

Nation's First 9-1-1 Call

The following is a brief recount of the events surrounding the placing of the nation's first 9-1-1 call.

Before Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, (June 2, 1875) public safety was served by town criers. A town crier would walk the streets of a town and cry out for help in emergency situations.

In the 1950's, independent telephone companies were very common in the United States. If you wanted the police, you dialed the police station. If you had a fire, you called the fire department. If you needed any emergency help, you dialed the individual you needed, or you could dial "0" and get the operator. Then he or she would ring the persons you were calling for.

In 1958, Congress called for an universal emergency number. At this time, the President's Commission of Law Enforcement and the F.C.C. started arguing over a single easy to remember number. This was due to the large volume of emergency calls going to telephone company operators. A person may be calling for emergency help while the operator was giving information on the number of Aunt Betsy in Louisiana or Uncle Charles in Oklahoma, which lead to delays in emergency responses. Telephone companies were facing the problem of how to separate emergencies from general business. For over ten years the idea was discussed and argued about among the different agencies who wanted to receive the calls. Police said they should answer all calls, the Fire Department felt they were the better choice, some even felt the local hospital was the best answer.

According to a report in the Fayette, Alabama Times Record commemorating the 25th anniversary of the historic event, B.W. Gallagher, President of Alabama Telephone Company, said he was inspired by an article in the Wall Street Journal. He read that the president of AT&T and the FCC had announced that 911 would be the nationwide emergency number. Being a bit offended by the fact that the views of the independent telephone industry had been overlooked in this decision, Gallagher decided to make the Alabama Telephone Company the first to implement 9-1-1.

Gallagher consulted with Robert Fitzgerald, inside plant manager for the Alabama Telephone Company, who examined schematics of the company's 27 exchanges. Fitzgerald chose Haleyville because its existing equipment was best suited to be quickly converted to receive 9-1-1 calls. Fitzgerald then designed the circuitry and installed the first 911 system in less than a week. Working with Fitzgerald to achieve this goal were technicians Pete Gosa, Jimmy White, Al Bush and Glenn Johnston.

In the early stages, the city fathers were skeptical of 9-1-1 calls being answered at the police station. They, like persons in Congress, were afraid that the city might not have the personnel qualified to answer "all out emergency calls".

Haleyville, Alabama introduced the nation's first 9-1-1 system which was located at the police station. Alabama Speaker of the House, Rankin Fite, made the first call from another city hall room. It was answered by Congressman Tom Bevill on a bright red telephone located in the police department. Also on hand was Haleyville Mayor James Whitt, Public Service Commission President Eugene (Bull) Connor, and B. W. Gallagher. So on February 16, 1968, the first 9-1-1 call was made.