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## Telephone service simple in Arkadelphia

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# Telephone service simple in Arkadelphia

By Wendy Richter  
For the Siftings

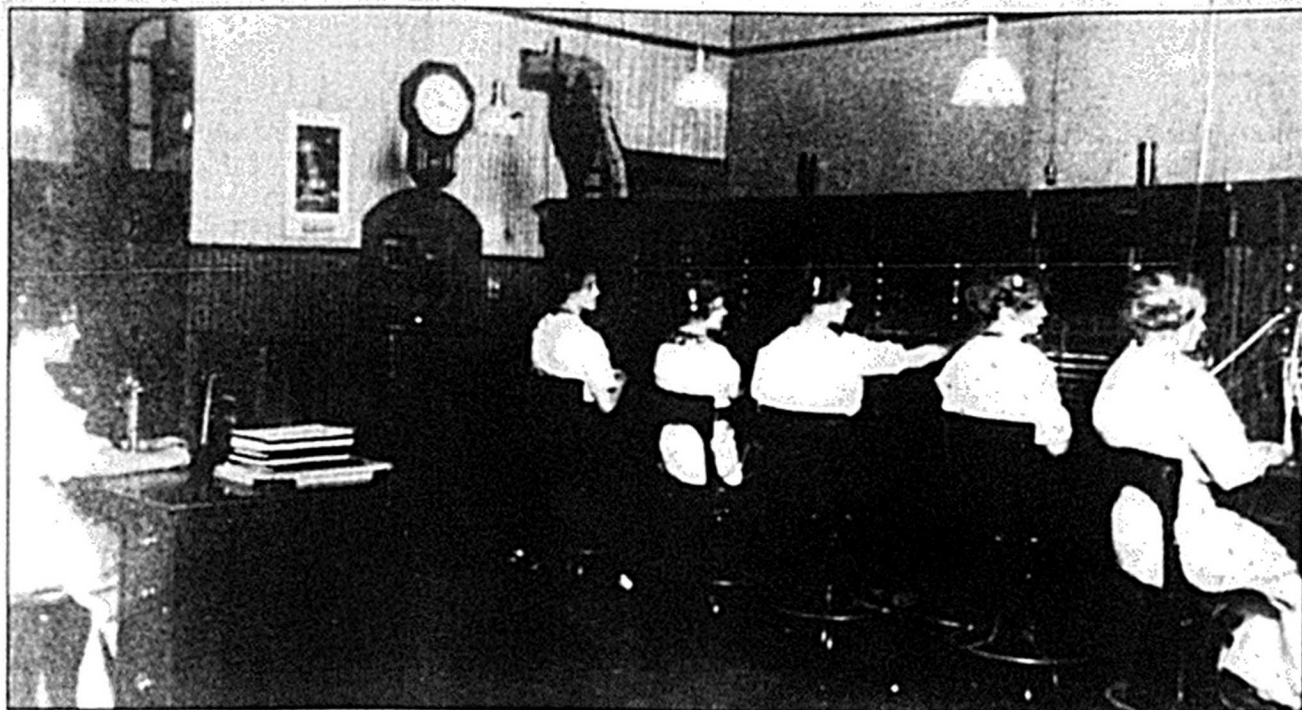
As the nineteenth century came to a close, telephone service began to flourish in Clark County. In its infancy, Arkadelphia's first telephone service was indeed simple: it allowed communication between two places. For example, in 1878, a store on Johnston Street connected with a nearby warehouse. And, a phone line linked the Southern Standard newspaper office with a local store. Other lines ran between particular businesses and residences.

Communication needs grew, and Arkadelphia's first telephone exchange was established in 1891 by Jack Wilson, Albert Crow, and William Gerig. The system's switchboard had five sets of "connecting plugs," so customers could be connected with a number of different people, but they sometimes had to wait their turn to talk. The

company's thirty original customers---called "subscribers"---included local businesses, Ouachita Baptist College, and Arkadelphia Methodist College. The number of subscribers grew quickly.

In 1894 the Southern Standard reported that "The Arkadelphia Telephone Company is stringing wires for its new system all over the city and to Daleville." By 1902, the phone company had extended its reach to include connections to other towns. The local telephone system became affiliated with the Southwestern Telephone and Telegraph Company in 1911, and the following year, the company began modernization of its service in Arkadelphia. By 1913, customers no longer had to turn a crank to begin their conversations!

By 1917, service had expanded even more, for the Southern Standard proclaimed that "Arkadelphia outranks perhaps every



Arkadelphia telephone operators

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE CLARK COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

other city in the state in the number of rural telephone lines coming into the city." The paper went on to say that "Arkadelphia outranks both Hot Springs and Little Rock in the number of rural lines. Although Malvern has more

rural subscribers, Arkadelphia has about ten more lines than Malvern, where on some of the lines there are nearly 50 subscribers." In fact, thirty-six total lines connected the city to about 320 rural telephones via some 690 miles of line.

The city of Arkadelphia itself included more than 400 telephones, and had eight "operators" to make connections.

For additional information about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Histor-

ical Museum ([www.clark-countyhistory.org](http://www.clark-countyhistory.org) or 230.1360) or the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library ([www.obu.edu/archives](http://www.obu.edu/archives) or 245.5332).