

Peering at the Past

Midnight phone calls cost 10 cents extra



Three early telephone switchboard operators in Houston, Minn., were, from left, Constance Loken, Velda Johnson and a co-worker whose identity has not yet been confirmed.

Photo courtesy of the Houston County Historical Society

By Lee Epps

Part three of a series

"Hello, central?" and "Number please," were commonly heard during the first half of the 1900s as telephone callers spoke with central switchboard operators, who would connect their calls. There was a personal touch to every call. Operators were required for anything other than calling other telephones on a shared party line.



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Caledonia received its first switchboard in 1900. Two years later, there was a second operator and also an overnight operator from 9 p.m. to 7 a.m., who had to provide her own bedding and was paid 10 cents per call handled. Subscribers had to pay the extra 10 cents for overnight service. Caledonia would eventually have seven or eight switchboards. It would be 50 or 60 years before direct dialing arrived in southeast Minnesota.

A switchboard had a vertical panel with numerous jacks and a desk in front with a row of switches and two rows of plugs attached to cables that retracted into the desk. When a customer hand-cranked the early phone or

later just picked up a receiver, it would activate a light above the corresponding jack in the switchboard. Lightning would also activate the switchboard; there were stormy nights without sleep.

Each village would have a switchboard; where there was a farmers' line, a switchboard was located in a farmhouse. The telephone company installed a switchboard in the rural Shumway home in the Portland Prairie area northwest of Eitzen. Delia (Shumway) Meiners, who was about four years old, recalled her mother was the operator — at first, paid \$8 a month in 1905 and eventually \$12 when replaced in 1921 by a Caledonia switchboard. Delia recalled, "When I was 12 years old, I could answer the call as good as my mother. We would all not leave home at one time. Someone had to be there day and night to answer..."

Stella Happel remembered, from her childhood, a switchboard on her kitchen wall, which served five telephone lines — New Hartford, Pine Creek, South Ridge, La Crescent and Houston. "That was the part of the house where almost always there was someone handy... if one of my parents couldn't be in the house... one of the children was assigned to stay there to either answer the phone or call an older person..."

In Houston, the operator blew the fire siren at noon every day. In Caledonia, one duty was to put out the alarm when a fire was reported. Tragedies would cause a light show on the switchboard. Everyone needed to know what had happened or wanted to tell someone what they had heard. To alert a police patrol car, the operator in Caledonia would turn off the light on the water tower.

Operators were the first to hear of every fire, birth and calamity. "I think I knew the voices of everyone in town," said Lylah Campbell from Houston. But she noted all of the "old central girls" wanted to dispel the image created by television comedian Lily Tomlin. They were too busy to eavesdrop. "Besides, it was against policy."

"The windows were always open," recalled former Houston operator Hazel Olson. "Whenever he went by, the doctor would always yell which way he was going and where," in case he was needed.

Tales of all-knowing operators could be accurate. "What would always throw the people who were calling long distance," said Campbell, "was when you would tell them... they can't reach the party, because they are walking up the street at the time."

But operators were gradually replaced by automated systems, first by direct dialing for local calls. The county seat was not the first to enjoy dial service. Brownsville and Hokah were among villages that were dialing before Caledonia did. Direct dialing came to Houston in 1956 and to La Crescent in 1958. It was 1961 when the Caledonia phone book included instructions for using a dial and explained new sounds — dial tones, busy signals, etc.

However, an operator was still needed for long distance calls. But long-distance direct dialing would follow, permitting subscribers to dial almost anyone in the United States and Canada without operator assistance. In 1970, long distance dialing came to Houston, Rushford, Lanesboro and Brownsville.

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