1847 MERRILL CENTENNIAL 1947

Telephone Service More Informal; Office General Information Center

By Mrs. Etta Noel Akey
410 Blaine Street

The inconveniences we experienced without telephone service a short time ago brought back reminiscences of the fifteen years I spent in the employ of the local Telephone Company about fifty years ago.

Those were days of deep snows, when we broke our own path to the streetcar line, through snow two to three feet deep, to get to work at eight o'clock A. M.—with the thermometer registering 30 to 40 degrees below zero for months at a time. During the month of January, 1899, the thermometer never registered above 30 degrees below zero, and I remember well one morning it dropped to 54 degrees blow; and it didn't seem as cold then as it does now at ten degrees below.

In those days snow banks six feet high on sidewalks and streets bothered the hardy pioneers of Merrill not at all. One winter the snow was banked so high all along the block where the post office is today that pedestrians were obliged to take to the street, and woe be to the poor wayfarer who happened to meet a dray along there.

When the snow got too deep for traffic the streetcar company would occasionally help the city out by attaching to the side of the streetcar a long plank which could be swung back and forth so as not to obstruct traffic. One night in November this writer was going home from work at the telephone company. The street car, with this plank contraption, came whizzing along. As it was quite dark, and the street lighting not so good right at that place, this unsuspecting pedestrian was scooped up and tossed headfirst into a snow bank five or six feet deep. The streetcar rolled merrily on its way, but some people passing by dug her out of the snow bank and helped her home where she sojourned for a week with a badly sprained back.

Ed King came across with a year's pass on the street car. In this day and age she could have sued both the streetcar company and the city for a good sized sum, but they weren't so smart in those days as they are now.

Those were days when spring arrived on scheduled time and we were picking wild violets, buttercups and trilliums in April, and all kinds of flowers were in bloom by the middle of May.

Then came the lovely, long lazy summer days with nice warm rains that kept everything fresh and green and everywhere could be seen gardens with an abundance of growing vegetables; one felt the days were not half long enough.

Balmy evenings when one could walk down town and meet every one he knew, strolling, strolling along main street with his best beloved. All the stores were brilliantly lighted up until nine o'clock and everyone happy and light hearted.

At that time the people of Merrill figured they were paying exorbitant rates to the Bell company for telephone service, so a few public spirited citizens got together and organized a local branch office, lowering the rates, in order that a man earning an ordinary wage could afford a telephone.

Mrs. Kate Fish, an experienced operator from Chicago, was hired to teach some of the Merrill girls to say "Hello." (In those days the subscribers wouldn't have known what we meant if we said "Number Please".)

Mrs. Fish was here only a short time when she was married to C. D. Clark of the Clark Lumber company, and Mrs. Etta Noel and Lenore Biron were hired to carry on. Later, Tena Clark and E. C. Wilson left the Bell Company and came to work for the Local; Tena as night operator and Wilson as lineman. Tena had worked for the Bell Company from the time they first located their office here. It was amusing to hear her tell how she used to go out and locate trouble on the lines. If the wires were crossed she would go out with a long bamboo fish pole and when the trouble was found she would hammer away with her pole until the wires separated.

At that time our switch board, which was probably something picked out of the junk pile during the dark ages, was equipped with little shutters that dropped down and showed the number when anyone called.

One day all the shutters on the board dropped, which meant that something was seriously wrong somewhere. The distributing pole was just outside the office window and E. C. Wilson started up the pole to see what was wrong. (By the way, Wilson was noted for his unlimited store of profanity in every language.) He had hardly reached the trouble when we heard such a torrent of yelling and swearing that we all rushed to the window to see what was the matter. A live wire from the electric plant had fallen across our wires and Wilson was wedged in the midst of them—being slowly fried to a cinder. We could see smoke curling up where the wires touched him. We hurried to call the electric plant and told them to turn off the power, and so saved Wilson from being electrocuted. He came down a pretty sober and scared man, with his shirt burned to rags.

In those days an operator was started in at the princely sum of $17.00 per month, and at the end of fifteen years of ten-hour-day-per-day service was paid the magnificent salary of $25.00 per month. Two or three of the girls worked for two or three years for a salary of $3.00 per week.

The telephone office was set up in the old Higneman building, located where the Citizens American Bank is today. It occupied three back rooms on the second floor. Our neighbors across the hall were Dr. Herrick, dentist; Dr. Cary, eye, ear and throat specialist; Van Hecke, Reed and Smart, lawyers; Dr. Walsh, and many other offices.

Did I say telephone office? It was an almanac, an information bureau, a weather bureau, and also a public secretary's office and dictionary.

Half the people in town did not need clocks. All they had to do was just ask the operator the time of day; also what kind of weather was scheduled for that day, or if the train was on time.

Some would call and ask the operator how to spell a word; another asked what the word Sheik meant. When told by the operator it meant an Arabian chieftain she said, "Oh, are you sure? I thought it was some kind of a bird."

The Standard Oil operative would call and say, "Operator, I have to leave the office for a short time. Take my calls for me, will you" "O. K." A few minutes later Jim Wright would call—"Give me the Standard Oil company." (No one ever thought of such a thing as calling by number—I dare say very few had telephone directories.) Operator would say, "Standard Oil doesn't answer their phone." Jim Wright: "Well, when he calls in tell him to send us two barrels of Eldorado, two barrels of black oil and one of castor, etc. etc."

Some one from the depot would call for one of the mills; when told that the line was busy he would say, "Well I am in a hurry. As soon as you can get them tell them we are setting out ten, or more, cars on their side track and give them these numbers." Then he would rattle off all the numbers of the box cars, which we would put down on a pad, and relay to the mill.

All this extra work was faithfully handled with a smile. As long as it was all right with the management it was okay with us.

We really got to be quite expert at this sort of work. You see, it broke the monotony of the regular routine of answering ordinary calls and made us feel we were a part of the business world and not just parrots.

One of the girls on the night shift said that it was quite a common occurence for some of the women whose husbands made a practice of working nights to ask the operator to locate him for them, as he didn't seem to be in his office. The operators got quite a thrill out of it but it didn't always work out so well so they were obliged to refuse, (reluctantly.) Then there were the secrets shared with the operator. Many of the then prominent gals would confide their deep, dark secrets to the telephone girls, for help with their dates so they wouldn't have to use the house phone. I am sure none of us ever betrayed their confidences but did all we could to help Cupid along.

Then came the day when the telephone office burned and everything was moved into a little shack on the alley back of Thielman's butcher shop. (And, incidentally, we learned then what went into the sausage.)

And then bedlam was turned loose. Dogs running yelping down the alley from the back doors of drug stores. Horses attached to farm wagons running away down the alley, with kids running whooping after them; dog fights, kid fights; dray loads of merchandise mired down in a foot of nice sticky mud—the drivers kicking their horses and swearing at the tops of their voices, Operator going out and threatening to report them to the humane office—driver telling operator to go back in the office and mind her business. Oh, it was exciting to say the least; but there was nothing we could do about it. We were located on an alley and very few people have any idea what goes on in an alley, unless they live there all day. Pandemonium reigned every day in front of the office door, and the operator was supposed to be answering calls with "a smile in her voice."

But in spite of all these handicaps, the service was said to be good. Ask any of the older residents. There surely must be some one left who remembers those good old days way back when.

There were never any complaints.

A. B. Nelson, who engaged in the general mercantile business on West Main street over fifty years ago. Mr. Nelson lives with his wife at 311 North Prospect street.

Everybody was grand to the "Telephone Girls", remembering us on Christmas with loads of candy, fruit, money and lovely gifts. One Christmas the money we received from the mills and business places amounted to over fifty dollars, besides all the other things we were given. Scarcely a day passed that some one didn't bring us a two pound box of candy or a pie from Harry Bruce's bakery.

The discipline was lax but it didn't seem to interfere with our work and those were really happy days . . . .

If we could only just blot out
Those years and years of Time,
And live once more the days of yore
The days of Auld Lang Syne.

The late George Rothlisberg, pioneer merchant of Merrill, began his merchandising career in the Sixth Ward as predecessor to the Emerich Mercantile Co. Together with his son, John, he later was in business on Grand avenue.