

Public Utilities in Northwest Franklin County

Telephone

As early as November 1899, there was talk of telephone service for Hilliard. On that date The Franklin Telephone requested a franchise but it was denied on February 2, 1901. On March 11, 1901 a franchise was given to the Hilliard West Jefferson Farmer's Mutual Telephone Company. In August 1904 the Central Union Telephone was given a franchise. This latter company became the Citizen Phone or Bell Phone. In 1920 both the Farmer's Exchange and the Bell Phone were operating here. Most merchants listed in their ads that they had both phones. This was bound to be frustrating. A person on one exchange, wanting to talk with a person on the other exchange, had to pay a toll, even though they might live just a few houses apart. Ohio Bell, which gives service to Hilliard today, was formed in 1921, and did away with this frustration.

Location of the first offices of these companies is not definitely known except that it was in the home of the operator. It is known that there was an office on the second floor of a store building on the east side of Main Street, one lot south of the railroad. This office, in June 1916, was moved across the street into the home of William Wilcox, next to the old bank building. The office remained there until about 1935 when the dial system was installed and there was no need for a local switchboard operator. Some of the operators of these companies were: Elizabeth Rice, her daughter, Pearl; Jennie and Grace Tripp; Isabel Wilcox; Maude W. Bowser, her daughter, Geraldine; Mae Ramey and Blanche Keller. There were probably more but their names are unknown at this time.



Improving telephone service is a constant goal. The earliest sets were voice-powered. Next came the wet battery, which occasionally leaked on the rug; then the dry battery. This model, a major advance, received its power from the telephone exchange, hence its name.

It was the duty of these operators to see that all connections were properly made. It was a party line system with some times six or eight families on the same line. All the parties on the line would know when the line was in use because the phone would ring in all the homes on the line-- a long and short ring combination was used. It certainly did not give privacy to a phone conversation. The introduction of the dial system and the adding of additional lines improved the service. Until some time in the 1930's no calls could be made outside the Hilliard area without a toll charge. All long distance calls had to be made through the operator. Today direct dialing to almost any place in the continental United States and even to many foreign countries has made direct communication something that was not even dreamed of when Alexander Graham Bell received his first telephone patent on March 7, 1876 and was demonstrated at the Ohio State Fair in September, 1878.

Electric

Electricity came to Hilliard in 1915 when the Hilliard Light and Power Company was incorporated. This company was owned and managed by people of Hilliard. The first Board of Directors were LeRoy Dobyns, President; Curtis Fishinger, Secretary; T. C. Latham; N. A. Scofield and J. W. Reason. The generating equipment was installed in a building off the west side of Main Street near Norwich. When the Fishinger Flour Mill moved from the Scioto River to Hilliard, the generating equipment was transferred to it for a time. Unfortunately there was not sufficient power to run the mill and provide service to the other customers at the same time so a practical compromise was made: the mill would use current until six o'clock in the evening and from six to ten P.M. the current would be furnished to others. Those persons not able to be serviced often had their own generating plant--a series of storage batteries and a fuel powered motor to produce the electricity. Rates were naturally high but the company grew. The plant was relocated back of Alder's Garage which was located on the west side of Main Street, between Center and Norwich.

On November, 1928, the Village Council began considering the possibilities of street lights. Rates were lower for there were now 212 customers in the village and surrounding area with thirty-two miles of distribution lines. In January 1919 the street lights were installed.

In 1936 this company was purchased by Ohio Midland Light and Power Company of Canal Winchester. Except for a few years during World War II when service was given by the Union Rural Electric Company, Ohio Midland furnished electricity to the area. By 1953 a hundred miles of lines were needed to supply the 1213 customers, of whom 632 were farm customers. A new substation and power transmission had been added.

In 1962 Columbus and Southern Electric Company purchased certain electric transmissions from Midland Light and Power--Hilliard was one of them. Rates at that time were \$12.50 per kilowatt hours. In January, 1978, there were approximately 2900 customers, 2500 of which were residential, who paid \$23.15 per 500 kwhs.

Although there has never been a long stoppage of service the winter of 1977-78 caused problems. Fifty-four inches of snowfall was recorded (a total of over thirty-four inches in the month of January). The Great Blizzard of January 26th, when the lowest barometric pressure ever recorded, 28.47 inches, brought gusts of winds up to sixty-nine miles per hour. Roads were impassible, power lines were down, many were stranded for several days. It was a time of community effort to help the residents of Hilliard to "dig out". From January 27 to February 24 the temperatures never got above freezing. To add to the misery the United Mine Workers Union was on strike, starting December 6, 1977 and ending March 24, 1978, a total of 109 days. The coal supply to the Electric Company for the generating of power dwindled to about a month's supply. People were asked to voluntarily conserve energy--lights were turned off along the streets and freeways, energy was conserved in the homes, and industries shortened their working hours. No mandatory order was needed to secure cooperation. As Charlotte Melfe, a reporter for The Northwest News put it: "we won't thank Mother Nature for the weather, but we can thank her for showing us the abundance of love and warmth."

Electrical power and the telephone brought a new means of communication. The first radio station in Columbus began broadcasting in the early 1920's: WBAC (1921). WAIU and WOSU (1922). Early listeners \ often compared notes on how far away they could hear a station on their crystal or battery operated sets. The first trans-Atlantic radio broadcast was in 1928 when a rubber company in Akron, Ohio, communicated with its rubber plantation in Liberia, Africa. Television stations came to Columbus in 1949: WLW-C now WCMH, NBC in March, WTVN (ABC) in August, and WBNS (CBS) in October. WOSU (Public Information Service) was started in 1956. Warner Cable, a subscription-type service started in May, 1976 and permitted television viewers to have a more extensive viewing selection. By the end of 1977 these viewers were able to subscribe to QUBE (a generic term) on a pay as you view basis. This area was among the first in the nation to receive this innovative, participatory service. There is interactive communication via a home terminal connected to the TV set. It presents through its thirty channels a variety of programs not available on the commercial stations.

Gas

As early as 1906 consideration was given to the supplying of natural gas to Hilliard. D. E. Sullivan and Sons were granted a franchise to lay lines for the purpose of conveying to and supplying natural gas to consumers and would furnish gas free, during the length of the franchise, to the corporation building (then located in the business establishment of Joe Wells, the Village Clerk). No record has been found that this franchise was used.

In 1930 some eighty persons in Hilliard petitioned the Ohio Fuel Gas Company, which became part of Columbia Gas of Ohio in 1964, to serve the community with natural gas. During 1931 the seventy-eight customers in Hilliard used an average of 30,800 cubic feet per year. The average rate was 92.06 cents per 1000 cubic feet. Twenty years later there were 218 customers using an average of 140,500 cubic feet per year, at a cost of 63.7 cents per 1000 cubic feet. Today the rate is \$2.47 per 1000 cubic feet for the 2,575 residential customers whose average use is 156,000 cubic feet per year.

In October, 1971 a freeze was placed on new taps being made. This slowed down the development of planned industrial areas which had been annexed to Hilliard. About a year later there was complete sales restriction for both industrial-commercial and residential and this is still in effect.

During the winter of 1976-77 when Franklin County experienced one of its coldest and longest winters, with thirty-seven days with temperatures below freezing, there was a shortage of natural gas in the area served by Columbia Gas. Everyone was asked to conserve gas in anyway that they could. Home temperatures were kept at 65 degrees during the day and 55 degrees at night. Schools were closed for a time. Industries were unable to operate. All non-essential use of public buildings which used natural gas as a source of heat was curtailed. Persons attending essential meetings wore their warmest clothing. Yes, it was an inconvenience but the spirit of cooperation was in the air and the people of Hilliard managed.