

OLD TELEPHONES:



YESTERDAY'S DISCARDS, TODAY'S TREASURES



John Murphy, president of the Gorham Telephone Company, explains the operation of an 1890 R&R electric switchboard to Ehly.



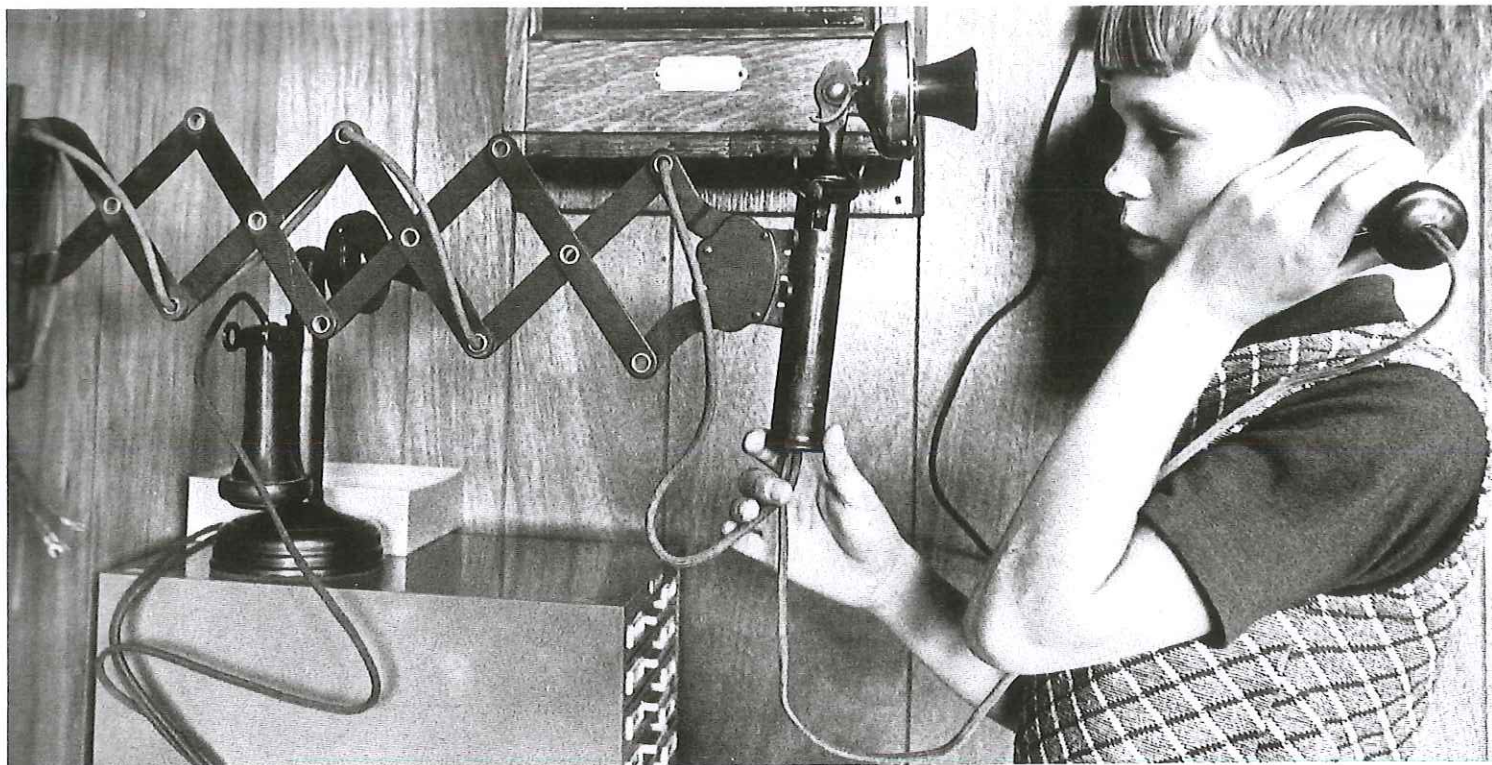
Kenneth Holder of Gorham, Kan., remembers that his folks had a 1902 North Electric set like this when he was a boy.

WHAT GOOD is a telephone after it's no good for making a telephone call? Well, if the reason it's no good is that it's obsolete, you can use it to start a collection. And this can get you in touch with fellow collectors in 36 of the United States, not to mention Canada and Australia.

At last count, there were at least 217 people who have found that old, nonworking phones can still provide fascination, information and fellowship. They're members of the Antique Telephone Collectors' Association, headquartered in La Crosse, Kan. They get a regular monthly newsletter; they have a membership list for individual correspondence; they have annual conventions. And the membership is climbing steadily as the word gets around about this four-year-old organization. Apparently there are a lot of people who picked up the hobby on their own and are only now discovering each other.

One might expect such a group to be almost entirely Bell System people, or at least Bell and independent telephone people. Not so; many, perhaps a majority, have no direct connection with the telephone business, and never have had.

Consider, for a sample, the association members who live in Southwestern Bell territory. There are 44 of them. Four are from Southwestern Bell—Roy Ehly of La Crosse, who is on the association's board of directors; A. G. Van Nortwick, division accounting manager at Wichita; Walt Lackey, district manager of Houston's South district; and Jack Stambaugh, formerly forecast engineer in Dallas. Others with Bell System ties are Michael Spangler, a Western Electric installer in Harlingen, Tex.; and Wallace Jensen of Little Rock, whose father is a veteran Southwestern Bell employee at Pittsburg, Kan.



Mike Murphy, John's son, enjoys "trying out" the collection. This type of set was once common in railroad and newspaper offices.

ment store employee, a retired feed mill electrician and—not surprisingly—a couple of antique dealers.

The town of La Crosse, 24 miles south of Hays in north central Kansas, may seem an unlikely location for the headquarters of a national organization with international connections. Its most obvious advantage is its closeness to the geographic center of the country, or at least the "lower 48." But when you learn that La Crosse is also headquarters for the national barbed wire collectors' organization, you begin to suspect that La Crosse has something special going for it besides geography.

It does. It includes in its 2,000 population a small group of aggressive civic leaders, and not the least of these movers and shakers is Southwestern Bell combinationman Roy Ehly. Ehly has a string of honors which includes the presidency of the Sunflower Pioneers' Northwest Council; governorship of a Lions' Club district including 26 Kansas counties; presidency of the city Chamber of Commerce and membership on the state chamber's council; directorship on the Highway 183 Association; presidency of the Rush County Historical Society; and last year, his third in city government, he served as mayor of La Crosse.

Rush County is not only in the heart of the United States, but it's in the heart of barbed wire country, and it was no trick at all for Ehly and some fellow enthusiasts to set up an organization for those collectors. When Van Nortwick telephoned him one day and suggested that they see if a similar group could be set up for antique telephone collectors, Ehly jumped at the idea. He likes to get things rolling, and, besides, his fellow civic leaders welcomed the added publicity for La Crosse.

Others who deserve a large share of credit for the growth of the two organizations—and by extension, the progress of La Crosse itself—are Merrill Humburg, former district governor of the Lions and president of the telephone group; C. A. Smith, retired but keeping busy as the telephone group's secretary-treasurer; and Mrs. Barbara Grass, wife of one of



Four of the people who make the ATCA go: (from left) Merrill Humburg, president; Roy Ehly, director; C. A. Smith, secretary-treasurer; Mrs. Barbara Grass, assistant secretary.

the town bankers, who does yeoman work of keeping records and correspondence in shape.

The ATCA holds meetings at other points around the country, but its spring show is always in La Crosse, on the first Saturday and Sunday after Easter. This year it will be on April 20-21. People have come to the convention in the past—bringing the prize items of their collections—from as far away as Massachusetts and California. Gasoline crisis or no, the ATCA is looking forward to another big turnout this year.

END

Photographed by Jim Swetnam

April 1974