

The History of Telephones . . .

When was the telephone invented?

Alexander Graham Bell is credited with inventing the telephone in 1876. Many people during this time were working on a prototype and Alexander Bell was the first to file for a patent (US patent number 174,465) on February 14, filing only two hours before another inventor, Elisha Gray. If Elisha had documented his invention before Mr. Bell, he may have received that important patent!

On February 17, his prototype carried the first message to his assistant in another room, "Mr. Watson, come here, I need you". He had a great vision, creating the Bell Telephone Company in 1877, which later became AT&T. Technology continued to increase the availability of the telephones and by the 1890s many towns had switchboard operators to transfer calls between the houses. Originally, boys were hired to be the switchboard operators, but were quickly replaced by females who had a gentler voice.

World War I

The Army adopted the telephone as soon as it was invented, using it in the Spanish-American War. In 1917 General Pershing asked the War Department to recruit women to serve overseas as telephone operators to pass messages back and forth between the front lines and headquarters. Although 7,000 women applied to serve, only 233 were sent to the war. They were named the 'Hello Girls'. They were required to pass physical and psychological tests, pass Secret Service investigations, as well as be able to speak French fluently. The 'Hello Girls' provided a vital service for their nation, relaying messages about troop movements and supplies, often working in the front lines.

Here's a great kid's biography about Grace Banker and the "Hello Girls":

Grace Banker and Her Hello Girls Answer the Call: The Heroic Story of WWI Telephone Operators <https://www.amazon.com/Grace-Banker-Hello-Girls-Answer/dp/1684373506>

In addition to the 'Hello Girls', women made other significant contributions to WWI:

- 21,490 Army nurses served in military hospitals in the U.S. and overseas;
- 18 African-American Army nurses served stateside caring for German prisoners of wars and African-American soldiers;
- 50 stenographers were sent to France to work with the Quartermaster Corps.
- 11,880 enlisted in the Navy as Yeomen to serve stateside in shore billets and release sailors for sea duty;
- 1,476 Navy nurses served in military hospitals stateside and overseas;
- 305 enlisted in the Marine Reserves to "free men to fight" by serving as clerks and telephone operators on the home front.

Did you know?

- The 'Hello Girls' were notified after the war that they were not considered soldiers, but contractors working for the Army. In 1978, they finally received recognition for their service and were provided veteran's status.
- Alexander Graham Bell was a teacher at the Pemberton Avenue School for the Deaf; both his wife and mother were deaf/hearing impaired.

Sources

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- The Women's Memorial: www.womensmemorial.org/Education/timeline.html
- U.S. Army Signal Corps: http://signal.army.mil/old/history/history-hello_girls.html