

ALMON STROWGER MUSEUM EXHIBIT

“Evolution of Communication”

In 2002, Emmett Clary a GTE retiree received an article from the St. Petersburg Times and a note from a fellow GTE retiree Gene Downs. The article was about the poor condition of the historical downtown Greenwood Cemetery in St. Petersburg, Fl. Gene reminded Emmett that Almon Strowger, the inventor of the automatic telephone switch, who had a profound influence on the AT&T dialing network, was buried there in the tall grass. Gene suggested that Emmett get the local TPA Chapter to help maintain the cemetery. Emmett contacted Ivan Seidenberg, CEO of Verizon, informing him of the impact Mr. Strowger had on our industry, including the Bell System, and that Verizon should help maintain the Cemetery. Mr. Seidenberg responded and the Verizon Foundation provided a one-time grant assist.

Although this was a great start to honor Mr. Strowger and what he did for the industry, Emmett wanted some special recognition to memorialize Mr. Strowger, whose invention had a major impact on his career. Emmett then formed a committee consisting of Robert Stoffels, former Editor of Telephone Engineer and Management Magazine and a Strowger engineer, Chris Kelly President of the Roser Park Home Owners Association (Greenwood Cemetery is in the Roser Park), and Mary Wyatt, Acting Director of the St. Petersburg History Museum. Emmett suggested a memorial at the cemetery, but Mr. Kelly correctly suggested that would violate the historical site and he suggested the St. Petersburg History Museum. With the help of many TPA members, the committee scoured the country and Great Britain for Strowger equipment to provide a working display. Through the generosity of Paul Wills, of Coatesville, Pa, they picked up two connectors, a power supply, two rotary dial phones, wire and extra wipers and arranged to have a friend bring them to Florida. Meanwhile, the St Petersburg History Museum decided they didn't have space for the exhibit so Emmett approached the Tampa History Museum.

Once Emmett received the equipment he stored it in his guest room, waiting for the Tampa Museum to break ground. He later found out the Tampa Museum was years away from breaking ground so he waited. In 2008 Emmett contacted the Tampa Museum when it was under construction. The people there were too busy to deal with his committee regarding an exhibit memorializing the Strowger Switch.

Coincidentally he received a call from Glen Caristinos, a trustee of the Safety Harbor Museum of Regional History. The museum trustee mentioned they were putting on a six-month revolving exhibition on “The Evolution of Communications”. They needed equipment to display from “smoke signals to FIOS” (Verizon acronym for Fiber Optic Service). So, Emmett lent them the Strowger equipment and helped procure many of the other artifacts for a complete display of vintage telephones, teletypes, switchboards for a professional exhibit.

During a meeting with the museum he mentioned that his committee was looking for a permanent place to display an exhibit honoring Almon Strowger and that we could find volunteers to mount the display and make it work.

Finally after 7 years the dream of having a permanent Strowger Museum exhibit was now going to be a success story. The plan was to have the exhibit completed by September when we would have a unveiling and dedication reception. It seemed like every week there was a new update or request for information to aid the committee and museum partners to meet the deadline promised of sponsoring an unveiling ceremony on the Friday night September 18, 2009.

Once the word got out 45 people committed to attending the event. The museum sponsored catered food, drink and a small program was presented with great fellowship and conversation of just how this became a reality. The great news is the museum is dedicated to educate the public about our rich history and how it has evolved today. Children from area schools are provided a tour of the museum and in the sessions the students are divided into groups and directed to one of the museum's five stations through a rotating process. Also the museum continuously hosts and conducts teacher training sessions to implement & familiarize teachers to their program.

Although the dedication was a huge success, our work was not finished. The two telephone Strowger connector switch would step and respond to the rotary dial telephone, but the answering phone could not respond. We were able to show the public how the switch worked, but the calls would not cut through.

We enlisted the help of Keith Cheshire, a director of Telephone Collectors International and Strowger Engineer to create a design to make the system work both ways and for the called phone to ring. On March 13, 2010 Mr. Cheshire met Tampa Pioneers Marty Miller and Emmett Clary at the museum and they worked eight hours to engineer and install a system to provide two way conversation and to allow the phone to ring.

We now have a system that includes a ten foot long display cabinet that shows the original invention, patent, various vintage phones from the candlestick to the WE 500 rotary dial phone and a working Strowger switch.

Presently, visitors line up, especially children, to experience the use of a rotary dial phone and learn about the inventive genius of Almon Brown Strowger.

Emmett Clary

