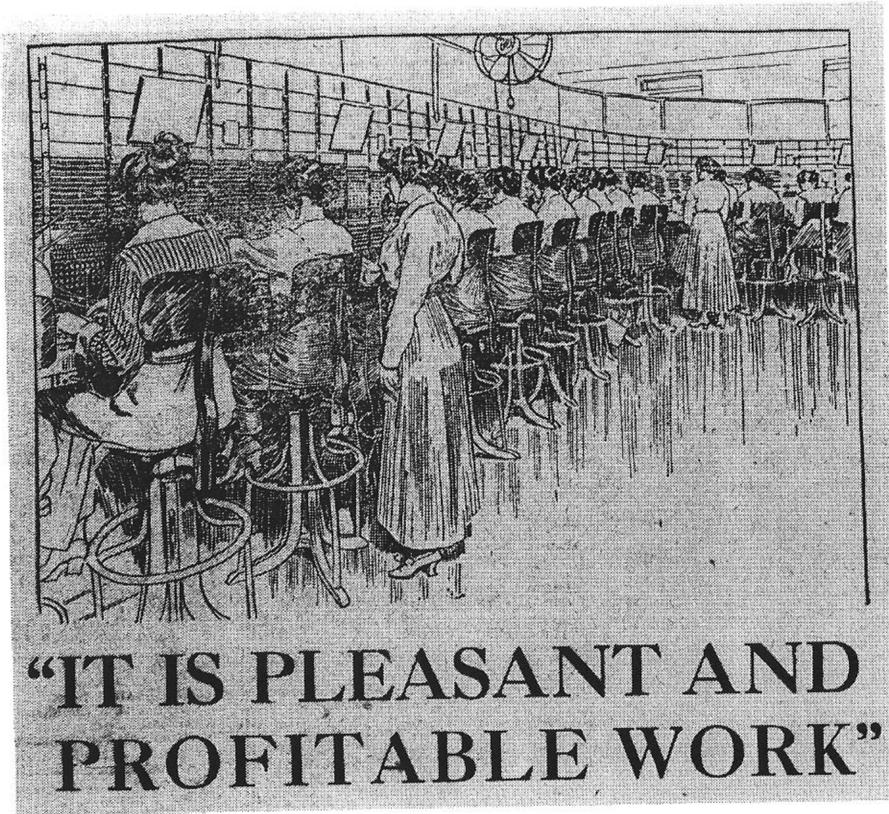


Advertisement for operators' positions, Houston telephone directory, Spring 1919.

The "Hello" Girls of Houston

The invention of the telephone in 1876 created a booming new industry across the United States. For over a century, the pleasant-voiced operator has personified the industry, especially in the days when "the 'hello' girls" personally connected each caller. The operator's job was significant as an exclusively female occupation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time when women who needed or wanted to work found the variety of jobs available to them severely limited. Photographs of the operators and their surroundings in the Houston Metropolitan Research Center's collections give us a glimpse of this "vocation for women" as it was in Houston.

Telephones appeared fairly early in the Texas Gulf Coast area. Colonel A. H. Belo, proprietor of the Galveston *Daily News*, saw the new invention demonstrated at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. In March 1878, he installed a line from his office to his home, the first commercial telephone line in Texas.[1] In June 1878 Houstonians had their first chance to talk on a telephone, when the local Western Union office[2] installed a temporary line as a public novelty in conjunction with a drill competition held by the Houston Light Guards. The line ran from Baldwin's bookstore in the *Weekly Telegram* building to the Guards' encampment at the fairgrounds, a mile away. The *Telegram* reported that the Lord's Prayer, some songs, a harmonica player, and conversations could all be "distinctly heard;" the

[1]Some sources claim that the first telephone in Texas belonged to Colonel George W. Brackenridge of San Antonio, who installed a private line with a printing telegraph from home to office in about 1873. He later added a pair of receivers to the line, converting it to a primitive telephone, but the actual date is uncertain.

[2]The Western Union Telegraph Company owned and operated the first Houston exchange. A complex series of patent lawsuits and corporate takeovers affected national ownership of the growing telephone system: with the rest of the southwestern exchanges, Houston's system passed into Bell ownership in 1881, was bought out by the Erie Telegraph and Telephone Company in 1883, and finally reverted to the Southwestern Telegraph and Telephone Company (a Bell affiliate) in 1890. Telephone history is further complicated by the various independent companies which opened competing exchanges in the first quarter of the twentieth century. In Houston, local switchboards were operated by the Citizens Telephone Company (ca. 1900-1910) and the Houston Home Telephone Company (ca. 1911-1916), which featured an automatic dialing system. Neither company could successfully compete with Southwestern, however. Several independent long distance companies also operated in Houston.

demonstration line was a success.

Houston's first commercial exchange began operation on October 21, 1879, with twenty-eight subscribers. By 1882 the exchange had ninety-four subscribers and was located in a room at the top of the market house tower. As a condition of the lease, the operator was required to ring the fire alarm bell when a call reported a fire. The exchange employed one lineman, who was also a part-time preacher. (Surprisingly, he was black; later, jobs in the area's telephone industry would be for whites only.) The number of subscribers grew rapidly, however, and so did the number of employees. By 1896 the exchange served 850 subscribers; by 1900, Houston had 2,000 telephones; by 1910, the city boasted 10,000.

Early switchboards across the country hired boys as well as women as operators, but by 1884 telephone operating was defined as a woman's field. The new occupation was a highly desirable one at the time. One of the most important factors for a woman in selecting a job was its perceived respectability. Some feeling still existed that for a woman to work at all made her somehow unfit to associate with those who did not. Domestic service and factory work were by this time completely unacceptable to the middle class, and such ungenteel jobs had become the province of the lower-class, foreign-born immigrant woman. American-born women chose more prestigious jobs in shops or offices despite the lower pay, which frequently could not cover their basic living expenses. The new occupation of telephone operator was clearly respectable; it was carefully supervised, offered no undesirably close association with male employees, did not require burdensome physical labor, was open only to native English speakers, and (unlike shops) screened the women from the impertinence of the public gaze. Local newspapers referred to the new labor force as "young lady operators," indicating the job's public image of respectability.

Despite the occupation's gentility, conditions were poor and wages low. After an unpaid training period, Houston operators in 1900 joined either the day or night shift, working nine to nine and a half hours seven days per week. They had no sick leave, of course, and if absent one day their position could be considered vacant. Company policies were sometimes harsh; for example, toll operators were required to pay for any toll bills that the company failed to collect. The monthly salary the women received was $15, which might be increased after six months or a year. This salary, fifty cents per day or $180 annually, ranked far below the average annual income for industrial workers in Houston: $278.74 for women and $520.65 for men, with skilled male laborers receiving from $2.75 to $4.50 per day.

Just how much male employees of the company were paid in 1900 is unclear. However, labor groups across Texas advocated an ideal "State scale" for all telephone company workers, and both men and women apparently considered it fair. The scale specified a wage of $2.50 to $3.50 per day for

foremen, linemen, inspectors, and trouble men, and $1.50 per day for unskilled male helpers. Women operators, however, would receive a starting salary of $20 per month, increasing quarterly to $30 per month after the first year. Toll operators and shift chiefs were rated at $35 to $40 per month. Days would be eight hours long, and Sundays and holidays would be double time except for operators and trouble men. Under this ideal wage scale, a lineman would earn as much in a seven-day week as an operator might earn in a month. Although the State scale was not adopted by most telephone companies, the fact that operators supported it in the statewide strike of November 1900 indicates that actual wages also showed a gross disparity between the salaries of men and women.

Improved salaries and working conditions were the main concerns of workers involved in the growing labor union movement, as strikes against oppressive company policies made headlines nationwide. Women were less likely to organize and strike than men, however, and the Houston telephone operators' initial interest in organized labor was not in order to change company policies, but merely to receive the sickness and death benefits the union offered. In July 1900, some of the operators learned of these benefits from the linemen in the same boarding house. Fourteen operators employed by the Southwestern Telephone & Telegraph Company asked to join Local No. 66, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and were immediately accepted. On the next day, two were fired and the other twelve told to leave either the union or the company. Instead, at a special meeting of the union that evening, forty more operators joined the local and both male and female employees of Southwestern went on strike. The strikers included fifty-four operators, eighteen linemen and twelve groundmen, leaving only five employees (three of them operators) still at work. Right to organize was the crucial issue. "It has come to a pretty pass when the officials of a corporation shall dictate to a poorly paid, hard working, honest class of girls what they shall and shall not belong to," declared one of the striking operators.[3] The strikers demanded reinstatement of the two dismissed operators, company recognition of the workers' right to join the union, reinstatement of the strikers without penalty, and a closed shop. The Southwestern Telephone & Telegraph Company tried to break the strike by importing and hiring operators, and a hostile crowd gathered around the Telephone Building at Prairie and Fannin, causing several minor incidents. After six days, the company compromised, retaining the right to hire non-union personnel but agreeing to the strikers' other demands. Both the striking operators and the newly hired Houston women kept their jobs—Southwestern's new larger switchboard apparently warranted an increase in

[3]Houston *Daily Post*, July 14, 1900.

staff.

The Houston operators were not so successful with their second strike against Southwestern later that year, in November. The strike had no local cause; it was in sympathy with striking operators in San Antonio who worked eleven or thirteen hour shifts with one dinner hour and two twenty-minute breaks. The strike spread from San Antonio to many parts of the state, including Waco, Dallas, Fort Worth, Galveston, Houston, Temple, and Flatonia (an important relay station). Again both male and female employees walked out, but neither public nor employee support was as strong in Houston as it was in July. More operators remained on the job, explaining, "We are working because we have no grievance against the company; our wages are better than the majority of working girls get, and our hours shorter."[5] Many Houston women apparently agreed with them, since two weeks into the strike Southwestern announced its plans to reopen by hiring new operators and received about two hundred applications—a few from women on strike. The company quickly filled all operators' positions, although it left many linemen's positions vacant. One month after the walkout, the local still claimed the strike was in effect but Southwestern's telephone service was fully operational and the striking women were out of their jobs.

Time and growth, more than unions, improved working conditions for Houston operators. Southwestern Telephone & Telegraph continued to expand, opening the Taylor exchange at 2215 Center in 1909, the Hadley exchange at 2615 Fannin in 1910, and building a new main building for the Preston and Capitol exchanges at the corner of Capitol Avenue and San Jacinto in 1911. The new buildings included amenities for the operators such as refreshment rooms, locker rooms, and rooftop areas where they could escape from the stifling heat of the operating room. Days were shorter, wages were higher, and by 1917 new operators were paid for their training period. The industry continued to boom and the number of "hello" girls, as they were popularly called by 1910, continued to increase.

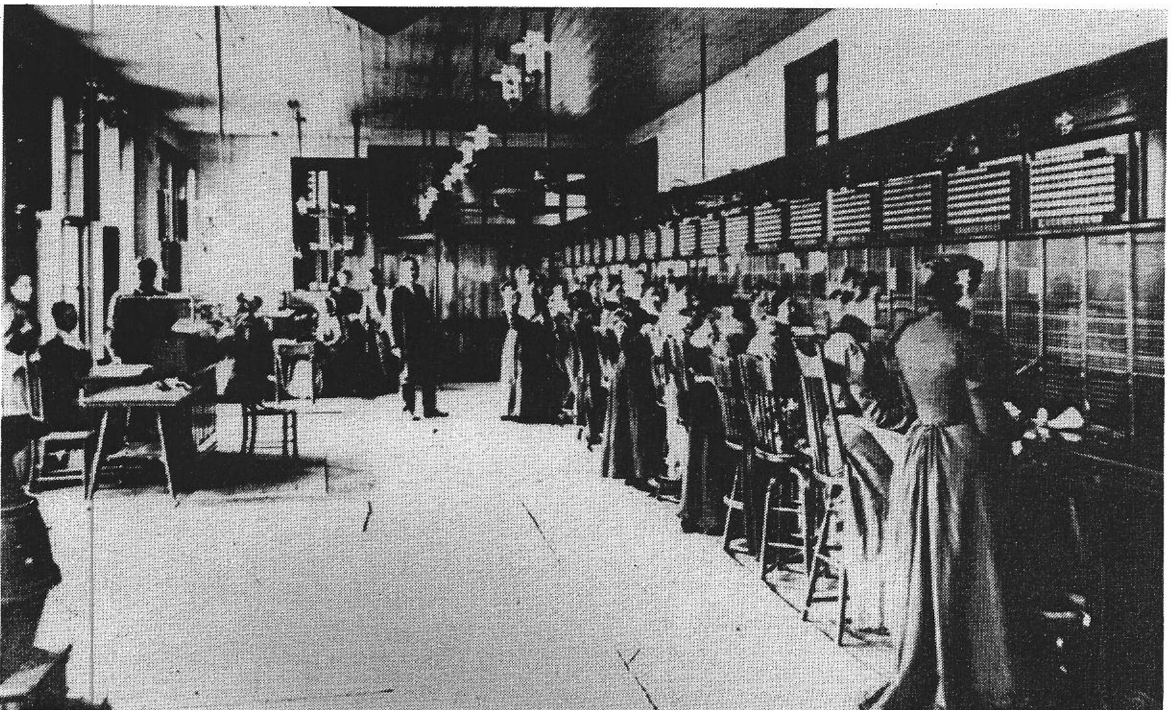
Houston converted to the automatic dialing system between 1927 and 1931, and with automation the "hello" girl no longer greeted each caller. But for over forty years, telephone companies had been an important employer of Houston women, in many ways offering one of the better opportunities available to women in an era when acceptable jobs were few.

Nancy Hadley
Production Editor

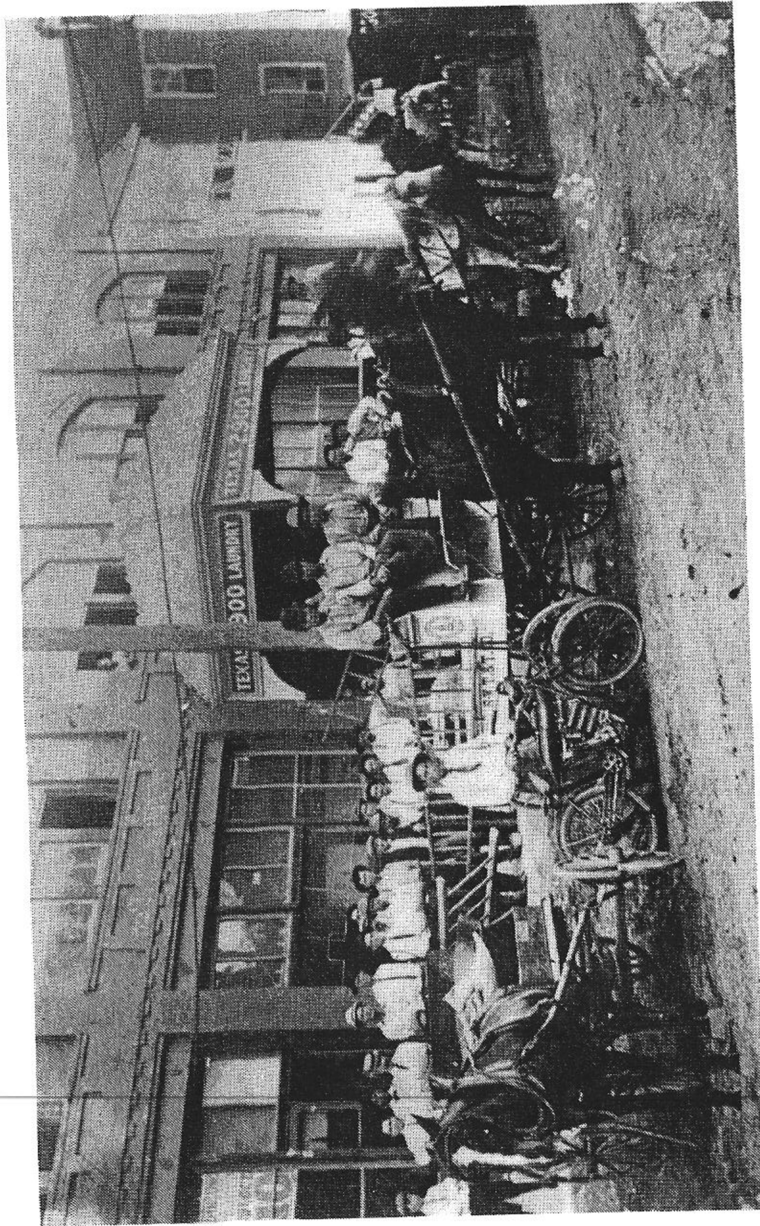
[5]Houston *Daily Post*, November 18, 1900.

Houston exchange, ca. 1898. At left is the manager, W. H. Marshall. The boy at center, Fred Winkler, was employed as a messenger and collector.

The Southwestern Telephone & Telegraph building in 1900. The signs in the corner tower windows show the distinctive bell-shaped national logo. The Telephone Building was located at 1018 Prairie Avenue; the relay station for Houston's long distance lines was at 3213 Texas Avenue.



The Southwestern switchboard in 1900, expanded and modernized. At left, next to the chief operator's desk, is manager Millard F. Thomas.



Southwestern's Plant Department, ca. 1910. The crews still depended primarily on horsedrawn vehicles, useful for installing lines in hard-to-reach country areas or repairing damaged poles amid storms and floods. Southwestern's equipment storage building shared the 500 block of Louisiana Street with the Texas Laundry (the 2900 on the sign is the laundry's telephone number).

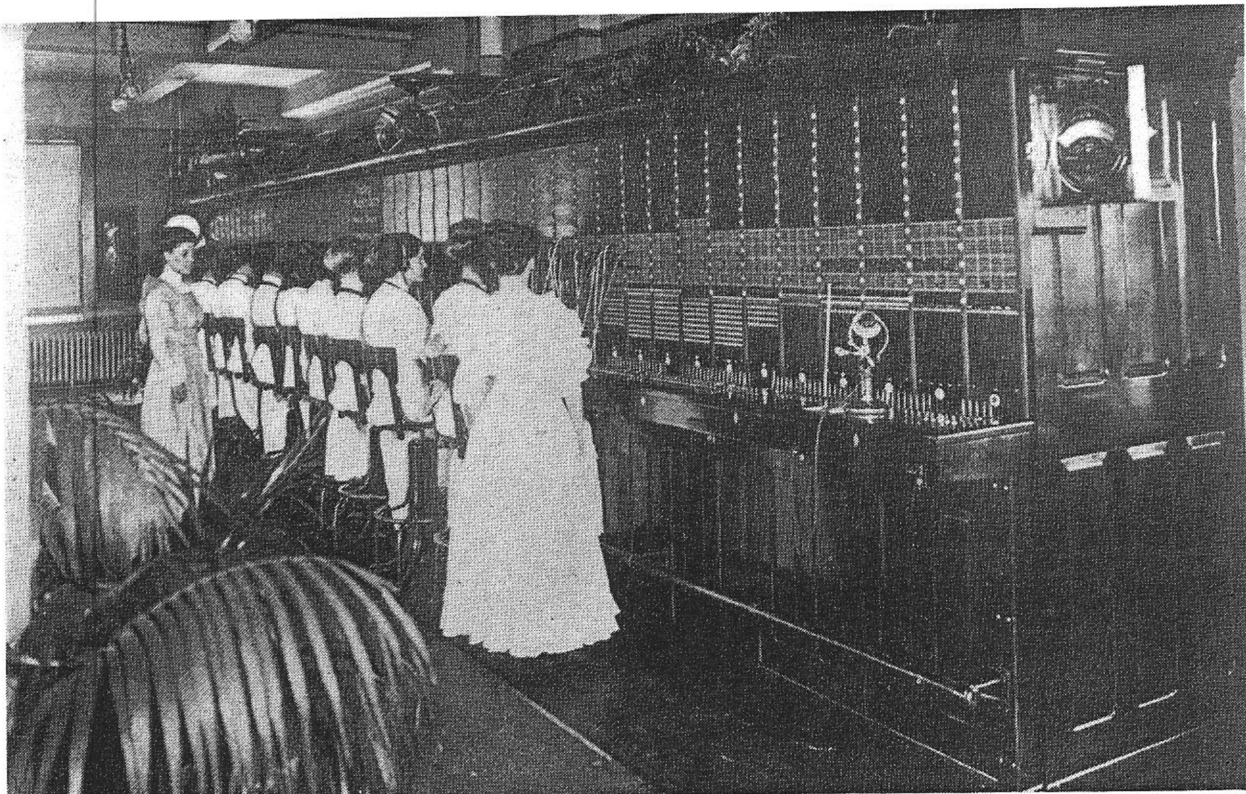
IN every city, town, village and hamlet you will find young American women engaged in Telephone operating.

Telephone operating is a remunerative profession exceptional in its opportunities for business training and personal development and entirely free from the exposure of public places.

Herein lies an excellent opportunity for intelligent young women 17 years of age and over. Not only is salary paid during the period of instruction but advancement is rapid and steady positions assured.

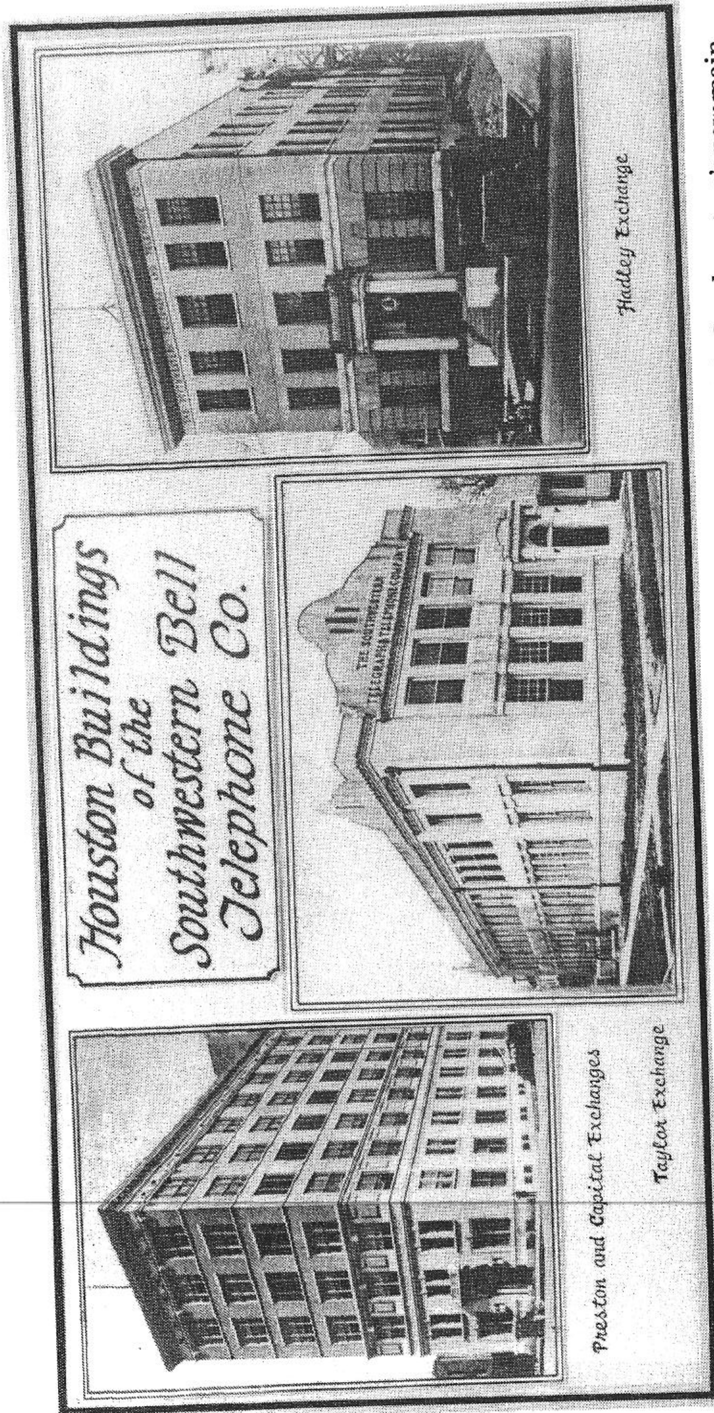
Applications will be received at the Bell Telephone Operator's School, Telephone Building, between 8.30 a. m. and 5 p. m., except on Sundays and Holidays, or call on the chief operator at the central office most convenient to you any week day between 8 a. m. and 9 p. m.

Advertisement in Houston telephone directories during World War I.



These two pictures of the new Hadley exchange appeared in the June 1910 issue of *Progressive Houston*, soon after the exchange opened. The switchboard could accommodate three thousand subscribers.

Progressive Houston described the Hadley exchange as "the completest structure for the purpose in the State." It featured a roof garden and the operators' refreshment room shown here.



Until the early 1920s, four exchanges in three locations served the Houston area. At left, Southwestern's new main building at 1119 Capitol Avenue, built in 1911, housed the Preston and Capitol exchanges for the downtown area. The Taylor exchange for the north side of town opened at 2215 Center in 1909, but soon relocated to this new building at 801 Harvard in the Houston Heights. On the right is the Hadley exchange at 2615 Fannin, serving the south side of the city.

Book Review

But Also Good Business: Texas Commerce Banks and th Financing of Houston and Texas, 1886-1986. Walter L. Buenge and Joseph A. Pratt. (College Station: Texas A & M Universit Press, 1986. Pp. 450.)

American business history was beset for a long time by critics from withou and either heretics or sycophants from within. Since the Populist an Progressive decades at this century's turn, critics have deplored the greed excesses of businessmen, while sycophants generated a business-lovin literature that was rarely distinguishable from public relations puffery. Bu the times they are again a-changin'. Whole areas of American histor specializations are presently involved in dynamic crosscurrents. Benjami DeMott recently hit the mark exactly: "The most promising sign just now i the emergence of academic historians writing in a new spirit about link between the development of capitalist markets and the transformation o concepts of personal responsibility."[1]

Among the persistent problems faced by business historians is that o gaining unqualified access both to a company's written records and to th recollections, whether written or oral, of present and former compan personnel. No access or conditional access leads to suspicions that pertinen facts were hidden or distorted. But, to say the least, unconditional access i difficult to obtain. In general, businessmen are as suspicious of academics a fact-grubbing wordsmen are of entrepreneurs.

When scholars do overleap the wall of suspicion and win access to th records of huge, bureaucratized, multinational corporations, enormou research problems face the interlopers by reason of the sheer volume o corporate records. The compartmentalized and depersonalized procedures o large corporations generate such quantities of written records as to discourage even computer-proficient, business-savvy historians.

But smaller firms, including the small number of family businesses that manage to survive generational hazards, create analogous problems. Histo-

[1]De Mott, "Threats and Whimpers: The New Business Heroes," *New York Times Book Review* (October 26, 1986), 1.