

75 Years

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75TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL FEATURE

STATE BAR OF MICHIGAN

What, No Cell Phones?

By Amber Strachan



A correction printed in the November 1939 issue of the *Michigan State Bar Journal* compelled us to take a look at name and address listings in the May 1939 directory issue, and sure enough, the way you reached out to touch someone back then was much different than it is today.

The correction read: "Attention has been called to an error in the listing of the telephone number of Ralph E. Routier, Detroit, in the May 1939 roster of Michigan attorneys. Mr. Routier's telephone number should read 'Randolph 0585.'"

Curious about the strange telephone number, we turned to statemaster.com for an explanation of how our members connected by telephone in the 1930s:

In the field of telecommunications, a central office houses equipment that is commonly known as simply a switch, which is a piece of equipment that connects phone calls. It is what makes phone calls "work" in the sense of making connections and relaying the speech information.

The term *exchange* can also be used to refer to an area served by a particular switch. And more narrowly, it can refer to the first three digits of the local number. In the past, the first two or three digits would map to a mnemonic exchange name, e.g., 869-1234 was formerly TOWNsend 9-1234, and before that (in some localities) might have been TOWNsend 1234 (only the capital letters and numbers being dialed).

In December of 1930, New York City became the first locality in the United States to adopt the two-letter, five-number for-

mat; it remained alone in this respect until well after World War II, when other municipalities across the country began to follow suit (in some areas, most notably much of California, telephone numbers in the 1930s through early 1950s consisted of only six digits, two letters which began the exchange name followed by four numbers, as in DUnkirk 0799). Prior to the mid-1950s, the number immediately following the name could never be a "0" or "1;" indeed, "0" was never pressed into service at all, except in the immediate Los Angeles area—the "BENsonhurst 0" exchange mentioned in an episode of the popular TV sitcom *The Honeymooners* was fictitious).

In 1955, the Bell System attempted to standardize the process of naming exchanges by issuing a "recommended list" of names to be used for the various number combinations. In 1961, New York Telephone introduced "selected-letter" exchanges, in which the two letters did not mark the start of any particular name (example: FL 6-9970), and by 1965 all newly-connected phone numbers nationwide consisted of numerals only (Wichita Falls, Texas had been the first locality in the United States to implement the latter, having done so in 1958). Pre-existing numbers continued to be displayed the old way in many places well into the 1970s. A Chicago carpet retailer frequently advertised their number NAtional 2-9000 on WGN until the 1990s; not to mention, the number TYler 8-7100 for a Detroit construction company.¹ ■

Sample Listing from the May 1939 *Michigan State Bar Journal*

ROSTER OF ATTORNEYS DETROIT

A

ABBOTT, A GEORGE
1604 Dime Bank Bldg. CADlac 0200
Lightner, Crawford, Sweeny,
Dodd & Mayer
ABBOTT, ARTHUR J
2232 Buhl Bldg CADlac 0730
ABRAMS, DAVID S
400 Lawyers Bldg RAndlh 8363
Theodore Masserman
ABRAMSOHN, WILLIAM
735 Penobscot Bldg CADlac 4539
ABT, LeROY J
601 Majestic Bldg CADlac 0995
ACCHIONE, ROBERT A
1534 Union Guardian Bldg. . . RAndlh 6300
ACKERMAN, BERNARD
748 Buhl Bldg RAndlh 1260
Finkelston, Lovejoy & Kaplan



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FOOTNOTE

1. Reprinted from <<http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Telephone-switch>> (accessed March 4, 2010).