

Oral History  
Outline for Montana History

Interview with Darlene Maki, Operator  
for Mountain Bell.

By Bob Pierce

The tape is a little hard to understand, so I took the liberty to type out most of what Darlene had to say. She was an Operator for Mountain bell in Great falls for many years.

In the 1800's, teenage boys were the first operators. Then unmarried young women. Couldn't be married and be a long distance operator. Women could not hold a higher job than a second level position, like a chief operator. Used a wire overhead ear piece with a wire that held the mouthpiece.

Positions- Supervisor, chief operators, long distance operators, inward & true operators, information operators. Clerks- put new phone numbers in the book, and took disconnected numbers out. Also had Telex and rated operators.

In Great falls, approximately 150 workers in the operator service dept.

I've had inward and through operator positions and handled all the calls from operators from all over the world. Sometimes it got to be interesting, especially when they could not speak good english. So we usually had to try to get help from someone who understood Spanish or German or French, or what ever it may be. These positions handled calls that the operators were having trouble dialing. In those days we had small offices. Formed from fort Benton, called a "ring down" (?). No operator could tell, the direct and the inward operators would have to ring Fort Benton on certain designated circuits, went just to Fort Benton.

Some of the calls would take 3-4 operators to put one call through. If it originated in Germany, there would be one from Germany, New York on to Chicago then into Great Falls and then into Fort Benton. From Fort Benton the operator would ring the number. Many years ago we had twelve stations which would be like Essex Mont. or to Neighart at the time. There would be maybe one telephone in the town. And it would be the old fashion crank telephone were you would ring 3 long rings, two short rings, if there was more than one line out to the toll station.

The long distance operators handled all kinds of calls, local calls at the time, long distance, conference calls, overseas calls which were handled on card boards. Each took two cards, one answering the customer, one to go out on a circuit. In those days all were designated, fact that Chicago might have the circuit. Chicago need three, New York-6. There were always delays in the calls. Some circuits were busy, the operator would have to tell you we will call you in 1/2 hour or an hour. The calls were all timed by a Calcilyagraph, which had 2 levers, one you pushed at the start of the call on a paper ticket that went into the slot going with that cord pair of the call. When the call was finished it was taken out. Then the other lever was pulled, which would put the minutes in the clock down. If it was over an hour or 2 hours the ticket would turn to the opposite end and the original clock down too. It would show the amount of minutes. If the call started at 1 o'clock until 3:15, it was 2 hours and 15

minute. These calls were all then passed to the rated operator who rated all the tickets. Customers who needed time and charges were all sent theirs. Three operators would call these charges back to the customer. And as time went on they received positions that had more automatic timing on their positions and push buttons, key tabs, and it was all automatically timed so the tickets were no longer needed. If a person required time & charges, you entered that on the key pad, and when the call was finished, a printout would come out, and this would be the time and charge and would call back the customer. Like a motel, motels were all typed on a tab back to the motel for the customers that stayed there.

Operators worked several different shifts, maybe 6-3, 7-4, 8-5. One hour lunch, two 15 minute breaks, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. There were split shifts, even shifts, and all night shifts. You worked approximately every other holiday, rotated days off. As the years went on, customers still called in ----- central and -----supplies and started being answered by a mans voice. Young men were breaking into operator services again. One reason was they would get experience from operators service dept, and after approx. a year they would transfer into outside work for each different dept. and into positions upstairs into the crane area, and network or they could go out on construction and -----repair man. Putting up telephone polls, running new wire. At approximately the same time women were able to get into traditionally mens jobs. Which made companies start to open up, not just the phone company.

Mothers day was the busiest day of the year. Many people couldn't get through area searches because all the lines were busy. As time went on, newer technology customers were able to dial direct. Christmas, Christmas eve, & New Years eve were very busy. When three president came to town it was always a big highlight. Presidential conferences always had their own switchboard operators that would bring them into the company and were slated in a separate area. It was always exciting to see this. Exciting during the Cuban crisis. When Elvis Presley died, circuits were tied up, you couldn't get a call to New York, couldn't get a call to Kentucky or Florida. When there was a delay, operators always put in extra effort. During crisis, time of floods, fire or any other emergency, worked many long hours, but you always felt good for the help you gave people. In these situations we had many people that would stay even 24 hours before they could be relieved on this type of situation. No-one complained, were always back to work the next day to work your regular shift, or were required more hours. The company always thanked you for extra time and work efforts. As time went by, the company was forced to centralize, many people had to move from their home areas to larger cities to stay with the company. Had good benefits, good retirement was major decision for many people, and we all know that when ----- came, Ma bell was no longer. Mountain Bell is one of the baby bells which is part of US west which has a 14 state area. The company would have expanded and have modernized as years go by.