

Montana Episodes

Number, please . . .

by Ethlyn F. Ross

Ethlyn Fowler Ross and her sister, Alene, were home from college for the summer in 1929 and landed jobs as operators for the Darby, Montana, telephone office. What follows are their experiences as early-day telephone operators.

Fifty years ago the telephone office was an active place in a small town. The operator was called to locate the doctor, send help to anyone needing it, and even announce the birth of a new baby. She was a friend who was always there because the office was open

twenty-four hours a day. There were no phone booths in town so the telephone company offered twenty-four-hour service.

I had just finished two years of college in 1929 and was looking for a summer job in my hometown of Darby, Montana. When the regular telephone operator was transferred to a better job in an exchange in a larger town and her assistant became the chief operator, I got the job as her new assistant.

As the operator I was connected to a one-person board by a plug

fastened to my "horn-of-plenty" mouth piece, which hung around my neck. The ear phone was held in place by double wires fastened over my head. Needless to say, in a short time my head and ear became very sore. The set-up took a lot of getting used to.

On the top of the board were little covers with numbers on them. When a call came in, the cover would drop and the operator would take one of a pair of plugs, pull it up, and put it in the hole above the cover to answer. Very few people ever asked for a



Still wearing part of her headset, Alene Fowler took a quick break from telephone duty in 1929 to pose with her boyfriend's new Durant.

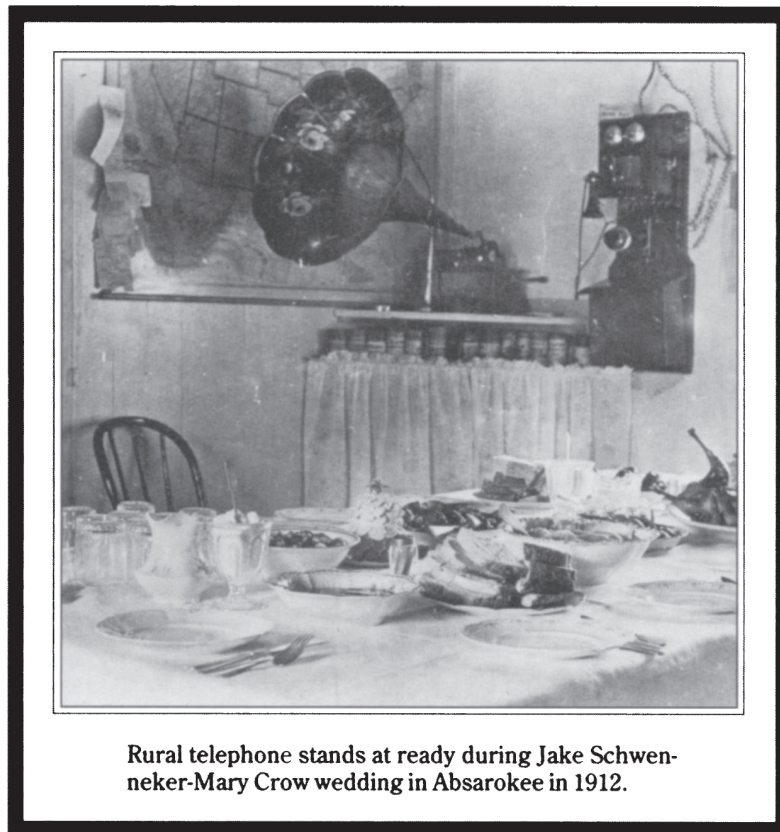
Photograph provided courtesy of the author

number. Instead, they asked for a name or a business, so the operator had to know all numbers.

My first task was to memorize the board and all the numbers for everyone. Many times I forgot and told the calling party that I was ringing while I looked frantically for the number. When I found it, I took the other plug of the pair and put it in that space, then I rang the number by turning a hand crank. With the calling party, I could turn a key so I couldn't hear them. On a slow day, however, one could learn a lot by not turning her key. The operator could never spread the news she heard from eaves-dropping, but no matter. Someone else would be listening and would let the town know. All phones were party lines and were given an identifying ring, one for one, two for another, etc. I'm sure few people resisted the temptation of picking up the receiver regardless of the number of rings.

Rural lines were another part of the exchange. Rural people had to maintain their own phones, big box like things that hung on the wall with the mouthpiece stuck out, the receiver hanging on the left side, and the hand crank on the right. They often let their batteries get very low, and it was frustrating trying to hear them. A rural line might come into the office with as many as twelve parties on it.

When a call came in I rang the party by the number of rings assigned to it, one long and two short, two longs, etc. This worked fine until other people came on the line and took away the signal strength before the original call was answered. I would then ask everyone to hang up, and I would try again. They were all polite and helpful, and waited until they thought the party had time to answer. Then all the receivers came down again. In exasperation I sometimes would ask a woman whom I knew was always listening (she was an invalid and had little to do) if she would ring the number for me because she was closer and the signal would be stronger. She never took offense saying she would be glad to. Sometimes I would have to plead with everyone to get off the line because it was an important call



Rural telephone stands at ready during Jake Schwenker-Mary Crow wedding in Absarokee in 1912.

MHS Photograph Archives

and the recipient could not hear with so many receivers down.

One day, I unexpectedly found myself chief operator. The girl I worked with had appendicitis and was rushed to the hospital in another town. It was a serious thing. We had no wonder drugs at that time, and if an appendix burst it was good-by. She was lucky, but she took the rest of the summer to recuperate. I had to move into the telephone building, which consisted of a kitchen, bedroom, and a front room that served as the office. My sister, Alene, became my assistant. Alene moved in with me because mother did not want one of us staying there alone. I trained Alene to be an operator.

We had quite a shock our first morning. We were in bed and Alene asked what those bugs were on the ceiling. I didn't know so we called mother, who came and was horrified to find they were bedbugs. We could not take our clothes home unless they hung on the line for a few hours, and we had to leave our suitcase in the wash house. Mother took no chance that we might get the bugs.

We got gallons of kerosene, soaked the mattress with it, and put the legs of the bed and chairs holding the suitcases in cans of kerosene. What a great fire we would have had if we had smoked or used any matches. Mother brought most of our meals so we only used the wood cook stove to get our breakfast, and it was in the other room.

Another line that came through the exchange was from the U.S. Forest Service. It connected the lookouts with the main office. Many young forestry majors from eastern and midwestern colleges spent the summer on the high lookout towers watching for fires. They had no radios, so their only connection to the world was the telephone. Often at eleven o'clock at night my sister and I would call the "line" of lookouts and give the boys what news we had and read the paper to them. We sent them books, candy, and jams when the supply pack train went in. I have forgotten the names of the lookout towers, but Hell's Half Acre was one of them and always conjured up a terrible picture. The lookouts asked us how to bake a cake so we gave

them the recipe and told them how long to bake it in their wood stoves. Most turned out O.K., but one boy ate all his before he baked it because he said it tasted so good. One of the students sent us a five-pound box of chocolates when he got home—the most chocolates I had ever seen in one box.

We had a German Shepherd dog named Mitzie, who for some unknown reason was frightened of the wind. Every windy day she would leave home and make her way four blocks through town to the telephone building. When she scratched at the door we would let her in, and she would curl up at the base of the board and sleep. She was not allowed in the house at home. People would do a double-take when they came in because her tail was all that showed from under the board. She would get up sometimes and greet people who came in to make a call, much to their discomfort.

It was very frightening to have to get up in the middle of the night and let someone in who wanted to make a call. Most of the time it was a very polite drunk wanting someone to pick him up. Once it was the county sheriff calling for help because he had an escapee cornered. Another time we had a "Hatfield-McCoy" type of fight on our front deck. The fight was getting bad but fortunately it was a windy day and everyone scattered when Mitzie showed up. When my sister and I left at the end of the summer, Mitzie still went to the office. The first time Mitzie appeared she frightened the new operator, but when the operator found out whose dog it was, she let Mitze visit. The operator came to expect her when the wind blew.

The bedbugs moved out and we settled down to what we thought was a routine summer. Not so. One of our wealthy summer residents came and almost immediately was called by the press. His daughter apparently had gotten into some sort of trouble, and he refused to answer the phone. He told us he would not accept any long distance calls. My sister and I had the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and many other well-known papers calling us, two girls eighteen and nineteen years old, for our



Ethlyn Fowler, left, with her sister, Alene, mother, Stella, and a neighbor girl in 1931.

Photograph provided courtesy of the author

impressions of what was going on. We knew from nothing, but we were very flattered and primly said, "Sorry, sir, but we are not allowed to say," as though we knew it all.

I don't remember how much we were paid, but it couldn't have been much. I don't remember going on any shopping sprees. My sister and I left at the end of the summer to go back to college and that was the end of my telephone career. But I have some fond memories to look back on, thanks to Mr. Butterfield, who owned the exchange.

Ethlyn Fowler Ross' grandparents homesteaded in Montana in the

1880s. Her father, Albert Fowler, was a mill man who worked in various places until his five children grew to school age. He then moved his family to Darby. After her summer's work on the telephone exchange, Alene Fowler went to teacher's college in Cheney, Washington, then returned to Darby to teach school. Now Alene Fowler Blake, she lives in Polson. Ethlyn Fowler graduated from the University of Montana in 1931. She had no luck finding a teaching position during the Depression. Instead she worked for the WPA and clerked in various stores. She currently lives in Polson and is working on a book about her experiences growing up in the Bitterroot Valley.