What's a Telephone Good For?

In the early 20th Century, the cost of leasing a telephone in the United States dropped precipitously, making it an option for middle class families for the first time. But what was one to do with this amazing device? The telephone company had suggestions. Users soon found other purposes. This period was also the height of the postcard craze, and cards of the era reflect the ways telephones were put to use.

Although picture postcards are still sent today, the "Golden Age" of the postcard ended in 1914. Most cards, regardless of publisher, had been printed in Germany up until that time. The outbreak of the World War ended access to those printers, and cards printed after that era tended to be lower in quality and therefore not as popular

A negative for printing a "Real Photo" postcard showing a telephone. A reduced image of what the actual card would have looked like is shown below.

This exhibit begins with a brief history of the telephone through the 1910s, then shows the ways in which Bell Telephone marketed its devices. Then the uses adopted by actual customers, as well as some fanciful purposes.

The following abbreviations are used: RPPC = Real Photo Postcard; UDB = Undivided Back (mostly cards made no later than 1907); DB = Divided Back (published after postal regulations were eased to allow writing on the left half of the address side in 1907). Information about the cards themselves rather than their subject matter is printed in a sans serif font.