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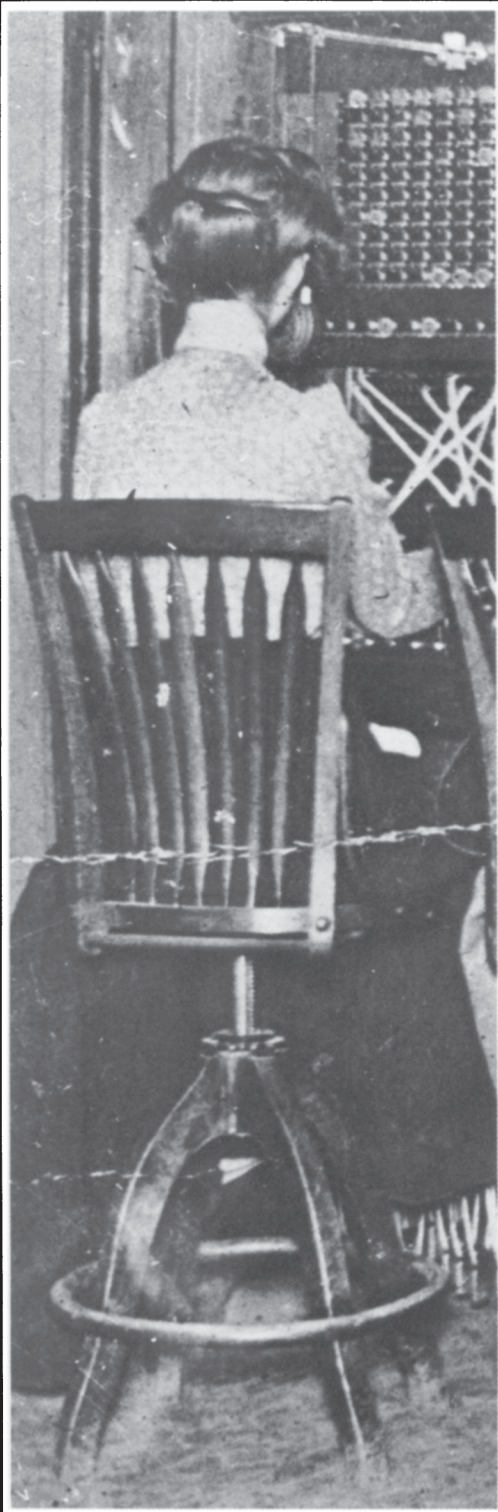
by DOROTHY M. JOHNSON

I used to be a switchboard operator in Whitefish, Montana, long enough ago so that my recollections should qualify as history. Big Mountain, north of town, where the famous ski resort is now, didn't even have a name yet, let alone any skiers. I'm not sure skiing had even been invented, but the telephone had. Not everybody had one — at \$1.75 a month on a four-party line, it was a luxury that lots of people could do without.

I was relief operator at Whitefish for two years in high school and every summer when I was home from the University. I started at age fourteen, and it's a good thing there were no laws effectively restricting child labor, because I needed that money to help pay for an education.

The Mountain States Power Company had both the electric power and telephone franchises in our neck of the woods. The local manager was a portly, pompous man named A. P. Tills. The telephone girls carried on a running battle with him, which nobody won.

The roster of operators included three girls "on steady," each working eight hours a day with one day off every two weeks; one girl "on relief," who worked those off shifts (every Sunday and every other Friday night); and one who was learning. She came in whenever she felt like it, helped out or got in the way for a few hours, and didn't get paid at all.



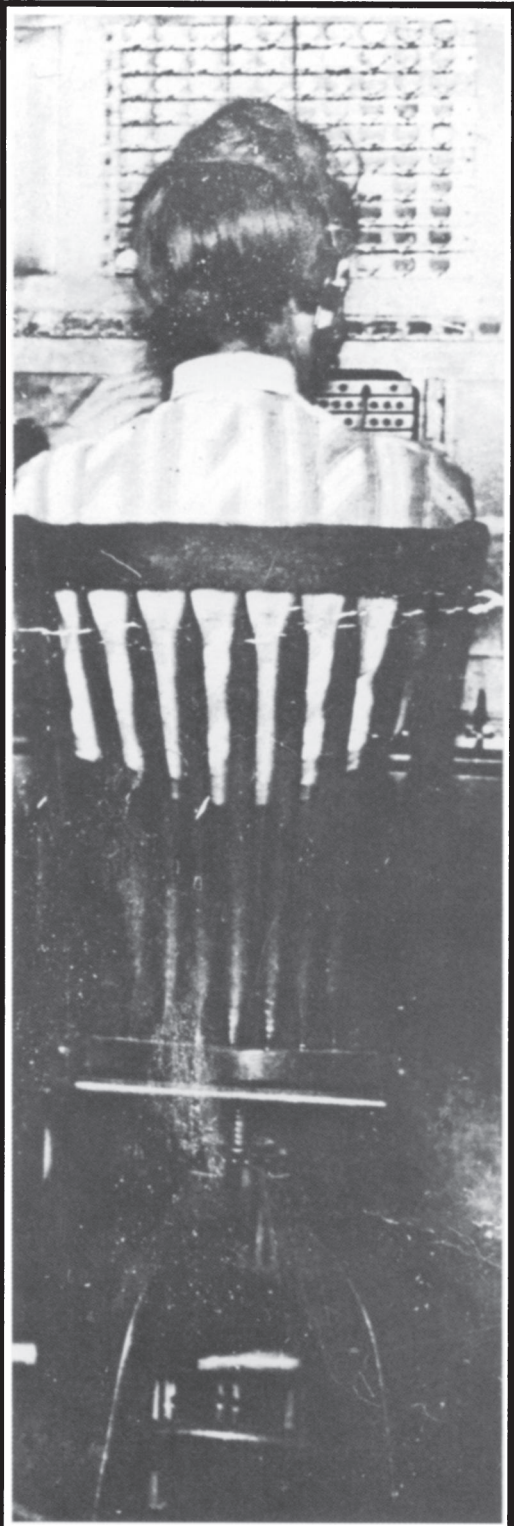
TRUE CONFESSIONS OF A

please!

A girl on steady, working 56 hours one week and 48 the next, got \$50 a month. The relief girl was paid \$1.65 for eight hours. If she worked part of a shift for one of the steady girls, that girl paid her 20 cents an hour. When I was relieving, I always maintained that \$1.65 divided by eight hours ought to be 21 cents, but the steady girls stood shoulder to shoulder against inflation.

These jobs were much in demand. There were usually two or three girls hopefully waiting for a chance to learn. The relief operator (unless she was me, not intending to make a career of it) hoped that one of the steady girls would get married, move away, or drop dead.

We all taught the learners willingly; it gave us status to have someone to admonish, because nobody hesitated to admonish us. And any of us could tell, after a learner had been at the board for a couple of hours, whether she was ever going to be any good. If she was phlegmatic and didn't get upset when she made a mistake, there wasn't much hope. Slow and steady did not win that race. The plow-horse type would never learn to be nimble, to keep track of the time on a long distance call while handling a lot of local calls and trying to hunt down a doctor and the Great Northern call boy. The fire-horse type worked out best — nervous, dedicated, quick. To this day, when the timer on my electric range buzzes, I jump a foot.



TEEN - AGED "CENTRAL"

There were no flashing lights on our switchboard. It had rows of black eyes, each with a number under it. When a subscriber wanted to make a call, he ground a crank. The little black eye above his number flipped over and showed red. Our board was modern enough, though, so that the operator didn't grind a crank to ring. She pulled a little peg called a key — and it had better be the right key or she'd ring somebody a blast in the ear, which was a dreadful thing to do because it hurt.

The board was a vast expanse of eyes, with, at the base, a dozen or so pairs of plugs on cords for connecting and an equal number of keys for talking, listening, and ringing. On a busy day these cords were woven across the board in a constantly changing, confusing pattern; half the people using telephones were convinced that Central was incompetent or hated them, and Central — flipping plugs into holes, ringing numbers, trying to remember whether 44 wanted 170K or 170L, because if she went back and asked him, he'd be sure she was stupid — was close to hysterics.

It was every operator's dream that when her ship came in she would open all the keys on a busy board, yell "To hell with you," pull all the plugs and march out in triumph, leaving everything in total chaos. Nobody ever did. We needed the money, and we felt an awful responsibility toward our little corner of the world. We really helped keep it running, one girl at a time all by herself at the board.

We were expected to remember quite a lot of things. There were two rural lines with lots of people on them and multiple rings, like three shorts and one long for a store out in the woods somewhere. Mostly these subscribers tended to their own affairs and did their own handle grinding, calling between isolated lumber camps, timber claims, and ranger stations. We were supposed to ignore them unless they buzzed one long ring. That meant they wanted the switchboard to connect them with someone on another line. The theory was fine. It just didn't work very well.

Consider: A girl is trained to stab a plug into every hole that buzzes, but she is also trained to ignore two of them. That's hard enough. But she is supposed to NOT ignore them if one long buzz sounds. When

there are buzzes all over the board, she probably does the wrong thing. Either she forgets to ignore those two lines, says "Number, please?" and is told by an impatient lumberjack twenty miles away to get off the line, or she remembers to ignore them and doesn't notice when one of them gives a long buzz that she's supposed to answer.

So way out there on a mountain somewhere a frustrated smoke-chaser grinds the crank harder and harder and gets madder and madder because he has a forest fire to report and why the hell doesn't Whitefish answer? When she finally remembers not to ignore that long buzz, the smoke-chaser naturally gives her a piece of his mind, hot off the griddle, and her feelings are hurt and maybe she cries. It's a wonder ALL the forests didn't burn up, with the flames fanned by gusts of high emotion.

We were also supposed to keep in mind that two other lines were pay stations, and when anyone phoned from there, it cost money. We were suspicious of anyone who was willing to pay a nickel for a local call. He was obviously up to no good. Why didn't he call from the pool hall? So he wanted privacy, did he? He didn't get it. A charming fellow I had met while swimming over at Whitefish Lake once called from a pay phone. Recognizing his voice, of course I kept the key open. He made an appointment with a soiled dove over at the Red Flats, so after that I didn't need any more swimming instruction from HIM.

On a pay-station call, when the operator got the called number to answer, she said, "Hold the line please," closed the key, opened the key to the pay phone, said, "I have your number. Deposit five cents, please," and waited until the nickel clanked. Then she connected both lines and advised benignly, "Go ahead."

For long distance it was harder, counting clanks of varying tones for various coins and doing mental arithmetic. Mr. Tills collected the money from the pay stations once a month. There was always too much money, and this he couldn't forgive. We always thought he ought to be pleased. But we were supposed to make out a ticket for every dratted five-cent call, and when we were busy, we forgot. When the monthly day of accounting came, we quivered under the lash of his tongue — "Two dollars and



sixty-five cents too much in Three Oh — what do you girls think you're doing?" We would gladly have divided the surplus among ourselves to keep him happy, but he had the key to the money boxes.

On one ghastly occasion the total was almost nine dollars short, and of course collecting too little money was worse than collecting too much. It was my fault, too. A man had phoned all the way to New York from 30, the pay station at the Cadillac Hotel. New York, mind you! Who ever heard of such a thing?

The combined efforts of operators in cities all across the United States, their voices getting fainter with distance as they bandied around a lot of bewildering code abbreviations, put the call through in a hurry. It didn't take more than a couple of hours. And I was so flushed with triumph when the connection was completed that I forgot to tell him to drop in his money. By the time the shortage was discovered, he had left town — the rat — and the hotel had no forwarding address for him. Mr. Tills came close to apoplexy.

There were two other lines about which we had to remember something special: "Don't say 'Number, please.' Say 'Whitefish'." Those lines were long distance connecting Kalispell, and we stood, in relation to any Kalispell operator, as an erring child to a stern stepmother who is a practicing witch. All our long distance calls went or came through Kalispell. Why, over there they had an operator who handled nothing but long distance!

We couldn't really imagine so idyllic a situation. A girl at our switchboard was everything — local, long distance, and information. We also turned on the fire alarm and the police signal. We used to tell inquirers what time it was until somebody missed a train because our clock was slow. After that, Mr. Tills made us refer such inquiries to the Great Northern depot, and the agent on duty there didn't like it a bit. Some subscribers even expected us to know whether No. 3 was going to be on time, but the railroad didn't think we ought to be responsible for information like that.

For Mr. Tills, life was a constant battle, him against us. We seldom came up to his standard. He had spent some years in Chicago, and he mentioned it often. Telephone

users in Whitefish didn't come up to his standard, either. Everybody tended to be too informal.

If Mrs. Smith asked for 73X, which was her sister, and we knew 73-X wouldn't answer because she wasn't home, we were likely to say, "She's at 190-L — I'll ring there." This was fine with Mrs. Smith and her sister, but Mr. Tills couldn't stand it. They didn't do things that way in Chicago. We were supposed to keep ringing 73-X until Mrs. Smith got tired and hung up or we got tired and announced, "That number does not answer."

Since our switchboard had no lights to flash on or off, the only way a girl could find out when people had finished a conversation was to open the key, listen, and inquire, "Are you waiting? Are you through?" If nobody said anything, she pulled the plugs. If somebody did say something, it was usually, "No, we're not through. Get off the line!" The telephoning public had a dark suspicion that we spent our spare time listening in, and very often the public was right. Mr. Tills felt that listening in was a crime just short of manslaughter. They didn't do it in Chicago. (Of course not. Nobody in Chicago knew anybody).

Another thing they didn't do in Chicago was to ring a number that the calling party couldn't look up because she had mislaid her glasses or the baby had torn that page out of the phone book. In cases like this, Mr. Tills expected us to assume another aspect of our triple personality. The local operator became Information. When requested to ring Charlie Turner's house, she mustn't admit that she knew the number. She was supposed to refer the calling party to Information. Then she said, "This is Information. May I help you?" and after letting enough time elapse to look up "Turner, Charles," which she didn't need to do, she announced his number.

Naturally the calling party then said, "All right, ring it, will you?" But Information was too superior to ring numbers; all she did was reveal them. So Information said with a tinge of reproach, "I will connect you with the operator." Thereupon she clicked the key a couple of times to indicate that big doings were afoot and came back on the line to say, "Number, please?"



This nonsense puzzled the customers, who knew very well that there was only one girl at the board, so what was all the fuss about? But Mr. Tills liked the formality; it was as close as possible to the way they did it in Chicago.

Sometimes in the evening when he had nothing better to do, he strolled around downtown and checked up on us from various phones. He was seldom successful in catching an operator doing something wrong. We recognized his voice. We recognized a lot of voices. Voices were our business. If he tried to make a girl mad by being grumpy or downright rude, she just became sweeter and sweeter; she dripped the honey of courtesy until he was up to his ankles in it.

If he tried to catch her knowing a number without referring to her all-wise other self, Information, she gave him more key clicks than anyone else got; also she kept him waiting a while and came back on the line to apologize abjectly for the delay and explain that the board was terribly busy. This was part of our continuing war with Mr. Tills. We insisted that only a genius with four hands could handle the job, and he was convinced that we had nothing to do and really should mop the floor once in a while.

Once he tried to prove we weren't overworked and couldn't possibly need two girls during the busiest part of the day. (Occasionally a day operator, pushed past the endurance point, simply burst into hysterical tears.) He would have us keep an accurate count of local calls. So he gave us a little gadget that we were supposed to tap every time we plugged in. If there was anything an overworked operator didn't need, it was one more gadget to keep track of. Naturally, what we did was ignore it until a lull came; then we caught up with our tapping, plus a good big bontus on account of resentment.

One of the perquisites of Mr. Tills' job as manager was a rent-free apartment just down the hall from the room the switchboard was in, and one of his duties (he said) was to supervise; i.e., to snoop and try to catch the night operator taking a nap. He removed the lock from our door, leaving a big round hole suitable for peering through. We always knew when he was there, because the floor squeaked. Mr. Tills had an afflic-

tion that made one of his eyes roll around sometimes. It was enough to stand your hair on end to glance over at the peep hole and see that whirling eye.

One night a newly trained girl on her first all-alone shift saw it and was terrified — but not paralyzed. With great presence of mind, she switched on the downtown light that signaled the police, rang the police station and left the key open so the night cop could hear her death struggle if it came to that, and then ran to the open window and screamed for help. It was all terribly embarrassing for Mr. Tills. After that there was a big cork in the peep hole.

I came home from the University one June to find that a new girl had been hired and she was trying to reform our methods, also Mr. Tills. She had worked in Minneapolis, which was almost as awesome as Chicago, both being big cities way back east. She was determined to introduce big-city usages in little old Whitefish. For her, the Great Northern depot was nigh-un nigh-un and Hori's Cafe was thu-rrree thu-rrree. She said "Oppiteh" when she meant operator, and her "Number please" came out like "No place." These elegancies confused the customers quite a lot, they being used to our home-grown pronunciation. Unless, I suppose, they had lived in Minneapolis.

We resented her, partly because she was married and didn't need the job, but we grudgingly admired her, too, because she bullied Mr. Tills and sometimes seemed to have him on the ropes. After all, his gospel about how they did things in Chicago was only hearsay; he had never been an oppiteh there. But Florence, or whatever her name was, had the True Word about Minneapolis from personal experience.

She yearned to be our chief Oppiteh and sometimes claimed she was, but Mr. Tills said she wasn't. Our real Chief Oppiteh was in Kalispell. We never laid eyes on her. We thought of her as a goblin that would get us if we didn't watch out, but we loved her as compared with Florence. So we went along as before, without any resident Chief Oppiteh. In Whitefish we were all first among equals.

When Florence departed, she left us a legacy. She used very fancy penmanship on long distance tickets, and for a while we all put little circles over our i's instead of dots.



I was a pretty good operator but not the best one Whitefish ever had. We had two girls in the years I worked there who were wonders. Carrie and Faye were the fastest draws in the West. Either of them could ring a number (front key plus a button for L, K, Y or X) with the left hand while flipping a back plug into a hole with the right hand and caroling "That party doesn't answer" with no hands to somebody else. Meanwhile she could remember that 90 had blinked before 144 and therefore deserved to be answered first and, when she had a second to spare, open two or three keys to inquire "Are you waiting? Are you through?" and pull out the plugs without disconnecting anybody. Those girls' hands darted around like a pair of hummingbirds.

Along with all this, Faye or Carrie could remember that when Kalispell called back to report, "On your 15 to Spokane, W.H." the man who had placed the call on Ticket 15 at the Cadillac Hotel pay station wasn't in the booth any more but she should ring the desk clerk, who would trot down the hall to his room to get him.

W.H. meant "We have the party you want, anyway within shouting distance, so now try to find yours." W.H.L. meant "We have the party on the line with the key open, so let's be formal." H.L. meant "Hold the line, I'll be right back." D.A. stood for "Doesn't answer; might as well give up." N.A. was less final — "No answer, but remind me later and I'll try some more." A.Y. meant "The calling party will talk to anyone who answers at that number." A.B. meant he would settle for anybody who could talk business. B.Y. meant "The line is busy."

We never knew why long distance operators had to communicate in that esoteric way. We simply accepted the idea that ordinary people trying to connect with someone far away were not supposed to know what was going on until one or another operator emerged from the sacred mystery and translated into plain language. I loved those code letters. They made me feel like part of an international spy ring instead of a relief operator whose eight-hour shift was worth \$1.65.

Automatic telephone equipment sometimes baffles me. If I get a wrong number, I have to accept the idea that I dialed it wrong. It was nicer in the old days, when the calling party knew darn well that Central



THE AUTHOR TAKING CARE OF WHITEFISH VIA THE SWITCHBOARD, CIRCA 1922

had made the mistake and should, therefore, be chewed out. If I make a personal call to Los Angeles and it isn't completed (we called them person-to-person calls), the ticket — if there is one — gets lost in some orderly shuffle at the local switchboard and an hour later I have to give all that information over again. Fifty years ago, at the Whitefish switchboard, the girl would have been all agog to keep trying on that call as often as Kalispell would let her. But nobody ever called Los Angeles. We weren't even sure how to pronounce it.

We took care of a lot of little things that a dial system won't do for you. If a brakeman's wife, expecting the doctor to phone because the baby was sick, asked us to ring lightly because Henry had to catch some sleep before going out on his run, we rang lightly.

Sometimes we were trapped. When the roundhouse whistle wailed over and over, we braced for a flood of calls because that signal called out the wrecker. Somewhere east or west a train was in bad trouble. Men might be hurt, might be dying. Frantic wives phoned, demanding the dispatcher's



office, wanting to know at least in which direction that wrecked train was. But everybody who might know was busy getting a crew together, making arrangements for the emergency, and couldn't answer such calls. All we could do was help the women worry. A dial system can't even do that.

Another difference between now and then is that teen-agers didn't monopolize telephones. They hadn't thought of it. Most of them were half scared to use the telephone. In fact, teen-agers hadn't even been invented back in the early 1920's. There were just big kids, little kids, and babies.

One of our sins that I'm not sure Mr. Tills ever caught onto was what we called "talkin' to a fellah." Late evenings and at night there was nothing much to do at the switchboard. When a girl had read all the dog-eared confession magazines, frowning because some other girl had already clipped the coupons that would bring a free sample of face powder, life was pretty dull. There wasn't room to lay out a game of solitaire. So when some man about town called in and crooned, "Hey, kid, you wanna talk?" she usually did.

The conversation was utterly pointless, small talk at its most pulverized. Neither party said anything worth listening to or

answering. But the idea was romantic. This was a kind of pillow talk that involved no obligation. It was just voice to voice, not face to face. Mostly Central murmured, "H-m-m? Umm, not really . . . Umm, maybe Oh, you go on!" Followed by a gurgle of giggles.

A really bold romeo might ask for the privilege of walking Central home after her shift was over (the evening shift, that is; nobody cared to walk home the night girl who got off at seven in the morning), and she might lead him on a little. But she probably refused him in the end and sneaked out the back way, just in case he might not be the type who would take No for an answer. She didn't really want to meet him. He might be an absolute monster. She just liked the sound of his voice, and he helped pass the time.

I carried on an affair intermittently all one summer with a smoke chaser far away in the woods. Both of us had to stay awake. He could make a conversation about nothing last until 3:00 a.m. and sound like Don Juan arranging a seduction without ever saying a thing I couldn't have repeated to my mother. I remember his voice fondly and with gratitude. Murmuring and cooing, we kept each other awake while he guarded the forest and I took care of Whitefish.



AN EDITORIAL REFLECTION ABOUT DOROTHY M. JOHNSON

A special kind of joy comes to editors when a writer of Dorothy Johnson's attainments gets into a mood for reminiscing. It has come to us, with the present article, and it will be followed by more: specifically, her memories of how children and teen-agers of her day made their spending money. That gem is coming up in the next issue. Dorothy Johnson, who is the author of "The Hanging Tree," "The Bloody Bozeman," "A Man Called Horse" and other works, has taught journalism at the University of Montana, served for many years as secretary of The Montana Press Association, and has been a frequent (but not frequent enough) contributor to this magazine, which she also serves as Rocky Mountain Regional Editor. In 1973, the University of Montana conferred a Doctor of Letters, and before that came two honors which no doubt meant every bit as much: her adoption into the Blackfeet tribe with the name "Kills Both Places," and her designation as honorary police chief of Whitefish, Montana, her hometown.
