

## “San Diego’s “Wonderful Talking Instrument”

*Lieutenant Philip Reade, Officer in Charge, Signal Service, U.S.A. at San Diego, returned to the city yesterday, after a brief trip to San Francisco, bringing with him a telephone . . . On his way down he stopped at Los Angeles, where he gave an experimental exhibition of the wonderful talking instrument. As soon as he can get the telephone set up here he will give us all an opportunity to hold conversation over the wire, and see (or rather, hear) for ourselves what it will do.*

–San Diego Union, November 29, 1877.

Less than two years after Alexander Graham Bell’s successful invention of the telephone, the mysterious hand gadget appeared in San Diego. A U.S. weather officer, Lt. Philip Reade, had discovered the telephone on a business trip to San Francisco, where he met Gardiner Hubbard, founder of the recently organized Bell Telephone Company and father-in-law of the inventor. Eager to promote business in California, Hubbard loaned Reade three telephone sets, which the lieutenant brought back to San Diego.

Reade took the telephones to J. W. Thompson, the manager of the local Western Union telegraph office. The men ran wires from the office to their homes, and began experimenting. “I shall never forget the sensation I experienced the first time I used the telephone,” Thompson recalled in his memoirs. “The voice came faint yet clear, seemed as if the voice was down in a deep well and it was almost the limit of hearing.”

On December 5, 1877, Reade and Thompson offered the first public demonstration of the telephone in San Diego. Sgt. Samuel Patton, a telegraph operator for the U.S. Signal Service, took a telephone east out of town and connected it to a telegraph line. “A lively and animated conversation” followed, reported the *Union*, including a “rattling” rendition of “Yankee Doodle” whistled over the wires by Sgt. Patton eighteen miles away.

The men repeated the experiment the next day by connecting the line from Campo, about 40 miles east. “Tunes were whistled, songs were sung, and various sounds transmitted with astonishing accuracy,” reported the newspaper. An exhibition and lecture held at Horton Hall on December 31 thrilled a large audience, which took turns using the device to talk to the Signal Service office a few blocks away, an “amusing practical exposition of telephony.”

San Diego’s first telephone was a wooden, bell-shaped instrument used for both transmission and reception. The user put the bell to the mouth to speak, then to the ear to hear the reply. Wires ran from the bell to batteries and then to the transmission line--usually telegraph wire in the early years. Most telephone users confirmed Thompson’s impression of audio quality as “faint yet clear.”

Lt. Reade continued to test his telephone in the first few months of 1878, gradually increasing the distances used. One “triumphal test” connected San Diego to Yuma, Arizona. The “200 mile” distance was “the greatest yet attained with the hand telephone,” claimed the *Union*.

Three years would pass before the telephone in San Diego made its next evolutionary step: a “telephone exchange” that linked service to subscribers in the city. In June 1881, J. W. Thompson opened the San Diego Telephone Exchange alongside the office of Western Union at the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and G streets. For a town of about 2,600 people, the Exchange was a

remarkable achievement and heralded by the *Union* as “one of the significant ‘signs of the times’ that marks the progress of the city.”

The first telephone directory appeared in July: a half-sheet card, listing thirty-one customers. The subscribers paid a monthly rate of \$4 after a \$20 installation fee for each telephone (longer distance runs, such as the telephone line to National City, cost considerably more). The high cost of the service ensured that businesses took all but eight of the phone lines. Personal ownership of phones was rare; City founder Alonzo Horton had a private phone, so did the town’s most successful physician, P. C. Remondino.

Communities outside the city of San Diego soon clamored for phone service. After Thompson installed a line linking the mining towns of Julian and Banner, the townspeople started a fundraising drive to construct their own line to San Diego. Wealthy rancher George Cowles led the effort to string phone lines to El Cajon-- “a nice thing to have plenty of ‘tin’ and know how to use it,” remarked a reporter.

The Army telegraph line to Campo was suggested by the *Union* as a means of linking the “settlers” of the east county. “If the residents of Jamul, of Cottonwood and Potrero would club together and have one telephone placed at a convenient place at each of the above localities the expense would be very light.”

Telephone connections to the world outside of San Diego County remained experimental. On March 28, 1882, the *Los Angeles Times* reported a successful trial between San Diego and Los Angeles using a telegraph line—“not first-class, having been in use twelve years.” The *Times* concluded that with proper wire the telephone was “a reliable message bearer for one hundred miles and better.”

As San Diego grew in the middle 1880s, seemingly every new phone installation was announced in the newspapers. By 1885, the San Diego Telephone Company, now in larger quarters at 813 Fifth, controlled 65 telephones, with connections ably managed by the first female phone operator, Mrs. W. F. McGrath. With the “Boom of the 80s,” and a population nearing 30,000 in 1887, the number of telephones would grow to nearly 300.

In December 1890, the San Diego Telephone Company was bought by the Sunset Telephone and Telegraph Company, a rapidly growing corporation based in San Francisco. J. W. Thompson continued as manager until 1895. Two years later the company completed a long distance line to Santa Ana, connecting San Diego County for the first time to the cities and towns of California.

**San Diego Telephone Exchange,**  
CENTRAL OFFICE, COR. SIXTH AND G STREETS.  
(With the Western Union Telegraph, Wells, Fargo & Co's Express, and General Stage Offices.)

**LIST OF SUBSCRIBERS.**

NAMES.	No.	LOCATION.	NAMES.	No.	LOCATION.
Allison Brothers	142	Market.	Kimball, F. A.	46	National City
"	146	Slaugh. House.	Leach & Parker	18	Office.
California Southern R. R.	42	General Office.	Luce, M. A.	20	Office.
"	43	National City.	Pacific Coast S. S. Co.	82	Office.
Campo	23		"	83	End of Wharf.
Chase, Chas. A.	9	Drug Store.	Read, D. C.	144	Residence.
Clark & Russell	22	Stable.	Remondino, Dr. P. C.	122	Residence.
Consolidated Bank	17		Russ & Company.	5	Lumber Yard.
Court House	11		"	44	National City.
Fairchild, J. A.	32	Office.	San Diego Flour Mills	74	
"	33	Residence.	Steiner, Klauber & Co.	72	
Francisco, Silliman & Co.	15		Stockton, Dr. T. C.	123	Residence.
Gas Works	16		"	125	Office.
Hamilton & Co.	24		Stewart, W. W.	21	Warehouse.
Hinton & Gordon	102	Livery Stable.	Sun Office	6	
Hinton, J. B.	103	Residence.	Thompson, J. W.	13	Residence.
Horton, A. E.	143	Residence.	Union Office	2	
Horton House	19		Wentscher, A.	12	Office.
Infirmary	124		"	13	Warehouse.
			"	23	Residence.

**NOTICE.**  
To facilitate rapid switching, each subscriber's wire will be designated by a number placed opposite his name on the right hand. Subscribers having more than one telephone station on the same wire, are designated by a small figure at the right of their telephone number, which figure is also the number of bells for that station. Call the Central Office, and give the number of the wire instead of the name of the person you wish to converse with. When switch is made ring again for the number wanted. Do not place the mouth too near the transmitter when talking. Report all interruptions to the Central Office.  
Always have the Telephone on the hook when not in use.  
J. W. THOMPSON, Manager.

San Diego’s first telephone book was a 5 x 7 manila card, provided to telephone subscribers in July 1881. *San Diego Public Library*

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