

*"Well, that line has been disconnected."*

*Telephone History with Ardys Brookshire*

*By Tamara Sibley and Shonda Olsen*

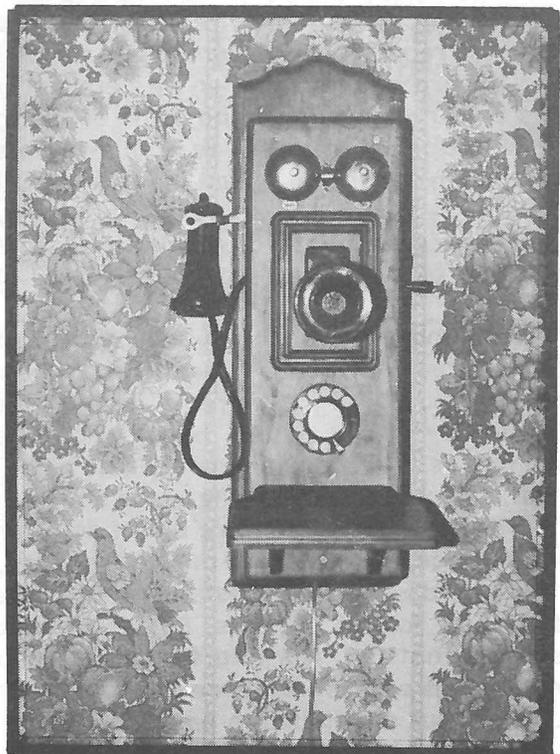


I chose to talk to Ardys Brookshire to find out about telephone history. Ardys recently retired after 30 years with the telephone company. As she began to tell me about her experiences with the telephone company I realized how efficient, and understanding she was as a telephone operator, as well as friendly.

"I first began working with the telephone company in 1947. There I stayed until I retired 30 years later. When we were in the country we didn't have telephones for a long time. Finally we got the old fashioned wall phone which was cranked by hand. A person would crank and crank for a long ring and less so for a short one. One long crank was just for reaching the operator.

"We had a board that was set up with rows of keys. There was a little desk for sitting in front of the board. The board had lights on it as well as cords to connect lines. These cords could be plugged into holes to correspond with the person called. There was a cord to pick up and plug into a hole before the keys could be pressed to ring the number. On the country lines we would press the lever for the long and short rings. Usually in the country there were about eight people on a party line, and there were letters representing each line, like W., J., R., and M. This made connecting the lines easier. Also the lights on the board signaled when a call was coming in or when a line was connected.

"As a person picked up the phone to make a call red lights would show on the board. We also had green lights that were for the hotels and a special trouble board for the plant department. The pay phones had lights, also. On the top of the



*You can get an operator without the dial.*



*Are you calling the  
Smyths or the Jones?*

*Number, please?*

*Is that two longs*

*and a short?*



board we had lights for a fire call. If someone called in to report a fire we would pull the string to ring the fire whistle. Or when we were working nights or early mornings, and some of the men got into trouble on the pass, we would watch and listen for anyone trying to call in for help. Often these callers would let us know what was happening in case of a blizzard. We also knew a good percentage of the gossip, especially living in the country.

"I remember I was on the switchboard one day and answered a fire call. It happened to be my parent's house; they weren't living there because they had it rented, but it was quite a shock for me. I recognized the address right off the bat, and of course, I left the board and rushed up there. Fortunately, the fire didn't do all that much damage, but it did give me quite a scare.

"The board was being constantly modernized, and we saw lots of changes. Since Steamboat wasn't all that big, working for the telephone company was easy. If someone disconnected we would just put a little white paint on that number. Then if someone tried to call 120 W, we would just look at the board and say 'That

number has been disconnected.' Then when someone new moved into the area they could have that number.

"We were trained to work with the pay phones. We had to listen for the different types of coins. A dime would tink, and a quarter would thud. However, a nickel and quarter were a lot alike, and we had to listen for the bigger thud sound.

"We used time clocks for long distance calls. We filled out tickets with Steamboat Springs to Denver, or where ever the call went, and the number called. Sometimes we had to call Denver to reach a separate station.

"When we called Denver we might say, 'Alpine, so and so number' and then they would connect us with, say, San Francisco, and then I would look at my time clock. I continued to watch the light until it went off, then I would record the time talked. I would subtract the time and figure the cost of the call.

"Usually switchboards weren't hard to operate. I'm sure I made mistakes and disconnected people not meaning to, especially with calls to Las Vegas or California, but that usually wasn't the case. It didn't take long to



*Answer those  
ringing phones!*

learn the system, especially if you stayed with it as long as I did.

"Most people didn't have but one number, except for the Harbor Hotel. It was the largest one here, and I can't even remember how many trunks they had. If it was a private line then there was only one trunk and one number, like 120 W or 120 J. The key would remain in one position all the time. But if it was a party line, the key would ring one way for W and another way for J. Then there might be a four party line with the short and long rings to determine the number called. The same hole could be used for the plug, but the lever would be pushed a different way or for a different amount of time for the ring.

"There used to be an old telephone switchboard in Dr. Price's office on Lincoln Avenue. There was also another telephone right around the corner from Howe's Shoe Shop. The original telephone company was just down from Lyon Drug, next to the little house on the corner. And the building where the phone company is now has gone through quite a few changes. There used to be a window that is now a brick wall. I was always in charge of decorating that window for the different holiday season, like for Valentine's Day and Christmas. I still have some pictures of some of the window decorations I did.

"The old board had just one set of keys and in the center there was a key to pull down or push back for different rings. When we got the board with a double row of keys, then each cord represented numbers. That way we didn't have to switch the key on and off all the time.

"The trunk is the key hole that the cord is plugged into. I had a light on it to show use. The light might be a Denver operator calling for a special number. The cord could be plugged into the number desired. For example, Luken's



*Ardys showing Jamie  
how the old time headsets were used.*

Garage had the number 50 or 5055, and Denver would call and say, 55, and I would plug in the cord, and that was long distance.

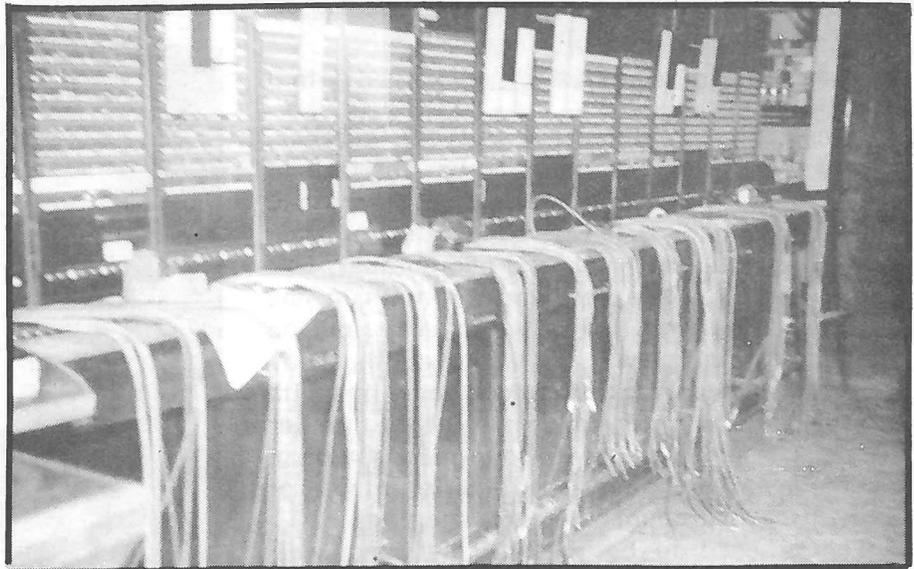
"Our old head sets were sort of bulky. They had a strap that went around your neck and held the mouthpiece, which we talked into. Most of them had a black triangle on the side of the ear to help hold the mouthpiece. Then the cord went down the side so it could be plugged into the board. To make the connection was just like plugging in an iron.



*Viola Otter was  
one of many telephone  
operators in the 1940s.*

*Getting rid of the cords*

*and putting in the dials.*



"I found an old payroll receipt the other day from one of my past pay checks. At first we got paid weekly, then they changed it to every two weeks. We worked a 40-hour week, and we worked weekends and holidays. We alternated holidays and usually just had to work a four hour shift. We often had split shifts at different times of the day, so we didn't work a full day without relief. I really can't remember what I first got paid, but it did get better every year."

I digressed from the telephone conversation to find out about Ardys' other life, the one apart from the telephone company. "I was born in Colorado, in 1925, and moved to this part of the country when I was in the seventh grade. I went to school at McGregor and then to high school here in Steamboat. We played volleyball and basketball, and we bought our own outfits for it. We dated some, but not much because we lived so far out in the country. We could go to dances at least once a week, but only if we were up and ready to milk the cows early the next morning.

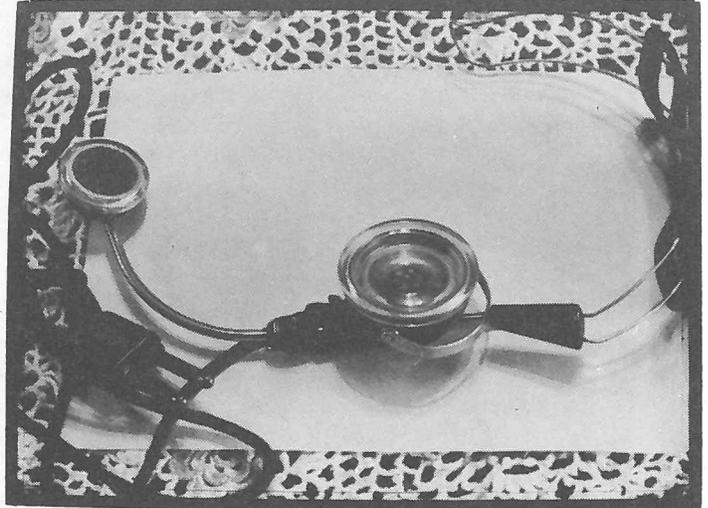
There were quite a few people around who played music for the dances; some were held in a log hut where Bedell's is now and others were held out at the Grange Hall. We lived in the county all the time, and it was usually too far to go to town, so we made our own fun out on the farm.

"I have had several jobs other than the phone company. I worked for Dr. Willett at the hospital; I worked part time for Mr. Shaw at the Shaw Cafe; and I worked for Paul Nelson at the Ben Franklin store. My first husband worked at the mine in McGregor, and we went to Oregon for a time where we had our second son, then moved back to Steamboat. That was when I went to work for the phone company. It was fortunate that I had my family here so my husband could take care of the boys, since operators had split shift. My sister and sister-in-law were a big help. In 1950, I married a second time to Don and continued to work for the phone company.

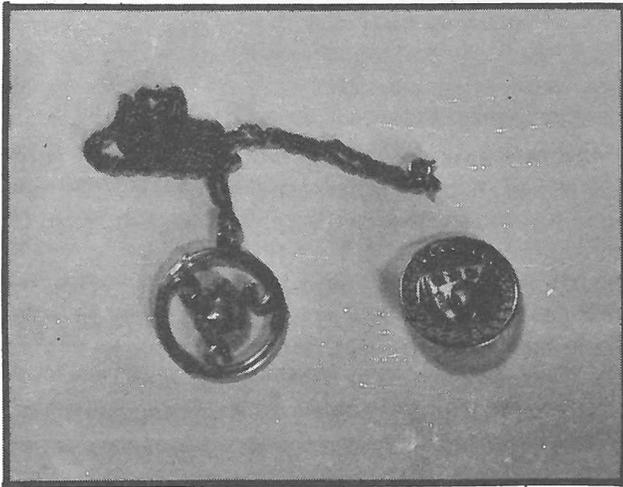


Ardys displaying the crystal and silver she won for being an operator for the telephone company.

One of many old time headsets used in the telephone company.



Some of many awards you get for working in a telephone company.



"The telephone company really wasn't all that bad of a place to work. I really enjoyed the work that I did and the people that I worked with. After retiring from the telephone company, I received crystal, silver and jewelry as well as many other prizes for working there for so long."

Ardys shared a lot of valuable information with me, and I hope that it was as interesting to our readers as it was to me. I liked reliving this time in history. I could feel what it was like to pick up the old receiver and say, "Operator, could you ring the Harbor Hotel for me? I think it's one short and two longs."

IDEA  
of a wheel - I might be a  
spoke, hub or rim  
But whatever the  
part is I play  
It is equally  
pertinent I do it well  
Or, there'll be  
the dickens to pay!

taken from "Poems"  
by Anna Bowie May (1946)