

NEWS

Decorah's Historic Downtown

Revolutionary telephone technology comes to Decorah

EDITOR'S NOTE: In the fall of 2014, the Decorah Historic Preservation Commission (DHPC) began a lengthy process to nominate the city's business district to the National Register of Historic Places. The district consists of some 130 buildings, mostly on Water, Washington and Winnebago streets. Over a period of seven months, a group of about 15 volunteer researchers gathered information and photographs of the buildings. The information was turned over in May to project consultant Jan Olive Full of Iowa City, who is incorporating it into the formal nomination and hopes National Register status will be granted by the U.S. Department of Interior by the end of 2017.

DHPC member Judy van der Linden is coordinating a series of Decorah Newspaper articles on particular buildings written by volunteer researchers. The next article in the series, below, was written by volunteer researcher Adrienne Coffeen and edited by van der Linden.

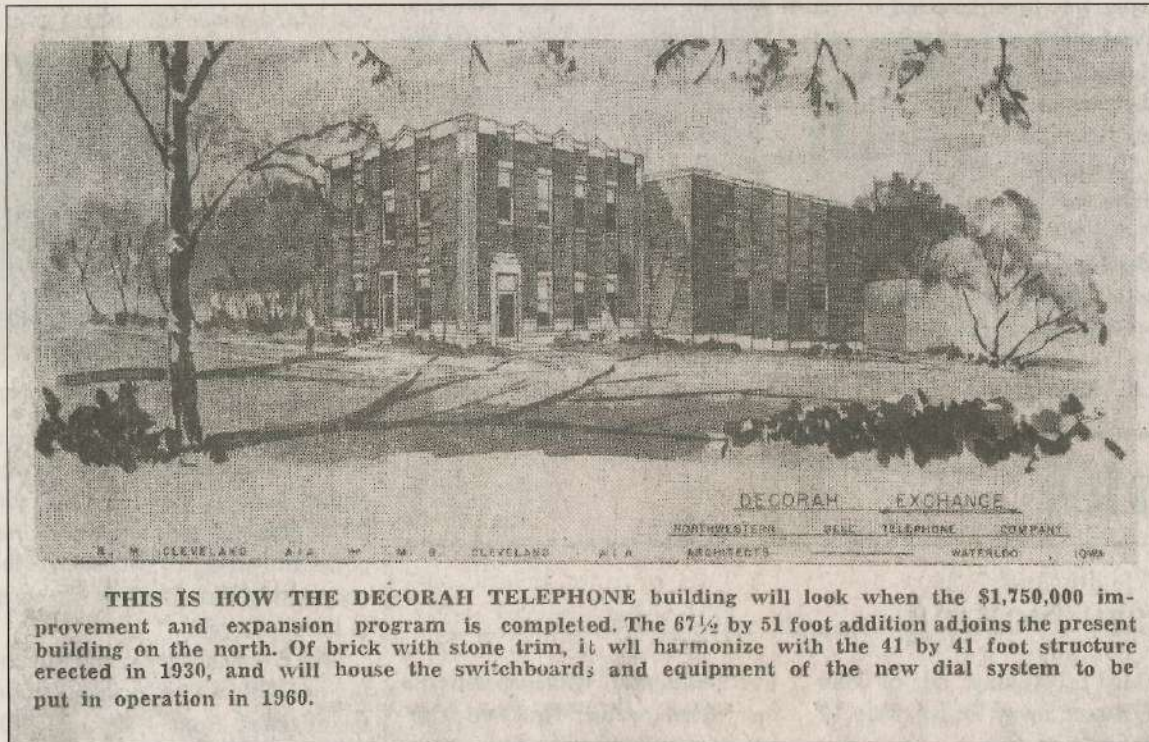
Hand-cranked telephones, switchboard operators for local and long distance calls, rotary phones for direct dialing, push button phones, mobile landline phones, cellular phones... depending on your age, all or some of these types of telephones have been used.

At the center of this changing telephone technology is one particular building in Decorah.

In 1929 Northwestern Bell Telephone Company's business in Decorah was expanding with nearly 1,200 Decorah customers and around 10,000 long distance calls per month.

In the early months of 1929, the company decided Decorah should become the main long distance call center for this section of Iowa. For this to happen Bell needed to invest over \$125,000 to install a new type of phone system, run additional underground cables, reconfigure telephone poles, and replace each customer's hand-cranked telephone. Also it was apparent that the existing telephone central office, located on the second floor of 112 W. Main, was too small. A state-of-the-art building was planned for 1930.

For the sum of \$7,500 North-



The 119 Court Street Telephone Exchange Building in 1930 with a 1960 addition. Mortimer Cleveland was the architect.

els, stated that once in the new building, the company anticipated hiring 15 additional employees for a total of 34 on payroll. In the uncertain times after the Stock Market Crash in October of 1929, Decorah's two newspapers could reassure residents of guaranteed jobs for Northeast Iowans.

The newspapers' building updates and all the planned phone improvements were "feel good" stories that must have boosted Decorah's civic pride. One of the first articles commented on the many people admiring a scale model of the new telephone building on display in Ben Bear's store window (the current Donlon Pharmacy).

By August, the paper declared that "it is now apparent that this will be one of the most beautiful business buildings in the city."

One paper noted that placing many of the phone wires underground "will aid the community's effort to beautify its thoroughfares" making tree trimming around phone lines unnecessary. It went on to state that by "eliminating unsightly posts and wires (the phone company) will contribute to the beauty of Iowa's most beautiful city." The newspaper wasn't entirely accurate since not all poles were removed, though many were relocated to alleys thus enhancing curb appeal.

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For the sum of \$7,500 Northwestern Bell purchased the property of the O.J. Ness family across from St. Benedict's Catholic Church on the corner of Court and W. Main Street. After the March 1, 1930 date of possession, construction could begin on the 119 Court Street telephone building.

Northwestern Bell employed Mortimer Cleveland, a highly respected architect from Waterloo, who designed the 41 ft. x 41 ft. fire-resistant building in the Art Deco style popular in the 1930's. The Northwestern Bell Telephone Exchange Building was planned as a two-story structure, with a basement that combined red brick with light-gray, cast stone columns.

Different designs including flowers, waves, urns, rising suns, stars and shells decorated the top of each column. Above the main entrance on Court Street was the word 'TELEPHONE' and on either side of the entrance were mail slots labeled 'Put Payments Here' and 'Envelopes.' These exterior details are still visible currently, and it's well worth a walk around the building.

Good news

The Decorah Newspapers kept the public well informed of the

THIS IS HOW THE DECORAH TELEPHONE building will look when the \$1,750,000 improvement and expansion program is completed. The 67½ by 51 foot addition adjoins the present building on the north. Of brick with stone trim, it will harmonize with the 41 by 41 foot structure erected in 1930, and will house the switchboards and equipment of the new dial system to be put in operation in 1960.

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Nine busy months were between the excavation in June 1930 to midnight of February 21, 1931, when Manager Rickels gave the order, "One, two, three, pull," disabling the old switchboard and seamlessly transferring all customers' lines to the new system.

During that nine-month period, the town had much activity. In preparation for the conversion, 900 feet of underground cable was placed between the old phone office and the new building. The business district improvements included trenching machines digging troughs for nearly 400 feet of buried cable. From every direction into town, underground long distance cables were added to directly connect Decorah to 22 cities including Minneapolis, Cedar Rapids, La Crosse, Mason City and Waterloo.

Considerable improvements were made to Decorah's west side where there was an increasing demand in long distance service. In total, the project required placing 30,000 feet of new underground and aerial cable while removing 45 miles of old aerial wire.

Learning curve

During these months local tele-

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The telephone building today.

they demonstrated and answered questions using a model telephone switchboard.

Once the new system was up and running, Decorah celebrated with the "At Home Days" Open House. Except for employees and limited newspaper reporters, the public had not seen the interior of the building. On March 5-7, 2,000 visitors took guided tours.

"All of them expressed amazement and delight at the fine new structure and the immense quantity of telephone equipment," wrote the Decorah Public Opinion.

At the main entrance was a small public lobby with a phone booth where the people could place calls any time of day or night. The inner door opened to a spacious business office that included a customers' room with a desk, chair and telephone "for traveling salesmen and others who might wish to send several long distance calls at one time."

Also on the main floor, the tour marveled at the hundreds of wires connected to panels by "small 'doodads,' difficult for a layman to describe or understand," as one news-

boards connecting calls both local and long distance. For those interested, a guided tour included the adjoining "finely appointed operator's restroom/break room."

Growing with Decorah

Advertising the 1931 Open House, Northwestern Bell Telephone Company wrote that the new building and new equipment were necessary so that it would grow with Decorah and provide service for many years to come. This was true until the 1950's when the need for new dial telephone equipment had outgrown the original 41 ft. x 41 ft. building.

First the company moved its business office to a location on Water Street, but there still wasn't enough space. In 1959, Northwestern Bell hired the original building's architect, Mortimer Cleveland, who with his son, designed the 67½ ft. x 51 ft. red brick addition to the north side. The building expansion and telephone improvements cost \$1,750,000.

For 86 years, from Northwestern Bell to U.S. West to Qwest to

