



WESTFORD'S FIRST TELEPHONE office was operated from the ell of this house across from Town Hall beginning in 1912, when its owner, Phonsie Isles, took the job as operator.
(Courtesy June Kennedy's 'Westford Recollections')

Phone switchin' from home before area codes, exchanges

By June W. Kennedy

The first telephone exchange in Westford was established in 1904 with 27 subscribers. When the new switchboard was to be installed in 1912, Phonsie Isles was told that even a woman could apply for the job of operator. She did, and Westford's telephone office was then housed in the ell of her home, located diagonally across from the town hall. The following are the recollections of Elizabeth Bosworth Field, whose mother and grandmother acted as telephone operators for the town in simpler times:

The telephone that Grandma (Phonsie Morin Isles) and Mother (Hilda Bosworth) operated was located diagonally across from the Town Hall in an old farmhouse that was built in the 1700's.

How my Grandmother got the job goes back away. She had been brought up in Westford, married and left town. Suddenly widowed, she came back here and was looking for work.

Word got around that the telephone company wanted to install a switchboard and was looking for someone to run it. The person had to live in the house where it would be installed, and they would hire a woman.

Grandma, of course, didn't have a house, but in 1908 her sister, Mary Morin, found the house in the center. She paid \$50 for it and Grandma got the job.

The new switchboard was

installed in 1912. The first exchange in Westford was in 1904 with 27 subscribers, may have been located at Westford Depot, had no operator.

Housework and switchin'

Mother was a little girl then, but as she grew up she learned how to operate the board. She and Grandma would operate it alternately; one would go out and do the housework and the cooking while the other ran the office. It was a 2-position switchboard. One person ran it most of the time.

As the years went by it got busier. Some parts of the day it took two operators to handle all the calls. Many women learned, but I recall that Freda and Mabel Prescott were often there. I could operate too, and had to take my stint at it to give Mother and Grandma a break.

You could have a private line or there were 2-party, 3-party and so on up to 8-party lines. The more people on the line, the less it cost you.

There were holes in the board in front of you — you picked up a plug attached to a cord. There were what they called drops up on top. A drop would come down, unhook and flop down. That was caused by electrical current. There would be a number on it. Whatever that number was, you'd plug it into the hole with the same number and say, "number please?" They'd give you the number, and you'd say, "thank you", then take the plug right in front of that one and plug it into the hole labelled

with the number they'd ask for. Then you'd ring with a switch — ring twice for a private; if it were a party line you'd ring 49 ring 2, 49 ring 3 or 49 ring 5, etc.

We had toll lines to Lowell. If you wanted to call California, or any place like that, you'd call through the toll line in Lowell.

The phones that I remember were the tall ones that stood up with levers that stuck out on the side for the receiver. Some may have had phones with boxes on the wall, but it would have been before my time.

There were many interesting sidelights connected with the switchboard. We knew everybody in town and what their number was. They'd call up to ask for all kinds of things besides numbers. Sometimes they called for recipes or just to chat for a few minutes. It was very friendly.

Always prepared

Mother used to sleep beside the switchboard. She had a cot bed that fit into a wooden encasement in the wall during the day. She pulled it out at night and unfolded it, then put on what she called the night bell — a buzzer that sounded every time a drop came down. In other words, when anyone called in, it would buzz until she answered the call.

Mother slept for years that way and Grandma slept upstairs with us kids. But there weren't too many calls at night unless there was an emergency

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Home operator: Title had a nice ring

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of some sort. The police used to come knock on her window to tell her things that went on, or to have her call somebody for them. John Sullivan was a wonderful man. He was Chief of Police for many years.

Whenever there was a fire, Mother and Grandma would call out the firemen — ring each one separately and tell them where the fire was. The men would rush up to the firehouse to get on a truck or drive themselves to the fire.

Many a time we'd hunt up doctors for people too. In later years, Mother took calls for doctors ... had sort of a small answering service there. Frequently people left messages to be forwarded.

Earthy talk

I remember there was an artificial insemination group that went around inseminating cows in the town. Mother took calls for them.

Whenever anyone had a cow ready to be bred, they'd call her up. It was kinda' funny the way some of them would word it. They would kinda' be at a loss for words to explain to a woman what they wanted and mostly they'd say, "Well, got a cow that's ready, Hilda. Suppose you can send those men down?"

Different farmers, if they had an extra lot of something, would bring it in free to Grandma and Mother at the telephone office — heavy cream and milk.

Oh, the food was beautiful in those days! We'd start out with fresh asparagus, fresh peas — vegetables all summer. They also brought us fresh fruit — raspberries, black raspberries, blackberries, blueberries, apples and peaches. Mother would make pies of all these. Grandma would make mincemeat ... used to chop up the fruit in her big wooden bowl. She'd make apple

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and grape jelly, pear honey and all kinds of delicious things I've never had the likes of since. Nothing tasted so good as when they made it.

Dials in

When Grandma died, Mother continued at the office. It was a sentimental day for us when in 1942 the dial system came into effect and they moved out the switchboard.

We really felt badly about it. It was a good living for my Mother, plus the fact that it was wonderful being in contact with these people all the time. We were so fond of them all and we knew each other so well. We missed it terribly.

Soon afterwards, World War II came

along. Mother was tickled to death when the town asked if she would run the Ratio Board from the same room where the switchboard had been. Once again she earned her living and had friends to work with her, this time issuing stamps for the purchase of sugar, metals, butter and gasoline — back in the days when SPAM became a household word!

Oldtimer George Perkins offered his own recollection of his return from World War I and installation of a telephone: "We used to pay \$3 and they'd put the telephone in. You went down to Mrs. Isles to pay your bill — \$2.50 a month. Had good service."

Hilda married one of the roadmen — that was Mrs. Isles' daughter — he was like a repairman. If your phone was out of order, he'd come all around to the villages. First he had a buggy, then he had a bicycle, then a motorcycle. He got a car at the end of it. June Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections", a series of historical vignettes and photos.