Aloe and Company who referred them to D. A. Kusel, a German electrician, who could assemble the telephones for them. It was necessary to purchase the parts separately because of the various patents on the assembled machines. The telephone as assembled by Kusel was, according to Hicks, "fearfully and wonderfully made". Three telephones were assembled at a cost of \$75.00 each and brought back to Tahlequah. These boxes were cumbersome and heavy. The hook was the only patented part about them. The wire, brackets, and insulators were purchased in St. Louis and shipped to Tahlequah. In order to appease the wrath of the Cherokees two telephones were fastened up and two full bloods were allowed to talk with each other. "Much of the opposition left after the Indians learned that the telephone could talk Cherokee"; however, fearing that it would lead to sectionizing the land, they were still a little worried about granting the permit, and when the permit was finally granted, it was stipulated that the

line must be constructed through country which would be inaccessible to railroads. A second restriction required that no surveyors' instruments could be used in building the line. The Cherokees had the idea that a surveyed line was the first step in building a railroad and they were much opposed to railroads being built through their nation although the Treaty of 1866 granted this right.

In late summer of 1886 a tool and a chuck wagon was equipped and the construction company began their project, working from Tahlequah. The tools consisted of axes, shovels, and a ladder. The crew was composed of Hicks, a teamster, and two negroes (Jack Luther and Emanuel Spenser) to help with the heavy work. Wherever possible the line was strung through trees, the tops being cut off to form posts. The wire was stretched by using a wagon and team, and a ladder was used instead of "climbers". Since they were allowed to use no surveyors' instruments, they depended upon their sense of general direction; and when they would reach a high point they would take sight and jog either to the right or left to keep a direct line to Muskogee.

By August 6, the line was completed to Fort Gibson. There the construction gang attempted to talk with the headquarters at Tahlequah. "We could not get the telephone working and a soldier at the fort who knew something about telephones told us it was wired wrong, and showed us how it should be fixed. We fixed our phone according to the directions given by the soldier and sent a darky to Tahlequah, with a picture I had drawn of the correct wiring. After several hours we rang Tahlequah and the voice of J. S. Stapler came over the line — 'Hello——,' 'Who is this?' 'This is the devil, I'm coming after you.' " Such, according to Mr. Hicks, was the first long distance telephone conversation in what is now the state of Oklahoma.

The next problem confronting the construction company was getting through the heavy cane brakes along the Arkansas and across the river. It was necessary to chop out a road for the combined tool and chuck wagon, no easy task with the tools at hand, and then manage to get the wagon across the swampy land along the river. This task was soon behind them and then they faced the problem of crossing the river. This was accomplished by the use of a flat boat trailing a rope to which was attached the wire. When they reached the other side, the wire was drawn over the

limbs of trees and the wagon and team were again brought into use in tightening it. After several attempts this feat was accomplished and five weeks after beginning the work at Tahlequah, a toll line was established to Muskogee. This fact was not a reality for long, however. Copper wire had been used for the eight-hundred-yard span across the river. It was not treated as the wire is today and within the space of a few weeks, broke and, "\$105.00 worth of copper wire fell into the Arkansas River, where it is today." The span was replaced with steel wire and connection was reestablished between Tahlequah and Muskogee in about two weeks.

Headquarters in Muskogee were established in the office of the C. W. Turner Hardware Company, on the site of the present Wolcott hotel. The first operator in Muskogee was Jim Bozeman. Headquarters in Tahlequah were established in the hardware store belonging to J. W. Stapler and Sons, and J. B. Stapler was the operator.

In 1885 Mr. Hicks had married Miss Lizzie Musgrove and in the fall of 1889 they moved to Tahlequah where Mr. Hicks was employed as engineer at the Cherokee Female Seminary, which had just been completed in Tahlequah, to replace the one at Park Hill which had burned in 1887. Mr. Hicks was here for three years, leaving to take a position with Stapler and Sons as manager of the Furniture and Undertaking departments. The Stapler store of that time occupied the rooms now occupied by the two Sherman stores and the First National Bank.

Mr. Hicks took charge of the telephone exchange which consisted of eighteen phones. In 1896 Mr. Hicks and Mr. Wm P. Thompson of Oklahoma City, an attorney who then lived in Tahlequah and later served on the Supreme Court commission from 1926 to 1930, organized the Tahlequah Telephone Exchange, installing the first switchboard used west of St. Louis. The board was kept in Stapler's Store and Mr. Hicks was the manager. He employed as "hello girl" Miss Lillian Buster, daughter of an attorney living in Tahlequah. Miss Buster's salary was \$3.00 per week, "when we could get the money"; and she worked from seven o'clock in the morning until dark every day except Sunday. In the years from 1891 until 1907 the exchange was in the Stapler Store. In 1907 J. W. Stapler died and the exchange was moved to quarters over Crew's Drug Store. The Pioneer Telephone and Telegraph Company purchased the Exchange in 1905 but retained

Mr. Hicks as manager. The year the exchange was moved to the Crew Building the board was burned in a fire caused from the overturning of a coal oil lamp. The Pioneer Company installed a new board which was used until 1916 when the present board was installed. The 1907 board was operated by the crank system.

In 1908 the offices were moved to the present quarters, and the cable system which had been introduced in New York in 1900, was used in wiring the switchboard. In 1916 the Pioneer was merged with other companies in neighboring states in the South-western Bell Telephone Company. When the 1916 switchboard was installed, the common battery system was used together with all the modern devices known to the trade. At the time of the retirement of Mr. Hicks, there were some 500 phones in operation from the Tahlequah board, operated by a personnel of eleven employees, having been reduced from fifteen in 1930. There is no PBX connection. The business is now in charge of Miss Elsie Kiesow, acting as chief operator-cashier.

Mr. and Mrs. Hicks have resided in Tahlequah since coming here in 1889. They have four children living, W. P. Hicks and Mrs. Jane Harnage, Tulsa and E. D. Hicks Jr. and Mrs. John Alley, Oklahoma City. Since retiring Mr. Hicks is devoting his time to personal affairs.

In connection with the construction of the line from Tahlequah to Muskogee, Mr. Hicks tells some interesting stories. One in particular will bear repeating. One man from Springdale, Arkansas, working on the construction gang had an uncontrollable fear of snakes. He had made the remark that if he ever saw a rattler, he was gone. One day while working near the Gulager home, he stepped on a rattle snake and with a scream he started to run. Mr. Hicks had heard nothing from him since that time until three years ago when the news of the approaching retirement of Mr. Hicks was given to the newspapers and the man, whose name Mr. Hicks is unable to recall, wrote a letter reminding Mr. Hicks of the snake incident. Frequently, according to Mr. Hicks, it became necessary to move camp after all arrangements had been made, because there were too many snakes in the immediate vicinity.

Along with Ft. Gibson, Gibson Station, and the Cherokee Nation the rattle snakes in this section of the country have suc-

cumbed to the influences of a progressive civilization and are now a memory.

The material for this article was assembled from interviews with Mr. Hicks and from the records of the Telephone Company.

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