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THE FIRST TELEPHONE.

1885

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Hattie Turner,
Investigator,
April 9, 1938.

Interview With Ed Hicks,
Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

THE FIRST TELEPHONE.

The Cherokee telephone company which placed in operation the first line in Indian Territory, now Oklahoma, came into existence in 1886. A franchise authorizing the erection of the line was granted by the Cherokee National Council at Tahlequah in the autumn of 1885. Work was begun the following year and before its close the first telephone line was a reality, connecting Tahlequah with Fort Gibson in the Cherokee Nation, and with Muskogee in the Creek Nation.

Before the completion of the line much delay was experienced in communicating from Tahlequah with the Union Indian Agency at Muskogee, and also with business men by other business men at the Cherokee capital. E. D. Hicks, a young business man of Tahlequah began thinking of the great convenience and value of more direct communication

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and suggested to a number of the leading men the convenience and feasibility of a telephone line. Much interest was aroused among those to whom he talked, with the result that a franchise was requested of the Cherokee National legislative bodies.

The route selected for the telephone line lay through some rugged and densely wooded sections. There was no surveyor, Contrary to the belief of many the route did not follow that of the old and long-used road lying between Tahlequah and Fort Gibson, but led over heights and ridges, through flatwoods and down steep-sloped valleys. In order to get the proper direction it was often necessary to ascend a hill and carefully observe the sylvan scene. There were times, too, when the weather conditions were bad, heavy rainfalls, resultant mud, snow and sleet, and gloomy days when the wind blew coldly from the North. But steady progress was made. No one sought to impede the workers, and eventually completion of the preparation of the route was realized. All that was necessary was to make correct connections.

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No one of the workers had ever seen connections made, for this was the first telephone being completed in all the vast Indian Territory. The workers were nonplussed, but in their time of difficulty a blue-coated soldier from the fort upon the hill arrived. He had learned back in Ohio how the connections were made and offered his services, which were gladly welcomed. With a rather brief period the telephone was in working order so far as the office at Fort Gibson was concerned. But the same connection must be made over at Tahlequah, twenty-three miles eastward over the telephone route. No one at the old capital knew anything about telephones, so a good-sized picture or diagram of the parts which were to be assembled and connected with the wire was placed in the hands of Manuel Spencer, a large and very black negro, and mounted on a horse, Manuel set out for Tahlequah. He was several hours on the road but he finally arrived at the store of J. W. Stapler & Sons and handed the diagram to James S. Stapler. The latter carefully studied the diagram, then set to work, and soon had the proper connections made.

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Talking was in order between Tahlequah and Fort Gibson.

The bell rang. From Tahlequah came the query from James S. Stapler: "Who is this"?

From Fort Gibson went back the reply from E. D.

Hicks: "The devil, and I'm coming after you".

In the beginning of the efforts to secure permission from the Council to operate the telephone line there were some who had misgivings, for there were some very conservative members of the Council. But several of the leading native members were consulted and they decided that the franchise should be granted. A short "sample line" was utilized by two notables in testing the powers of the telephone. George Sanders, usually called Soggy Sanders, a large man, weighing probably 300 pounds stood at one end of the line, and another leading Indian of the name of Smith at the other. These men held an animated conversation in their native tongue. At conclusion of their talk Sander laughed and remarked that the telephone was all right. "It talks in Cherokee", he said.

The Cherokee Telephone company was in operation until 1896, when E. D. Hicks and W. P. Thompson established an

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exchange in Tahlequah and the name, the Tahlequah Telephone Company superceded the original name. This name was retained until 1905 when the exchange was sold to the Southwest Bell Telephone Company. During the years the manager of the telephone under its several designations was E.D. Hicks, whose retirement after forty-eight years and six months of service is of comparatively recent date.

Edward D. Hicks is a member of historic Cherokee families. He is the son of Daniel R and Nancy Rider-Hicks, and was born at Fort Gibson, Indian Territory, on January 1, 1866. In his youth he attended the Tahlequah schools, later studied at the Cherokee National Seminary, and spent the years 1880-81 at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. Except for brief periods his lifetime was principally spent in Tahlequah, which he always regarded and called his home town.

The first white member of the Hicks family was Nathan Hicks, who, in the "Old Nation" east of the Mississippi River, married a daughter of Chief Broom, for whom Broom's Town was named. It was at this old town or settlement that

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the first written law of the Cherokeees was made in 1908. It was somewhere near the American Revolutionary war period that Nathan Hicks became identified with the Cherokeees. His oldest son was Charles R. Hicks, the first educated Principal Chief. For thirty years before he assumed the office of Principal Chief, Charles R. Hicks had wielded great influence. He was a penman of ability and about 1826 was elevated to the highest office in the Indian Nation, but his tenure of office was brief for his death occurred within a year. He was succeeded briefly by his brother, William Hicks, and the latter in 1828 was succeeded by John Ross, who was to hold the position until his death nearly forty years later.

Another notable man of the early days was Elijah Hicks, son of Chief Charles R. Hicks. Of Elijah Hicks it is recorded that he was educated in South Carolina. His wife was Margaret Ross, a sister of Chief John Ross, and their son was Daniel R. Hicks, to whom reference has been made. Thus E. D. Hicks is the grandson several times removed of Chief Broom; the great grandson of Chief Chas.

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R. Hicks; the grandson of "Acting Principal Chief", old Elijah Hicks, and a grand nephew of Chief John Ross.

Notes:- Elijah Hicks served for a period as editor of the Cherokee Phoenix, first Indian newspaper, at New Echota, Georgia. He was a leading man in the Nation in Indian Territory, delegate to Washington, besides occupying other important positions. On an occasion when Chief John Ross was absent from the Cherokee Nation Elijah Hicks served as Acting Principal Chief.