

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #468

Interviewees: Bette Erwin, Dixie Runnels, and Marilyn Wittrock

Interviewer:

Subject: Oregon and Washington Telephone Company Operators

Date: March 9, 2009

Place: Chester & Helen Felt Recording Room, Harney County Library, Burns, OR

Release Form: Yes

We are pleased to bring an interview with telephone operators of the Oregon-Washington Telephone Company, starting in around 1959. Please give your names, and when you started working as a telephone operator.

DIXIE RUNNELS: I'm Dixie Runnels; I went to work for Oregon-Washington Telephone Company in the fall of 1959. My youngest child would be starting school the following year, so I decided it would be, help pay the bills if I went to work. I didn't know where to start looking, and a good friend insisted I apply at the telephone office, which

I did, and was hired. Ida Dodson was chief operator at that time. I recall that Lillian Richardson was chief operator prior to that. After Ida, ... was chief operator, and then Bette Erwin. I was appointed as chief operator when Betty Longevin was on maternity leave.

MARILYN WITTROCK: Hello, my name is Marilyn Wittrock; I started working as a telephone operator at the Oregon-Washington Telephone Company in 1960. Betty Longevin was the chief operator at that time.

BETTE ERWIN: And I'm Bette Erwin, I started in 1960, and was an operator until Betty Longevin moved. And I served as chief operator until I, we went direct dial in 1974. One of my jobs was to make the schedule, and that was very interesting to say the least. We did have to have coverage 24/7. And I will be interviewing the hello girls today. Do you recall some of the other operators?

Dixie: Yes, Pauline Henderson, Doris Peterson, Maxine Krause, Marilyn Coulounbe, Mary Foster, Linda Garland, Ann Boales, Barbara Norris, Juanita Gaines, Marilyn Radmacher, Pam Vogler, Butch Jeffers, Peggy Asmussen, Claire Steele, Helen Jackson, Nel Bosch, Glenna Rothwell, Sonya Quier, Georgia Marshall, Pam Tompkins, Linda Fisher, Gail Faulhaber, Pam Mather, Harriet Dennis, Linda Peila, Betty

Davis, Paulette Modey, Madeline and Cordella Miles, Mary Mousseau, Janice Bickle, Marilyn Carter, Elaine Deiter, Elaine Christensen, Jeannie Heinz, Sally Burke, Linda Elwood, and Mary Lynn Brown, and Darlene Jones.

BETTE: Oh that is a lot of operators you had through the years then. Not all at the same time I'm sure. And some of those names do sound familiar. Weren't some of them still in high school at the time?

DIXIE: Yes, they were, and we had some that were wives of fellows that worked at the radar base. And we had some wives whose husbands worked at the, for the BLM.

BETTE: Yeah, that was a good way to earn money at any age. Well explain about the equipment you had to work with.

DIXIE: At the time that I went to work there were two positions, and later a third and fourth were added. As telephone traffic increased, they installed another position, which

we called a bus. It set up higher than the other positions so we felt like we were sitting on an 18-wheeler, thus the name bus.

BETTE: Oh, that's why it is called the bus. Was that for local calls?

MARILYN: Well for local calls, the operator had to, all local calls for the customer, and they were only a four-digit number at that time.

BETTE: Uh huh. And did you also handle long distance calls?

MARILYN: Yes, we did handle long distance calls to some cities. But a lot of the cities we had to pass on to the Bend operators to complete, except for the over seas calls, which went to the over seas operator.

BETTE: How did you handle emergency calls?

DIXIE: We handled emergency calls for the fire department, and the police department. When there was a fire, the operator was alerted as to the location, and we in turn activated the fire siren. Then the firemen called in with a code and we gave them the information that we had received.

And when the police were needed, we activated a red light that was across, at the top of the hill across from the Silver Spur. The police then called the operator and we gave them the information we had received. Needless to say we had some interesting calls. We tried to be as helpful, and any way that we could. We also aided the funeral director some calls. I remember in particular when Bob

Salladay had the funeral home. When he needed to be away from the phone, we intercepted his calls, and he was always so appreciative and always remembered us at Christmas time.

BETTE: Well that was nice, and I'm sure the operators were appreciated by many of the customers. Were you on duty during any catastrophes?

MARILYN: Yes, I was working the day that the Arrowhead Hotel burned. It was across the street, and down a couple of doors from the telephone office. But I was not working the night that the Crane School burned. And there was one winter, during the snowmelts that the back room was flooded with water.

BETTE: And I remember the big October storm. We had calls from some of the western offices, for them to get their calls through, over to the rest of the state, and the country I suppose. Were there any pay phones then?

DIXIE: Yes, we had pay phones located in several places. There was one located in the office and when the call was completed, the customer paid inside. Later a phone booth was placed outside the office and the customer deposited the coins when were requested by the operator. An interesting bit of information, we had a pay phone at Burns Junction. And we have a regular customer, we had a coin on

a string and he tried to fool us many times. Sometimes I'm sure he did. (Laughter)

BETTE: Oh dear. Describe some of the changes during those years.

MARILYN: Some of the changes, at first there was not telephone service in the rural county, like on, past Crane, except for the radiophones. There were several ranches that had radiophones, and the vet had a radiophone in his rig in case he was needed.

Then Pacific Northwest Bell installed phone service poles and everything for service clear down to the Nevada border. That was, they were called North Harney and South Harney Phone Service.

BETTE: Now how was information handled?

MARILYN: There was a number to call for local information. The number was 131, and there was no charge on that.

BETTE: Were there any other people involved with providing the phone service?

MARILYN: Yes, the other people involved, Louie Griggs was wire chief in the central office. Bill Runnels worked on the radiophones, and the microwave problems. We had equipment in buildings in Juntura, Harper, Seneca, John Day, and Fall Mountain. There was also Thad Geer, Brick

Callaway, Paul Hopper, Kip Atkins, Glen Marsh, Burt Roswell, Elden Meeder, Ed Hellbusch, Gary Hebener, Bill Tiller, Mike Simpson, and Mr. Klemet.

BETTE: Were there any other people just in the office that were needed?

MARILYN: Yes, the office crew would be Loraine Kincaid, Lois Clemens, Royaline Oltman, Joyce Roswell, Juanita Gaines.

BETTE: And Lily Marie Eberly, did she work there too?

DIXIE: Yes, she did.

BETTE: And did you mention the managers?

MARILYN: Yes.

BETTE: Okay, good. I lost my place.

MARILYN: Okay, I will mention them now.

BETTE: All right.

MARILYN: Okay, the managers, Mr. Dodson, Bill Garner, Don Klinge, Mr. Jackson, Kip Atkins.

BETTE: Okay, thank you. Was it always called Oregon-Washington Telephone Company?

MARILYN: No, after it was called Oregon-Washington then it was United Telephone Company, then United Telecommunications, and then Sprint. The local office now is called Centry-Tel.

BETTE: You were a busy group. Was there any time for community involvement?

MARILYN: Yes, every year we had a float in the Harney County Fair Parade, and we won several ribbons, including one purple ribbon. We had birthday parties, baby showers, Christmas, and Thanksgiving potluck at the office, and one year we had a picnic at Idlewild.

BETTE: So you had time for fun too then. Well, thank you very much for an interesting and informative history of the telephone operators.

(The End)

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