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History

'45 phone directory is like a phone call to the past

Several weeks ago, before he fled to Florida for the winter, Willimantic's Vince Cerreto kindly provided me with scanned copies of the 1945 Willimantic Telephone Directory. It was compiled in December 1944 and published Feb. 1, 1945. This 55-year-old phone book is a remarkable historic document and provides valuable information about communication and advertising in the first half of the 20th century.

This week, we will take a close look at the phone book, and during the next two weeks examine its yellow pages. The directory served sections of the towns of Colchester, Norwich, Manchester and Putnam, and the towns of Windham, Lebanon and Stafford Springs, including more than 40 communities in the region, ranging from Amston to Warrenville.

The Southern New England Telephone Co. first built the current Willimantic telephone exchange at 32 High St. in 1913. The new technology provided then ensured that callers only had to lift the receiver to alert the operator, rather than



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to vigorously turn a crank.

Thirty-two years later, telephone technology had not advanced greatly. Page 2 of the 1945 book reveals the services on offer, such as station-to-station calls, person-to-person calls, appointment and messenger calls, collect calls and telegrams by telephone. Virtually all services had to go through the operator sat at the switchboard, through dial and manual telephones.

Only a few subscribers had numbers that could be called direct. These were four-figure numbers beginning with "9." The majority of numbers consisted of four or five figures and a letter. Long distance calls were very expensive. A three-minute person-to-person call from Willimantic to San Fran-

cisco cost \$5, Monday through Friday, but only \$4 at nights — 6 p.m. to 4:30 a.m. — and Sundays. Telephone bills could be paid in person at 32 High St. or at H.C. Murray's Boston Store.

Willimantic subscribers could save money by joining a party line. The directory stressed that satisfactory service depended upon cooperation. Party-liners were instructed to keep their calls short and give way to emergency calls. If someone dialed while you were in conversation, clicks were heard and you were instructed to kindly ask the third party to hang up. Each member of a party line was provided with a card that listed the numbers and names and addresses of all those sharing your phone line.

The first entry in the Willimantic listings was Alfred P. Abbe, the fire warden, who could be contacted by dialing 67. The last entry was Alex Zuryk of Columbia, number 665-W1. The American Thread Co.'s main number was 753. The business office was 1093, and dialing 1094 and a letter-number suffix would contact

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This advertisement for the Hotel Hooker was published in the 1945 Willimantic Telephone Directory.

you with various departments in the plant. Every department at the University of Connecticut, including the fraternities, was available through direct dial four-figure numbers starting with "9." The Willimantic Railroad Depot had a simple listing. Just dialing the number "4" contacted you with the stationmaster's office.

A quick glance at the numbers reveals that phones subscribers of half a century ago employed their personal telephone numbers in a similar way automobile drivers have

personalized number plates today. Businesses too had easy to remember numbers. The Hosmer Mountain Spring Bottling Co. could be reached at 425, Louis Arnold's insurance company was number 1000, and his home number at 87 North St. was 1500. If you needed to dine at the most lavish restaurant in town (pictured), then just dial 2587.

Next Week: The 1945 Yellow Pages.

Want to read more about Willimantic history? Log on to www.threadcity.com.