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*A first-hand account of the  
impact of an operator's job on  
a family in Fayette County.*

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# *Making the Connection*

The story of a  
small-town telephone operator

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by Vern Carpenter

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I LIVE IN Indianola, Iowa, fourteen miles south of Des Moines. Recently, I wanted to telephone a man living in a small town southeast of Indianola who trims trees, but I could not recall his name. Obtaining his name years ago would have been easy. I would have stepped to the telephone hanging on the wall, rung the telephone operator in the town, and asked her the name of the tree trimmer. She would have known. Before dial systems were installed, telephone operators in small towns were a fountainhead of information.

How do I know this? Because my mother, Nellie Knight Carpenter, operated and managed the telephone office at Randalia, in Fayette County, Iowa, from 1920 to 1942.

My father died in the flu epidemic of 1919/20, leaving my mother with four children and no means of support. To make matters more difficult, during the period of high inflation following World War I, the cost of living nearly doubled. My maternal grandparents encouraged my mother to place her two youngest children — my sister Frances and me — in an orphans' home. Although this was a common practice of the day, my mother could not bear the thought.

About this time the job of telephone oper-

ator-manager became available in nearby Randalia, where my maternal grandparents lived. The switchboard was installed in a small house that the telephone company rented to the operator. The company had been experiencing difficulty keeping an operator for any length of time because the pay was low and the job too confining to suit most families. My mother took the job.

The hours of work were twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, with neither paid vacation nor sick leave. The pay was \$40 a month, but \$5 had to be paid back to the telephone company for house rent plus \$1 for electricity. This left \$34 a month for the family to live on. Out of this \$34 our family of five bought coal for the two potbellied heating stoves. As I recall, the telephone company at first paid a small amount towards the coal bill, but in later years it discontinued the practice, to my mother's dismay.

My mother took the job, she told me, because she had no other means to support her four children. (Although my brother, Irvin, could work as a hired man on farms when not in high school, Mildred was just starting high school, Frances was five, and I was just under three.) Mother also told me that getting



Nellie Carpenter operated the Randalia switchboard for over two decades from the home she rented from the telephone company. The job involved her four children as well, who learned to handle calls, collect telephone rent, and to deliver messages to citizens without phones. The photo was taken in 1939.

approved for a widow's pension from the county at that time was extremely difficult. My mother was not trained in any vocation. In the 1890s her father had not believed that women needed to be educated, and he had not allowed my mother and her sisters to complete high school.

**O**UR FAMILY MOVED to Randalia from Maynard, a distance of six miles. My mother began work on March 11, 1920, amidst boxes packed full of household goods piled high in the small room used for the telephone office. The switchboard stood in one corner, with a wall-type telephone nearby for customers to use. A coal heating stove stood in the center of the room.

The one-story, five-room frame house, which was both home and office for Mother, still stands. Although small by today's standards, it was adequate for us. In addition to the room used as the telephone office, there were two small bedrooms, a combined kitchen-dining room, and a parlor. (During winter months we kept two rooms closed off to save on heat.) Our family was permitted to use the garden space at no cost. One of us kids carried water from a neighbor's well for drinking and cooking, and for baths and laundry when our cistern was empty. Nevertheless, the job of telephone operator turned out to be a good one for our family for years to come, and we appreciated it. It provided the security we needed. Randalia was a good place to live even if you were poor.

My sister Mildred was first in our family to learn to operate the switchboard. Beulah Brown, the former operator, showed her how



*Fayette County Mutual Telephone Company ca. 1920. Vern Carpenter 1/16/1989.*

Author's drawing of his childhood home in Randalia, where the local switchboard was located.

to process incoming calls while my mother was learning the necessary bookkeeping. There was no formal training, nor was any training material provided.

After Mildred learned, she taught my mother and my brother. My sister Frances answered local calls at age five but not long-distance toll calls, which required slightly more skill. By the time I was five, I, too, was able to answer local calls. Within a year or two my mother would send me to businesses around town to collect monthly telephone rent.

From that day in March 1920, when my mother started the job, until September 6, 1942, when she resigned, there was never one minute when the house was unoccupied. For twenty-four hours a day someone was on duty, awake or asleep. Although telephone hours were from 6:00 A.M. to 9:30 P.M., emergency calls were answered at all hours. Occasional incoming calls after 9:30 that were not emergency calls were put through without any comment on the part of the operator.

Someone was always in the house tending

the switchboard. We seldom left the house as a family group, but on those rare occasions when we did, we always felt we needed to hurry home because we were paying a substitute we could not afford. My sister Mildred had computed our family's net income at five cents an hour, so this is the amount my mother offered to women who would substitute. Several substituted at this rate and were glad to get the opportunity to do so.

**T**HE TELEPHONE had been introduced into Fayette County in 1878. According to a 1910 county history, "The Bell Company was the first to invade the county, but soon local organizations of a rival nature were organized, and for a time there was hardly a town in the county that did not have a telephone company. There are now fourteen of these companies in existence whose

lines reach every town and hamlet, besides fully one-half of the farm homes occupied by their owners." The county history acknowledged that "this modern convenience has become almost a necessity."

By early 1908 the independent Farmers' Telephone Company had incorporated as the Fayette County Mutual Telephone Company. It operated out of three towns situated geographically in a triangle: Randalia, Fayette (five miles east of Randalia), and Maynard (six miles south). Because it was a mutual company, each "subscriber" (a household with a telephone) could own one share of stock. Telephone rent was one dollar a month for renters, but only fifty cents a month for stockholders. Part of my mother's job was to collect rent payments and income from toll calls and file monthly reports to the telephone company secretary.

The Randalia telephone service covered an area three or four miles beyond town in all directions. In 1920 there were 131 telephone subscribers; 101 of these lived on farms. At that time, rural subscribers often had to maintain their own telephone poles, wire, and glass insulators (if they were lucky enough to have them). Subscribers living on farmsteads well off the few main mud roads often needed to string their own wire for the half-mile or so between their farmhouse and the trunk line. Number 9 wire was the best size; it is sturdy but workable with a pair of lineman pliers. In time, however, it rusts and becomes brittle. Heavy, wet snow and sleet made it belly down between poles and break during high winds — often when isolated farmers in emergencies most needed telephone service.

Thirty of our subscribers lived in Randalia. For the ten town families and two businesses that felt they could not afford telephones, messenger service was available — one of us kids would walk to the home of the person being called and have the person go to a nearby telephone. The messenger fee was usually only ten cents, because in our small town we didn't have to walk very far to reach the most distant house. Occasionally, in an emergency in the middle of the night when a household did not answer, the caller asked my mother to send me to the party's home in town to awaken them, which I did. For this service there was no charge.

More than fifty years have passed and it is difficult for me to estimate the number of calls processed each day. Nevertheless, I still recall several of the individual telephone numbers, perhaps because in our "family business" we realized it was necessary to know the names of every person living in the home of every subscriber. Callers counted on this. Most often a caller would not say "Would you ring 0111, please?" but rather "Give me the Rob Claxton farm, please." The operator was expected to know the Claxton's number. Or a caller might tell the operator that he or she wanted to talk to Howard Hoepfner, for example, and did the operator know Howard — or if Howard was the son of Herman Hoepfner. (There was no charge for information, as there is nowadays.)

In case of emergencies or special announcements, the operator would alert all subscribers with a "general ring," consisting of ten to fifteen short rings. After most of the subscribers had picked up their receivers, the operator might report that a barn was on fire and the farm family needed help. Neighbors were good about dropping their work and responding to a fire call. Not all general rings were so urgent. For example, on another day my mother might announce that Chubb Bronn's truck farm at the west edge of town had strawberries for sale at five cents a quart if you picked your own.

**A**LTHOUGH several local businesses had private lines, most households were on party lines. The number of subscribers on a party line varied with the length of the line in miles. If too many telephones were on one line, people could not hear well, so linemen took care to not overload any one line.

Another complication arose from the tendency of people on party lines to listen in on others' phone calls. When several subscribers picked up their receivers, the extra drain on the electrical current made it difficult for the two original parties to hear. In these instances, the operator would come in on the line to interrupt the conversation and ask the others listening in to get off the line. Those listening in



Telephones connected Iowa's rural and often isolated households to businesses and services in town.

usually responded favorably and hung up.

Nevertheless, it's probably safe to say that many conversations were heard on party lines, overloaded or not. Sometimes this served a purpose. After trying several times unsuccessfully to call a party, the caller might ask the operator whether the party was at home or not. If the operator did not know, a "helpful" neighbor might break in on the line to report that "they're not home — they're over at her mother's in Fayette." Other times the operator asked whether anyone listening in knew where the party being called was at the time.

With limited social contact because of poor roads (especially in the country), subscribers

sometimes used their telephones for very personal conversations, even on party lines. They did this even though they were almost certain others would be listening in and would repeat the information as common gossip, some of which was vicious and unfounded.

I might eventually have heard most of this gossip anyway through the local gossip mill. But because of my mother's job, I became aware of aberrant behavior within the community perhaps earlier than most children did. As one would expect in any community, there was venereal disease, extra-marital affairs, and bad-check writing. During the early years of the Great Depression there were a number of

thefts. I was aware that someone bootlegged in town, but I never knew who it was. Two married couples traded partners. There was an instance of wife-beating, another of mother-beating. Nevertheless, my mother drilled into us four children time and again that we were not to repeat any information outside the office that we had heard on the telephone lines or in the office.

**S**WITCHBOARD operators played a key role in the public and private events of a community. When a baby was due, our family kept a close ear to the phone after bedtime in case a doctor was needed during the night. When a death occurred in the community, the operator was sometimes asked to make a number of calls to notify relatives. If the relative did not have a phone, we were the messengers. I remember at least two occasions when my sister Mildred or I walked to a household to inform the family about a fatal car accident involving the loss of a loved one. And I remember — during the Great Depression — my mother putting through a call to a doctor from a distraught farm woman whose husband had just hanged himself in an outbuilding.

One night after my mother had closed the telephone office to the public at 9:30, an upset young farmer knocked on the door. Apologetically he said he knew it was after business hours, but he needed to call the county sheriff at West Union, eleven miles away. Apparently, he and his sweetheart were attending the local dance when another fellow stole his girlfriend from him, in a manner of speaking. I never knew the details, but I suppose some young man danced with her and asked her to sit with him and then asked her to go home with him. I do not remember the outcome that night — except that the sheriff could not help him — but the farmer eventually married the young woman.

Sometimes the operator was an active third party in a conversation by repeating words if noise interfered, or if one party had a hearing problem or a phobia about not wanting to talk over a telephone. Then there were times when

the operator provided compassion and understanding for the needs of her customers. I remember an elderly woman who would call my mother. "Hello, Nell," she would say to my mother. "Is Paul there?" (Paul was the woman's deceased husband. Although he had been dead for several years, she would often leave home alone at night on foot to go looking for him.)

My mother would reply, "He hasn't been here today, so far."

"Well, he left here after breakfast and said he might stop in to pay the telephone rent."

"I see," my mother would say. "Well, he hasn't been here yet. He may have been delayed uptown on some business."

"I'm so lonesome for him," the caller would say thoughtfully.

**M**Y SIBLINGS and I continued to help my mother tend the switchboard and answer incoming calls with the customary word "Randalia." When my voice began changing, I practiced saying "Randalia" in as guttural a tone as possible. I tried to lower the pitch of my voice each time. (I had read that this was an excellent method for developing deep timbre in one's voice, and that it was also an excellent exercise before going on radio. Who knew what my future would bring?)

I was twenty-five when my mother resigned her job and went to live with my sister Mildred for health reasons. (My mother suffered from a serious heart condition most of her life.) For two decades she had played a vital part in the communication network of Fayette County. Telephone service in a rural Iowa community was extremely important to the subscribers. Besides the mail, the telephone was their main connection with the outside world. Telephone operators like my mother provided the technological link of plugging in the right jacks and handling toll calls. But they also provided a working knowledge of the community. Their skill, compassion, and personal touch facilitated communication between Iowans in the early decades of telephone use. □