

RENEW NOW!

Singing Wires

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History of Telephony and Wiring Through Old Postcards

by Jan Verhelst, Antwerp, Belgium



Fig. 1 - Example of aerial telephony wiring in the mid-1890s

A postcard of the "industrial environment" of the port of Antwerp: in addition to frequent horse and cart traffic, there were also beautiful iron telephone poles (left on picture) that routed a new form of traffic: telephony!

Telephony wiring before 1900: only aerial lines

After the introduction of telephony in Belgium, licenses were given

to private companies to build telephone networks in the early 1880s. Originally the government thought of obliging these private compa-

nies to do the cabling underground. Finally this was cancelled as the cost was rather high.

All connections in urban, industrial, and rural areas were made by overhead lines.

Gradually, telephone poles started to appear in the streets everywhere. They led the wires to derricks on the roofs of public buildings (usually the city hall [Fig.2], train station, or post office). From there the wiring was routed above the roofs to the derrick on the roof of the telephone exchange building (Fig. 3).

In urban areas, telephone poles were often made of iron. In more rural areas, they were usually made of wood. These wooden poles were creosoted (treated against rotting).

Continued on page 2



Fig. 2 - A derrick on the roof of the Antwerp city hall (mid-1890s)

Derricks on public buildings were used to route the subscriber wires to the telephone exchange



Fig. 3- A derrick on the roof of the Antwerp telephone exchange building

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Charleroi



Mons



Brussels (a post office)

Fig. 4 - Telephone Exchange Buildings

"Postcards"...

Continued from page 1

The telephone exchange building was mostly called "Hôtel du téléphone" (telephone hotel) in French (Fig. 4).

Evolution to (partially) underground cabling starting from 1900

Originally, only one wire was used per subscriber, and an earth connection was used for the second conductor. When the government took over the telephone networks from the private companies in the mid-1890s, it was decided to make everything two-wire for quality reasons, which doubled the required wiring. At the same time, the number of telephone connections increased dramatically, especially for

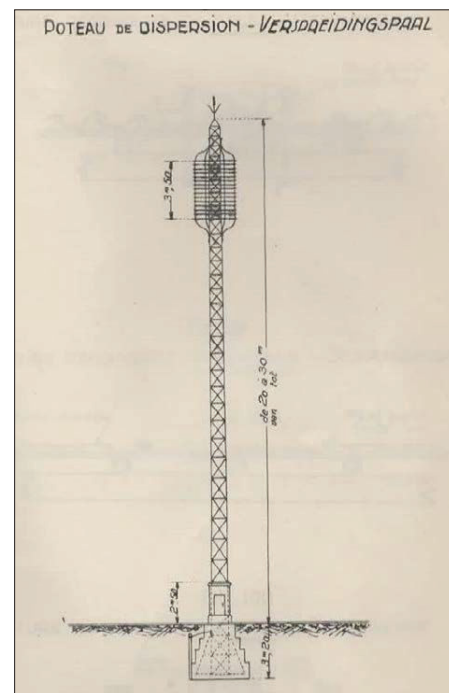


Fig. 5 - Distribution pole, design drawing

In This Issue

- 1 **History of telephony and wiring through old postcards**
by Jan Verhelst
- 4 **Western Union**
- 5 **New and Useful Improvements in Telephones**
- 6 **New Area Codes and Eleven Digit Dialing**
- 6 **TCI News & Views**

- 7 **October Article Feedback**
by Dennis Hock
- 8 **Irving Seltzer - 1929 - 2021**
- 9 **How to Adjust Dial Speeds**
by Dan Golden
- 10 **Perry Mason - The Case of the Missing Bullet**
- 11 **Buy/Sell/Trade**



Fig. 6 - Installation of underground cable in Brussels (~1900)

business applications and government services.

In an urban environment, this led to an overload of wiring in the streets. From 1899 onwards, underground cables (Fig. 6) were laid between the telephone exchange and the neighborhoods where the telephones were to be connected.

In these neighborhoods, a “distribution pole” (Figs. 5, 7) was then erected, measuring up to twenty to thirty meters high above the roofs (it was also two meters below ground level). From the telephone exchange, a cable containing a number of wire pairs was laid underground, arriving at the base of the distribution pole. From there the cable was led upwards and each wire ended in a connector/isolator.

These isolators consisted of glass, porcelain or, later, Bakelite. From that position, the wires were led above the roofs directly to the subscribers’ houses.

I assume that the gentlemen with the hats never touched any tool!

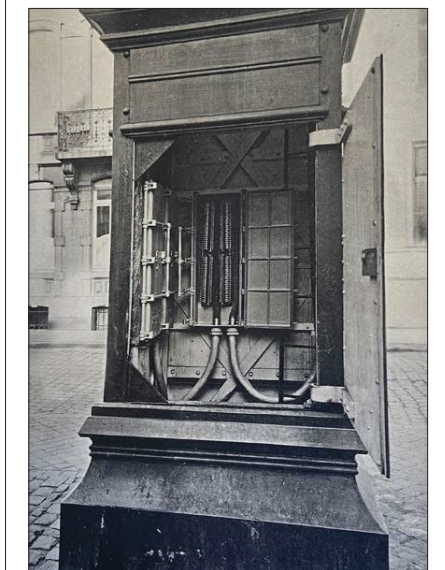
The German firm Siemens & Halske was requested to install the un-



Erecting a distribution pole



Insertion of a cable into the distribution pole



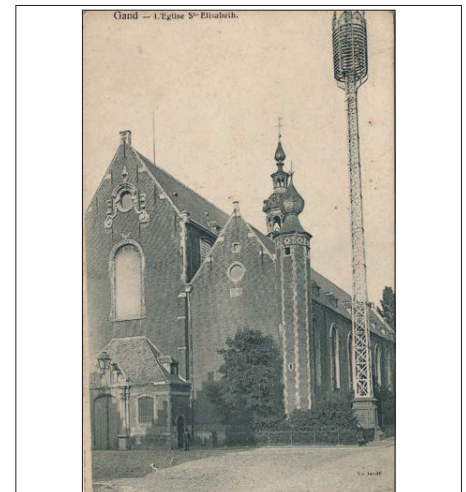
Installation of lightning protection in the base

Fig. 7 - Installation of a distribution pole

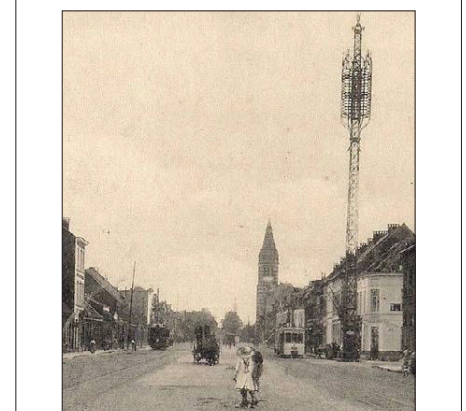
derground cabling. Photo albums from the underground installation in Brussels (1899-1902) and Verviers (1909-1910) were found in the archives of the former telecommunication museum. We publish the Brussels picture here (Fig. 6).

Postcards with distribution poles

Old postcards from all over the country show such distribution poles. They were at least installed until the mid-1930s. Since telephone wires are very thin compared to electricity cables and since the resolution of the postcards is limited, one never sees telephone wires on these pictures. I have collected a large number of digital postcards that show Belgium distribution poles. Figures 8A, and 8B show a few examples.



Ghent

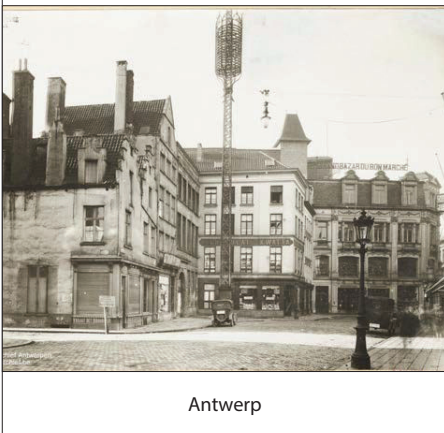


Merksem (suburb Antwerp)

Fig. 8A - Distribution poles all over the country



De Panne (Belgian Coast)



Antwerp

Fig. 8B - Distribution poles all over the country

Rural areas

In a rural environment, people continued to work with overhead wiring through wooden telephone poles until after the Second World War. In the village where I grew up (a suburb of Antwerp, see Fig. 9), the wooden poles were replaced by underground wiring at the end of the 1950s. It was around 1980 that all overhead lines were replaced by completely underground wiring throughout the country.

System with distribution poles also used in other countries?

A survey was made among telephone historians in Germany, France, United Kingdom, and USA.



Fig. 9 - Typical set-up with wooden telephone pole in a rural environment



Fig. 10 - Distribution pole in Rotterdam, NL
Source: Arnold Abels, Van Houwelingenmuseum Rotterdam, NL.

Unless I am mistaken, they did not seem to have used that system with distribution poles anywhere (please mail me if you have different information). Only in the Netherlands this system was used too until approximately 1930 (Fig. 10).

Thanks to Arnold Abels, Stefan Biesemans, and Bruno Stroobants for their help and photographs in realizing this article.

WE LOVE COMMENTS! SEND YOURS ON THIS OR ANY OTHER *SINGING WIRES* ISSUE.

Western Union

Fritz Lang, the famous director, had this to say about *Western Union*, a film he made in 1941: “You know the real hero—the man who actually built the telegraph line from Sioux City to San Francisco—was married and had seven children. Naturally, in the film, he had to be a bachelor. But for me the funniest thing was the following: I forgot who wrote the script, but they had to invent many things, because, in reality, nothing happened during the entire building of the line except that they ran out of wood for the telegraph poles. So they had to find some can-



Buffalo

yons, where there was timber, which they put into the ground—I did a lot of research on what kind of instruments they used, to give it authenticity—and

the only other thing that disturbed the laying of the line was the ticks on the buffaloes; the buffaloes got itchy and rubbed themselves against the poles, and the poles tumbled. And that was all that happened. Naturally, much more happened in the picture—and much more interesting things. Anyway, when the film was finished, I found out that the laying of the line did not take half as long as the shooting of the picture!”

From Who the Devil Made It, Peter Bogdanovich, Ballantine Books, 1998

