

It Would Please Utilities, Customers Too

Old-Time Phone Central May Return

By **BORIS WEINTRAUB**
National Geographic
News Service

WASHINGTON — Once there was a time when Americans picked up their telephones, turned the crank, and shouted, "Hello, Central?"

Early telephone operators really were central to the life of their communities. They knew how to track down someone who had left the office to go to the store. They knew callers' voices and how to reach someone without bothering with numbers. They were used to dealing with the questions of where the fire was, what the weather was like, and how the mayor was feeling.

But then telephone service became more common, and infinitely more complex. As automation took hold to deal with the vastly increased number of telephone calls, the telephone operator became less central, and the service she gave became far less personal.

Change in the Wind?

Now, in an age of automation and divestiture, the voice of the telephone operator may be heard more often in our land. That would please customers, who prefer a human voice to a synthesized one; it would please operators, who say they want to use their own initiative and give better service; and it would please the telephone companies, which could reap additional revenue by providing additional services.

There is nothing definite about any of this. Spokesmen for local operating companies and for AT&T Communications, the long-distance arm of the shrunken Bell System since the January 1 breakup, say only that the changes are under consideration. But some experiments have been tried, and they have been promising. One change would enable long-distance operators to go beyond simply making a connection, to suggesting another call when an initial call could

not be completed, or promising another attempt later. Local companies are wondering whether their directory-assistance operators should make wake-up calls or calls to check in on the elderly.

Such services would go a long way toward assuaging complaints of unionized operators that they are limited to providing only rote responses to customers, and are forced by work practices to cut short the amount of time they can spend with customers.

Boys Came First
The earliest telephone operators were young boys. When William J. Peissier died in Malden, Mass., in 1959 at the age of 98, obituaries called him "reputedly the world's first telephone operator." He was walking down a Boston street at the age of 17 when he saw a "boy wanted" sign, walked into the Telephone Despatch Co., and was hired.

But young boys, who handled a variety of office chores in addition to making connections for owners of the earliest telephones, proved to be too rowdy, and sometimes too crude, for the job. Phone company officials soon turned to young women instead.

Historians still debate whether the first female telephone operator was Emma Nutt of the New England Bell Telephone Co., or Margaret Kennedy of the New York Telephone Co.

Whoever was first, she was quickly followed by millions of sisters, daughters, and granddaughters. Telephone operating became almost exclusively a female occupation — even today, after more than a decade since the Bell System began hiring male operators, more than 91 percent of the operator force is female — and Americans became used to hearing a female voice respond when they shouted, "Hello, Central?"

The growth of telephone service began to overwhelm the operator and her cord switchboard. The writer of a 1941

book on the role of the telephone described how completing a call from Maine to California required the services of eight different operators.

Automated equipment, beginning with dial telephones, began to limit the need for operators, and the rise of computers in the last few decades has cut the need even more. A survey by the Communications Workers of America found that the number of operators dropped from 244,190 in 1950 to 128,214 in 1980, a 47-percent decline.

Overall Employment Up
This decline came at a time when overall industry employment increased by 61 percent, when the number of local calls quadrupled, when the number of toll calls went up 15 times.

Along with the decline in numbers has come a decrease in the amount of time spent with the customer. Agnes Kelly, a directory-assistance operator in Pleasantville, N.J., an operator since 1947, remembers spending three or four minutes with a customer when she had to rely on a collection of phone books.

Today, the average directory-assistance operator, sitting at a computer terminal and searching for one among the 1.1 million phone numbers in the 609 area code, spends only 29 seconds with a customer, and new audio response equipment now being installed will make it less.

The limited "AWT," for "average work time," has led to continuous contention between labor and management. Some operators have been fired because their AWT was too high, though most have later been reinstated. Ann Crump, a former operator who heads a CWA local in Milwaukee and organizes national conferences for operators, says the system "puts a great deal of stress on the operators."

"They are not allowed to do anything but sit at the job," says Crump. "They're not allowed to get up and walk around, sneeze, or whatever.

And there is not a second between calls; as soon as they're finished with one call, another is there automatically. Operators take pride in their ability to give service, but the companies don't enable them to do so."

On the other hand, James W. Carrigan, New Jersey Bell spokesman, says his firm is out "to process the most calls with the least number of operators to minimize the cost." The shorter the AWT, the more calls that can be handled, and what customers want is a fast, accurate response, he says.

Tennessee Experiment

Still, the coming of competition in the industry has led to studies of new ways to utilize operators, especially since AT&T Communications' competitors have no operators. A Tennessee experiment gave operators the chance to spend more time with long-distance customers if an operator thought it necessary. Everyone was pleased, and the company picked up an additional \$2 million in revenue.

"Our over-arching goal is customer satisfaction," says Bob Beck, vice president for operator services at AT&T Communications. "Efficiency is important, but at times we

must go beyond that to see what a customer needs. We want to draw upon an operator more, and change the way we measure the job to induce call-completion. There's less rote reliance on methods and procedures. It may be essential to deviate from practice in order to complete a call."

This attitude is not universal, and many union officials take a wait-and-see attitude. But if operators are given a more important role, says James Irvine, CWA vice president for long-distance operators, "We would be with them 100 percent. That would be great."



DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION SECRETARY ELIZABETH DOLE speaks with a caller on DOT's Auto Safety Hotline, a free consumer service for the public to report auto safety problems and receive information on recalls and the results of government crash tests on new cars. The Auto Safety Hotline telephone number is (800) 424-9393. The hotline is in service from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. on weekdays.

Faircloth 9 To 2

In last week's issue, we incorrectly reported that D.M. "Lauch" Faircloth carried ten of the 11 county precincts. Official returns released on Thursday indicate that Faircloth won in nine of the 11

precincts.

Former Charlotte Mayor H. Eddie Knox carried both the Grapevine and Mars Hill precincts.

The News Record regrets this error.

Principal's Award

Wachovia Bank and Trust Company and the North Carolina Dept. of Public Instruction will sponsor a statewide program to recognize outstanding high school principals. Announcement of the award was made last week at a meeting of the state board in Winston Salem.

The Wachovia High School Principal's Award will be presented annually to two high school principals chosen from among eight regional winners.

Each winner will receive a \$1,000 cash award and the school they administer will also receive a \$1,000 award to be used for academic equipment purchases. The regional winners will also receive a \$750 award for their school.

The Department of Public Instruction will administer the program. The eight district winners will be reviewed by a statewide committee in the fall. The winners will be announced in November.



Hayes Run

WHEN SPRING is over, Madison County hopes its streams will show more sparkle and less debris. That's the reason for a countywide cleanup now under way. It's also the reason this sign was posted beside Hayes Run on Hayes Run Road. Ponder Chapel is in the background.

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