

Telephones

Antiques Made for Conversation

When I started looking for old telephones in the 1950s, I did not set out to build a collection. A cousin who was decorating her new house and who knew that I worked with phones asked me if I could find her an old wooden wall telephone with a crank. I picked one up for a few dollars and rewired it so that it could be hooked up. Then a friend asked me for a stand-up desk telephone from the 1920s. After finding and dispersing among friends what amounted to a small collection, I began to collect for myself.

Before long I acquired enough telephones to wire a small community. My collection includes nearly every

Willard Elsasser, retired technician for the New York Telephone Company, was a founder of the Telephone Pioneer Museum of Long Island.

type of instrument used in the United States beginning in 1877, when Alexander Graham Bell's invention first was installed as a commercial venture, and continuing until 1950, although most collectors limit themselves to models made before 1930.

The days when you could find a rare early telephone at a farm auction are largely gone, partly because of the increasing interest in collecting and partly because many people, like my cousin, want antiques to use as their home telephones. Many still work; some can be rewired. However, federal law requires that any instrument connected to the telephone communications system be certified as compatible with it; in many cities the local telephone company certifies antiques and, if necessary, puts them in working order.

Collectors are interested not in using but in displaying their old phones. They seek rarities: the very old, the landmark designs and the oddities. Stand-up desk models like the one at right and wall-hung models are the types most collectors look for, although coin telephones and, to a lesser extent, handsets, or French telephones, from Europe are also sought.

Some people specialize in the equipment of particular manufacturers. There are more than you might think. After Alexander Graham Bell's patents ran out in 1894, more than 300 manufacturers jumped into the business. Most were eventually bought up by the

Bell System's subsidiary, the Western Electric Company, whose products are sought after most by collectors. However, the Bell System has never had a complete monopoly on American telephone service—in 1979 some 33,381,000 telephones were serviced by 1,527 independent companies—and many manufacturers have continued to produce telephones. Among those whose products are collectible are Kellogg Switchboard & Supply Co., Stromberg-Carlson Telephone Manufacturing Company, L. M. Ericsson Telephone Co. of Sweden, the Strowger Automatic Telephone Exchange (later called the Automatic Electric Company), Manhattan Electrical Supply Co. and Sterling Electric Company. (I have a particular fondness for De Veau equipment—my father was a De Veau engineer.)

The oldest of Bell's telephones to see regular use date from 1877 and survive only in museums. They were mahogany boxes fitted at one end with a device made like the modern telephone receiver but used as both receiver and transmitter. Introduced a year later, and similarly rare, are the first telephones to have a transmitter like the modern one. (The transmitter was invented not by Bell but by Thomas A. Edison, and it was sold to the Western Union Telegraph Company, which in 1879 sold it, in one of history's more shortsighted business deals, to the Bell organization.) Soon a variety of instruments were being produced, and many of them, although rare and valuable, are within the financial reach of collectors.

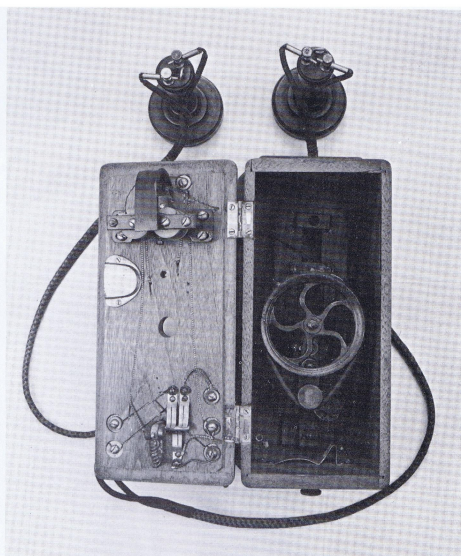
Among instruments that hung on the wall, one of the most coveted is the Williams' Coffin (page 8) of 1878—an example was sold in 1979 for \$5,000. It had batteries for voice transmission and a hand-cranked generator, or magneto, for calling the operator. It was followed in 1882 by another prize, the three-box set: magneto and bells in the top box with a separate receiver hanging on the side, an Edison-type transmitter in a box below, and the batteries in a bottom box. The introduction of a smaller transmitter later made the middle box redun-

A dial telephone of 1905 (right) is desirable partly for its age, partly for its 11th finger hole, which rang up the long-distance operator. The dial was introduced in 1896; earlier automatic telephones, somewhat like modern Touch-Tone models, operated by push buttons and are very rare.





An 1878 Williams' Coffin telephone—named for its maker and shape—is pictured above as it looked installed on a wall and at right, above, with case open. Very rare, it was the first telephone to have separate parts



for talking and listening, though both parts were identical, made like modern receivers. The crank spun the machinery inside—a magneto, or generator, which produced power to ring a bell at the operator's station.

dant, which led to the two-box set. In the mid-1890s the power for talking began to be supplied by batteries at the exchange, thus eliminating the need for the battery box in the home phone. The resulting one-box set, although it is now more available than its precursors, is valued by collectors. It is the oldest type that is fairly simple to put in working order.

Almost at the same time as these wall-hung telephones came the stand-up desk sets—known as candlesticks—familiar in city homes and offices for two generations. The first, produced in 1879, is exceedingly rare, but later models are relatively easy to find and very desirable. Among the most sought after are the Western Electric (page 12) and De Veau potbelly candlesticks from the late 1890s. Oilcan candlesticks (page 12) were made by a number of companies and are also desirable. The most common candlesticks are the black straight-shaft ones of the 1920s, which dealers sold for around \$100 each in the 1980s.

French telephones and dial instruments were developed before 1900 but did not find widespread use in America until the late 1920s. In Europe a great many variations, many of them highly ornamental, were pro-

duced beginning in the 1890s. A large number of those early examples were imported into the United States during the 1950s by interior decorators and can readily be found. Even most examples from the turn of the century are valued only about as highly as candlesticks from the 1920s.

The dial phone, the brain child of a funeral director from Kansas City, Kansas, named Almon B. Strowger, also appeared early. As the story goes, Strowger became convinced that telephone operators were being bribed to switch his customers' calls to his competitors. He set out to bypass the exchange. By 1896 he had perfected a dial system similar to one still in wide use. Strowger's own version, which was manufactured by Automatic Electric Company, was used by many independent telephone companies, and old examples can be found in the areas they served. One collector fished a Strowger telephone out of an Oregon river—he had heard, correctly, that they had been dumped there years before when the Bell System took over an independent local exchange.

For related material, see the article on Insulators in a separate volume of this encyclopedia.



An elaborately carved vanity, or cabinet, telephone of the early 1900s (above) was made by the Stromberg-Carlson Telephone Manufacturing Company. It is a rare type, designed for public places such as hotel lobbies; this one was once in a Scranton, Pennsylvania, men's club.



A handset, or French telephone, made in Sweden about 1900 (above) is relatively easy to find. The instrument was originally produced for the

Copenhagen system by the L. M. Ericsson Telephone Co., which supplied equipment to many countries, including the United States.



This 1890s handset is prized for its elaborate nickel-plated and gilt grillwork. The collector believes it was made for the Royal Family of

Norway, where he bought it. Only three similar models are known. The receiver position can be adjusted to suit the user.



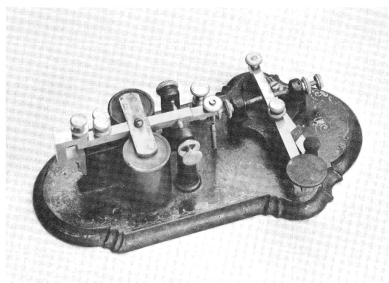
The nickel-plated desk-top, or candlestick, telephones on this page date from the turn of the century and are highly desirable. The one above is called an oilcan because of the shape of its base and tapered shaft.



This 1898 telephone, a Western Electric version of the type called a potbelly, is particularly valuable because it has an easily sterilized glass mouthpiece, which was added during the 1918 influenza epidemic. Models with the original hard-rubber mouthpieces are more common but still desirable.



A French-made telephone of 1892 that is known as a cow horn because of the shape of its transmitter-receiver (left) is unusual. The mother-in-law extension at right—a second receiver—adds to the value.



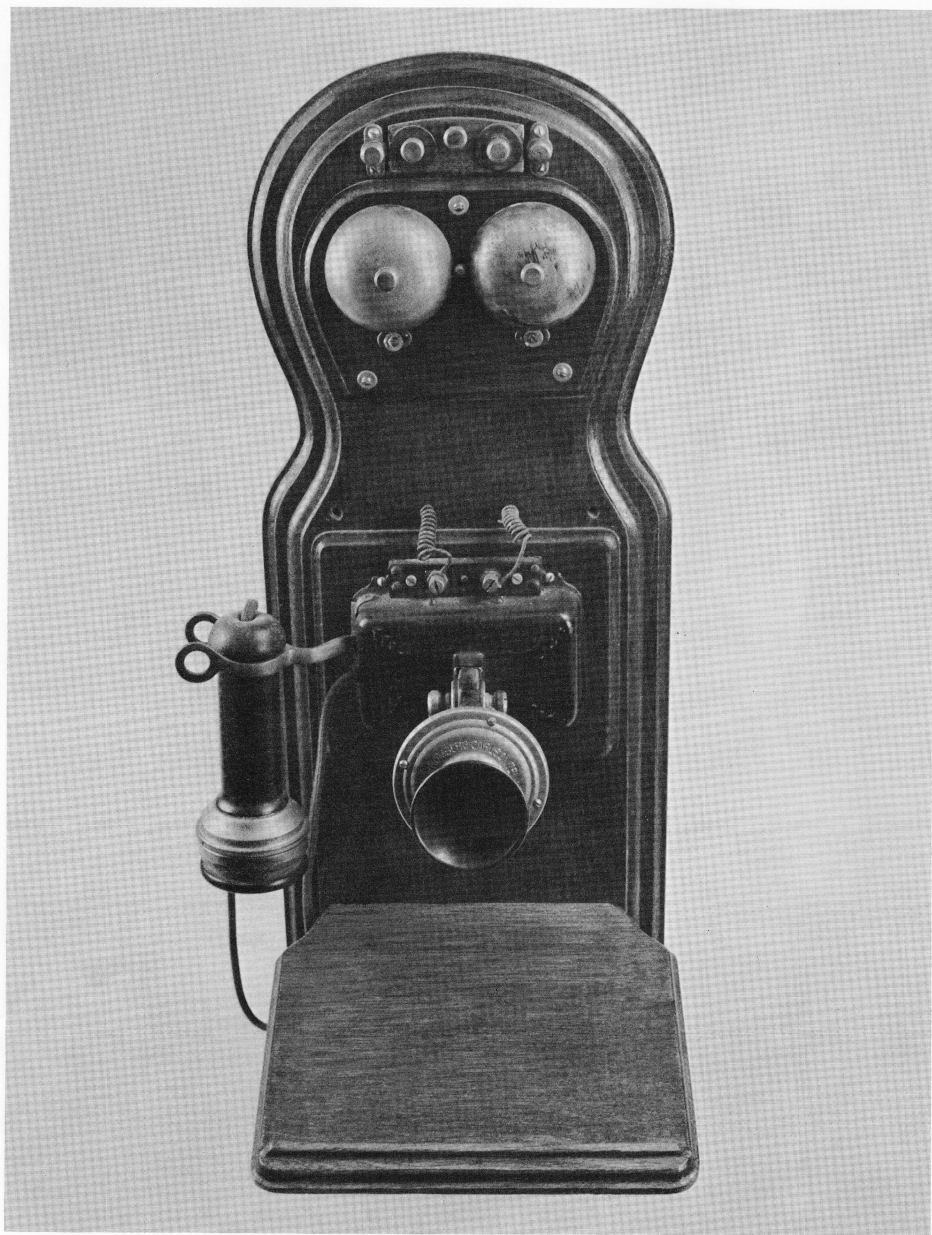
A brass and iron telegraph set with key (right) and sounder (left) is sought because it was made by L. G. Tillotson & Co. of New York. The scrollwork on the base increases value.

Mementos of the Telegraph

Telegraph equipment of the 19th Century is collected both as an adjunct to telephones and in its own right. Most widely sought are the keys that telegraphers used to tap out the dots and dashes of the Morse code. Particularly unusual is the camel-back key, named for the hump in its arm, or lever. Other collectors look for relays (battery-powered units installed at intervals along a telegraph line to boost the electrical signal) and sounders (receivers, sometimes found separately and sometimes in a combination unit with a key, as pictured above).

There are a number of ways to date a find. Some of the most sought-after pieces bear the names (usually stamped on the base) that disappeared before the start of the 20th Century: L. G. Tillotson & Co. of New York, for example, operated from 1865 to 1885. G. M. Phelps of Troy, New York, an individual craftsman whose products are particularly desirable because of the elegance of their workmanship, put his own name on pieces he made for two firms between 1852 and the late 1880s.

In some cases, the age of telegraph devices can be estimated from the materials used. Keys can sometimes be dated—and valued accordingly—by their knobs. Rubber was used from 1860 until 1917 and is not a good guide, but wood was employed during the Civil War, and plastic came in around 1917. Most prized of all are keys with knobs of ivory, in use from the 1830s to the late 1860s.



This 1897 Stromberg-Carlson wall telephone, known as the grave-marker because of its shape, is a rare find. It has lightning-arrester and

ground connections, which are visible above the bells, and an automatic on-off switch built into the receiver hook.



The pay telephone above, a combination of an ordinary 1919 desk set and a coin box, was portable so that it could be taken from table to table

in a restaurant. When this example, from Amana, Iowa, was in use, it was one of three telephones in town.