

An Old Noble Family, a Castle, the American Army, and an ATEA PABX during WW II

What is the correlation between all these? Let's start with some background information.

1. History of the Wégimont castle

Wégimont is a place in the southern part of Belgium, East of the city of Liège, near the German border.



The castle on the Wégimont domain

1.1 The noble d'Oulremont family

Although the castle probably dates from the 13th century, one finds only traces of it in the 1574 archives. It would also have been destroyed in 1636. The Oulremont family, an old noble family that lived for centuries in the Liège region, acquired this large estate and castle of Wégimont in 1756.

This family lived on the estate until about 1920.

We presume maintenance and personnel costs became too expensive to maintain the castle court (as happened with many castles in the 1920s), and it was sold early in the 1920s.

1.2 The province of Liège

Although the province of Liège acquired the complex in the early 1920s, it took until 1937/1938 before it was opened to the public. There was an entire recreational infrastructure required for the working class, (since they acquired "paid vacation" in those days) and therefore had need of leisure. It had swimming pools, miniature golf, sports fields, playgrounds, camping, etc., and in the castle there was also a kind of Congress Centre.

We assume a small ATEA PABX (4 local lines, one exchange line) was installed at the end of the 1930s. Delivery and installation was done by the National Operating Company, RTT, who had a monopoly for small systems.

1.3 Occupation by the Germans during World War II

After the First World War Germany had a population decline, and the Nazis started an action to increase the birth rate. During the occupation, the castle was confiscated by the Germans, and was used between 1942 and 1944 under their "Lebensborn" action.

Ideological background of Lebensborn

Lebensborn (Spring of Life, in antiquated German) was a Nazi programme set up by SS leader Heinrich Himmler that provided maternity homes and financial assistance to the wives of SS members and to unmarried mothers. It also provided orphanages and relocation programmes for children.

Initially set up in Germany in 1935, Lebensborn expanded into several occupied European countries during the Second World War. In line with the racial and eugenic policies of Nazi Germany, the Lebensborn program was restricted to individuals who were deemed to be "biologically fit" and "racially pure", "Aryans", and to SS members.

In occupied countries, thousands of women facing social ostracism because they were in relationships with German soldiers and had become pregnant, had few alternatives other than applying for help with Lebensborn.

Establishment of "Lebensborn" shelters in occupied countries

Lebensborn shelters were established in all occupied countries. In Belgium, this was the domain of Wégimont, named "Heim Ardennen" by the Germans, with logistics for approximately 30 mothers. Another source says that the SS used the domain as "Rest & Recreation" for their troops during the war.

1.4 Arrival of the Allied Forces 1944/45

The Allied forces arrived in 1944/1945 on their way to Germany. The division "4034 Signal Operations Company," of the US 1st Army, who was responsible for telecommunication on the battlefields, (with portable exchanges on a truck) took over the domain and castle. This division established its headquarters in the castle of Wégimont.

The Americans had a high-tech military telecommunication network. When they encountered a small ATEA PABX in the castle (4 local lines, 1 exchange line) they used it, we think, to connect their network to

the Belgian civil telephone network.

When they left, a 28 year old lieutenant Frank D. Reese confiscated the ATEA PABX as spoil of war and took it home to the US.

2 Who was Frank D. Reese?



Frank D. Reese was born in Cortland, NY in December 1917 to a physician who co-founded the local hospital, Reese's parents died when he was young and he was largely raised by an uncle. When at age 12 he was given some batteries from the railroad, he and two pals wired a telegraph between their three houses, the start of his telephony career.

Frank was hired by General Telephone Company of Pennsylvania as an equipment engineer in Erie after graduating from Cornell University in 1939 with a BSc degree in Mechanical Engineering.

Between 1942-45 he served as a lieutenant in the Army Signal Corps", and he followed the Normandy invasion across France to Belgium and Germany.

After the war he worked as Supervisor for several telephone companies, such as General Telephone in Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Telephone Corporation. At 40 - when transferred to GTE Service Corp as Engineering Director - his career took off. Three years later in 1960 Reese was elected President of the newly-formed GTE Automatic Electric Laboratories in Northlake, IL. During the next fourteen years he oversaw the development and launch of GTE's electronic product line and mentored a staff of talented engineering managers.

By 1974 he was telling friends he was hankering to get back to his operating company roots and took early GTE retirement to join North Pittsburgh Tel in Gibsonia, a telephone operating Company. Finally he retired from that company as President and General Manager.

Even after his retirement he remained active in telephony, we find evidence of an affiliation with a small Telecom company in 2001.

Frank D. Reese was active in various professional associations (such as the U.S. Telephone Association) and he chaired committees for the "Institute of Electrical

and Electronics Engineers' (IEEE), he also contributed articles for their publications.

The telecom business showed him their appreciation. After an IEEE award in 1974, he was recognized, mainly in the 1990s, for his activities. So he got two prestigious USTA awards:

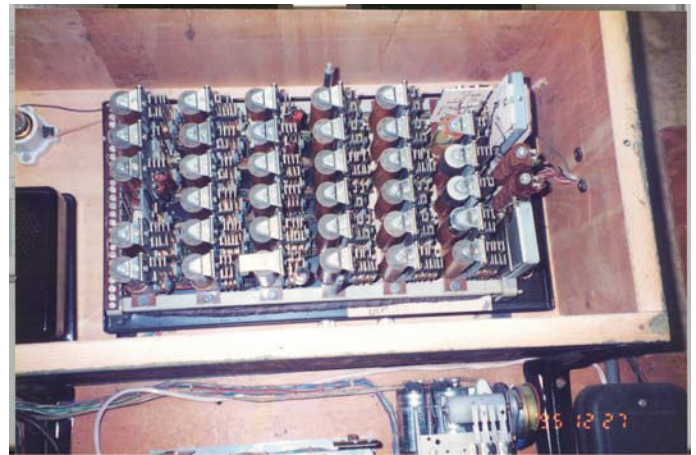
- The Pacesetter (1991) and

- The Distinguished Service Medallion (1994), for leadership in telephone technology".

In 1997 he was inducted into the "Independent Telephone Hall of Fame", which honoured important people in the telecom industry.

Frank passed away in 2011, at the age of 93.

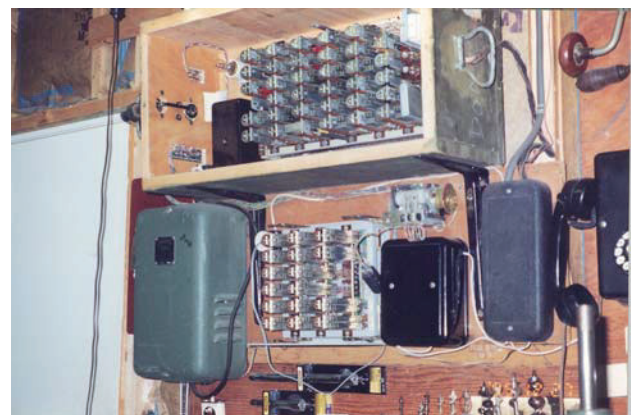
2.1 Frank was an engineer at heart



Frank D. Reese's ATEA PABX built into a wooden box

Photo: Frank D. Reese, 1995

2.2



Frank D. Reese's ATEA PABX with expansion to 8 lines and DTMF receiver

Photo: Frank D. Reese, 1995

Despite his high position as President, Frank remained a technician at heart. He brought the ATEA PABX home, installed and maintained it, and adapted it to the

changing necessities. When his three sons were growing up, it saw considerable use.

The original ATEA PABX was equipped with 4 local lines and one exchange line. When he became president of GTE Automatic Electric Labs in 1960 he came in contact with ATEA people (ATEA was also part of GTE at that time), who provided him circuit drawings and spare parts, so

- the system was expanded from 4 to 8 local lines
- when DTMF phones became popular, Frank installed an Automatic Electric DTMF receiver on the lines, superimposed upon the dial-pulse counting chain relays.
- The system operates from the output of a 20v DC, 30 Hz AC power supply from Lorain. (He thought it would operate better on 24v).
- Some functions with “pre war” technology have been replaced:
 - o The dial tone generation, originally with some kind of buzzer has been replaced by a electronic dial tone source
 - o The low voltage internal “pole changer” ringing source has been replaced by a 30 Hz ringer of the Lorain power supply.
- New contacts with ATEA
- As president of GTE Automatic Electric labs, he came in contact with ATEA managers, who provided spare parts. Spare parts were ordered until 1970.
- In the 1990s a growing interest in Atea’s past did lead to establishment of a museum. During that process somebody remembered the story of Frank D. Reese, so ATEA got in touch with him in 1995. The ATEA PABX was still in service at his home, 50 years after World War II.
- Frank D. Reese did send some photographs, and a copy of the updated circuit drawings to ATEA.
- ATEA offered him a new analogue system, in exchange for the old ATEA PABX, but somehow that did not work out.

Frank D. Reese passed away in 2011. We don’t know what happened to his PABX. We would have loved to retrieve this system for the “friends of the ATEA museum”.

Search for the PABX in 2012

We got in touch with Charles Reese, his son. Charles wrote

“Unfortunately, I do not know who my father gave the PBX to. In 2008, they sold their home in Erie and moved into an assisted-living facility. They had lots of stuff to unload and Dad managed the task; as his sons all lived some distance from Erie. If you know my father, then you know he was passionate about the telephone industry. Neither my brothers nor I followed his footsteps into the telephone business. I do know that Dad felt the PBX must go to somebody who fully appreciated what it was. When I asked what he did with it, I did not pursue the details about exactly who got it. It certainly makes sense to bring the PBX back to its original home. But Dad was in a rush and doing what was most expedient.

I know a few of Dad's living contacts and I can put out some feelers. If I learn of its position, I will let you know. We certainly appreciated the complete report on the origins of the PBX. It was quite the novelty in the Reese household.

Regards,
Charles Reese

Until now, we did not get an answer. A question was asked at the TCI forum, without result. If somebody should know...

Mortsel, 30 July 2012

Jan Verhelst

Many thanks to the “friends of the ATE Amuseum” for their assistance.

We thank also my good friend Dick Beilke (Sycamore, IL, USA) for his support in rewriting this article in English.