

Telephone History of Graham County Arizona 1897 to 1925

In 1897 Mr. Ijams placed the first telephones in Safford. One set was located in the Safford Drugstore. A large two-story building now the site now occupied by the McGlamery's Service Station. The other telephone was placed in the Ijams home on Central Avenue, half a block from the drugstore. Later, another wire was strung from the Safford Drugstore to Solomonville.

In 1898, E. T. Ijams, Dr. W. E. Platte, Dr. Lacy and Dr Green got together and agreed to install a telephone exchange. The first switchboard was installed in the Safford Drugstore with seven subscribers taking advantage of the service.

Dr. J. W. Stratton, then a young clerk in the store, between filling prescriptions and making sarsaparillas answered the telephone calls and operated the switchboard. Frank McCollum, now superintendent of the material department of the Sinclair Oil Company at Tampico, Mexico, was night operator. During the day time, he was "trouble shooter", climbing poles, fixing wires blown down during wind storms and being general overseer for the entire system.

The first year, there were only seven telephones but the idea of having one of the new contraptions in stores and homes finally caught on and Frank McCollum found he had a full time job with a much bigger system than the one he had started. McCollum became manager for the company and later Joe Stratton became manager when McCollum found he had a great deal of outside work and could not be in the office as much as he should. During his manager-ship, McCollum hired Vivian Reed, the first girl in the vicinity to be a telephone operator.

Later the company extended its system to include the rural people as well as those living within the Safford city limits. A grounded toll line to Clifton and to Globe was then built for better service to the local patrons.

Finally the new system outgrew its corner in the drugstore and the switchboard was moved to the old Guardian office next door to the drugstore. This building, too, was demolished several years ago to make way for a service station. In this office, Frank McCollum was plant manager and Joe Stratton was Commercial Manager. W. H. Coole followed Stratton in his position sometime later. M. E. Webster was another early manager of the company.

The Safford telephone system at last was connected with the Riggs system in Wilcox and Bowie. Through this circuit, the Safford subscriber was able to reach the Hinchcliffe system which operated through Wilcox and in towns west of Tucson.

Pima and Thatcher were also developing telephone systems during this period. In Pima, Miss Taylor was the first operator and Miss Della Curtis, the present Mrs., Alex Layton, was the first in Thatcher. Solomonville had two operators, Miss Nannie Ryan who later was Mrs. Ed. Gillispie and Miss Jean Johnson, who became Mrs. Will Gillispie.

The year 1912 marked the purchase of the Gila Telephone system by the Mountain States Company. The Thatcher and Solomonville exchanges were placed under the Safford office. The switchboards were moved to the present building next door to the old post office now occupied by the Best Cafe. The first manager for the Mountain States Telephone and Telegraph people in Safford was a Mr. Hamby. Frank Passo followed him and later (in 1915) Ijams was Manager. In 1916 Mr. Tve was appointed. He was replaced by Charles B. Flynn who several months later moved to Mesa. M. E. Broderick became manager of the company and has been here ever since 1918.

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A few more facts for the Pioneer Record might be added to Maurice Broderick's Gila Valley Telephone Company History.

Before the telephone came to the Gila Valley, communications with the outside were established in the summer of 1892 when the citizens of Solomonville constructed a telegraph line from Solomonville to Bowie and connected it to the Western Union telegraph line at Bowie. Safford was then connected by telegraph wire to Solomonville.

Later (1898) this same single wire grounded telegraph circuit was used for the telephone service installed by E. T. Ijams and Fr. W. E. Platt when they connected this wire to their line at the Safford Drug Store to a Dr. Lacy's Star Drug Store at Solomonville.

In December of 1903, E. T. Ijams, President of the Gila Valley Telephone Company, met C. W. Hinchcliffe, division manager of the Sunset Telephone Company, at Tucson and discussed at some length the question of establishing a

long distance telephone connection between Tucson and the lines operated in Cochise County by the Gila Valley Company.

Ijam's Gila Valley company had established a telephone connection with Benson early in 1903, where they connected with the Rigga telephone system in Willcox and Bowie mentioned by Maurice.

Although these single wire grounded circuits were connected into a telephone system of sorts, they were not a satisfactory for long distance telephone usage as they had been for the dots and dashes of the telegraph instruments. These lines were connected to various types of switchboards and a variety of different makes of telephone which made for poor transmission of speech. If a conversation did get through on some of the longer calls, the message was most likely passed along from one office to another by the operators acting as human repeating devices.

In June of 1904, the Sunset Company (Bell System) in Arizona, became the Independent Consolidated Telephone Company through a lease to several Tucson business men who later bought it outright from the California company.

Our copy of a Tucson Consolidated Telephone directory dated October 1, 1907 notes: "Next town to be connected (to the Tucson Exchange) will be; Kelvin, Globe, Safford, Solomonville, Clifton and Morenci".

This indicates that whatever outside connections had been made between the Gila Valley Telephone with Tucson in 1903 or 1904, the lines were no longer in use as toll lines in 1907. In 1911, after the Consolidated Company had brought out the Gila Valley Telephone System. They announced that Safford would become the principal exchange for the Valley. It was suggested that the company would build new main exchanged building in Safford provided they could secure a lot somewhere near the center of town. It was stated that the erection of a new office would be an improvement greatly desired and someone said; "It would be a good idea for the people of Safford to offer a free building site for the construction of such a building as the cost of such a lot would be very small when one takes into consideration that a good substantial building would be erected by the company". (Ed. Note: As far as we know, this idea never hatched.)

In July of 1911, the Arizona Telephone and Telegraph Company (Bell System) acquired the stock of the Independent Consolidated Company.

The announcement of the Consolidated Company in 1911 that they would string a two-wire metallic copper circuit from Bowie to Globe Via Safford (partly on railroad right of way and telegraph company poles) was later completed by the Arizona Telephone Company in 1912. The Bell System was starting to combine some of their offices and lines with the Western Union Telegraph system due to their holding in the Western Union Company at that time.

This circuit was connected at Bowie to the new line built by the Tri-State Telephone Company (Bell System) from Benson to El Paso in 1911 via Willcox and Bowie. Connections were then established with the west coast over the Arizona Telephone Company's lines which the Consolidated Company had built that same year from Tucson to Benson. At Tucson this line connected with their Tucson-Yuma line which was in turn connected with a Los Angeles-Yuma line built by the Pacific Coast Telephone Company early in 1911.

The Arizona Telephone Company also completed their new copper circuit in 1912 to Clifton with direct connections to Safford.

In the summer of 1912 , The Mountain States Telephone Company purchased the Arizona Telephone Company's holdings in Arizona including the Gila Valley system.

In 1925, The Mountain States build its present toll line through Safford from Phoenix via Globe with connections at Lordsburg, New Mexico with the El Paso-Yuma section of the Southern Transcontinental. trunk line.

Frank McCollum, referred by Maurice, was an uncle to William E. McCollum now our Arizona Plant Manager at Phoenix, (Circa 1961)

Vivian Reed, also referred to, (now Mrs. Robert Nash of Safford), the first female operator hired by the Gila Valley Telephone Company is an aunt to Warren Reed, M.S.T&T. Arizona Customer Relations Supervisor at Phoenix, , (Circa 1961)