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Farewell to the Holbrook Cord Boards

Good-by, Central, Good-by

Editor's note: Betty McDermott, a former telephone operator, spent months researching the history of the phone system in this area. Though new computerized systems signaled progress in communication, something was lost when the one-to-one contact with operators ended. "it's like a death in the family," McDermott said. As operators performed their craft, they brought a sense of caring to communication that computers can't match. "It was more personalized," she said. In addition to helping people keep in touch, operators sometimes searched by phone for stray children and husband, she said. "An operator was truly a babysitter." McDermott tells the story of the phone company and its operators in the following article.

At midnight, Sept. 8, 1983, Contel of the West phased out the cord boards at Holbrook that had been serving an 8,000 mile area of Northeastern Arizona for generations.

With the advent of new state-of-the-art automated service originating from the company's new \$5 million toll center facility in Show Low, operator service as it was known in Holbrook quietly went down in history. This left only one Arizona toll center (operated in Window Rock by Navajo Communications Company) still using the cord board.

Highly automated toll centers are a result of progress in computer world. They are necessary to fill the ever increasing communications needs of Arizona's telephone users, who seem to grow in volume and sophistication each day. Yet the demise of the cord board is also a little sad for the countless operators who worked so many hours at the cord boards ticketing and timing call on a one-to-one connection with their customers, giving courteous and rapid service to the best of their abilities.

Owners of the old systems have many memories of hard work that went into the development of telephone service in Northeastern Arizona.

At the time of communications' beginning in Northeastern Arizona, there were three telegraph offices: The Western Union, J. E. Desosin, operator; Postal Telegraph Company, William Barnes Woods, manager; and the U. S. Military line, J. H. Young operator. The town of Holbrook, soon to be the county seat of Navajo County, was an excellent location for telegraph service because it was the hub of activity for shipping and operations, as well as a central point for travelers.

The first known pioneering of a telephone system for the area was attributed to William (Billy) Barnes Woods. Born in Chattanooga, Tenn., in 1866, Woods received his public school training in Dayton, Ohio, St. Louis and Quincy, Ill. In 1895, he came to Arizona to live with an uncle, Adam Horner, one of Arizona's pioneers. In 1897 he began to work for the Santa Fe Railroad

where he learned the art of telegraphy. He became the first manager of the Postal Telegraph Company, then in competition with Western Union in Holbrook.

Woods was one of the most influential figures in the growth and development of Holbrook. He was identified with so many phases of community life he is generally recognized as one of the community's foremost citizens.

In 1896, he was appointed Clerk of the Court for the Fourth Judicial District of the Arizona Territory, serving in that capacity until Arizona became a state in 1912. After statehood, he was elected the first Clerk of the Superior Court of Navajo County.

In 1898, Woods had charge of the Military Telegraph Line for government civil service, until the government left Fort Apache in Whiteriver. He was so fascinated with the field of communications he continuously worked for better service. In so doing he became instrumental in beginning Holbrook's first telephone service in his own home with a small panel board. Due to community growth, he soon moved his panel board to the back room of The Toggery, a men's clothing store. In his new location he put in two switch boards, his telegraph set and his desk for various accounting jobs.

In 1900, Woods married Mary E. Cook from Albuquerque, and they worked together in the community. Mary Cook Woods was the first telephone operator in the area. She maintained the switchboard in the Woods' home in the beginning. This switchboard, with a "drop" system, cranks and cords was the first switchboard in use in Northeastern Arizona.

Allie Cross Harvey, who still resides in Holbrook, worked for the Woods. She learned the telephone craft at a very early age and always enjoyed her work. At times, she said, she would be very busy. Codes "blue" and "red" were used in emergencies and a few phones in the community were in use.

She remembers the cold December day The Toggery Shop burned to the ground, destroying her switchboard and the telegraph machine. Having no fire department of call, local businessmen formed a bucket brigade. Pipes were frozen everywhere, increasing the odds against the bucket brigade fireman, and despite their efforts in earnest, all was soon lost.

Harvey remembers Woods was very ingenious. Not a man to let a fire stop him, he took two phones and moved what was left to a room in his home. Soon he ordered two Kellogg switchboards, making do for service temporarily until the new Kellogg equipment arrived by train three months later.

Later on, the Woods home burned and another telephone system was gone for a time. Through hard times, however, service did survive in one way or another.

The Woods had three sons: Bill who later worked on the AT&T repeater station built in 1930 in Holbrook; Ernie, who lives in Denver, and Roy, who lives in Scottsdale. Roy, who became the first linemen in the area, seemed to inherit his parents' interest in the telephone business.

In 1914, Woods and Lloyd C. Henning, another pioneer businessman in the area, organized the Navajo Apache Telephone System Company.

Henning was born in 1865 in Illinois, where he became a printer by trade and after settling in Winslow, purchased the Winslow Mail newspaper, which he operated with the Holbrook Argus. Later, Henning moved to Holbrook and sold his newspapers to accept the position of manager of the Navajo Apache Bank, now known as the Great Western Bank in Holbrook. Henning was known for his farsightedness as a financier and proved to be an excellent bank manager.

The combination of Woods and Henning was unique because they had so much in common. They were both determined to succeed in their endeavors. They both had the same educational background and came to Arizona from the same area. Henning and Woods were Masons and found themselves affiliated with most all local lodges and community interest groups. They proved to be good business people and generally had the same political interests..

In September 1930 the Navajo-Apache Telephone System overhauled its lines and began work on the completion of a standard copper circuit between Holbrook and Snowflake. The circuit was expected to be working by election time that year, Woods and Henning intended to standardize all their toll lines with copper wire as soon as possible in connection with their connection with Mountain Bell, then Mountain States Telephone, at Navajo-Apache Telephone System's Holbrook exchange. This would enable the inland towns of Navajo and Apache counties to communicate with the same class of service, as was already possible through Mountain States Telephone, the Bell affiliate.

In 1931, Woods sold his interest to Henning, and from then on Henning owned and operated the telephone system in the area. During the Henning ownership switchboard (or positions) were installed up country to further better service. Those old drop "battery run" boards were worked by operators who were public minded and were dedicated. Hours were 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. and after hours switchboards opened again for any emergency.

Some workers operated from a home or a small store. The oath of secrecy was just accepted and was, as it is today, always discussed before anyone was hired. Though some people felt the operator "listened in" or monitored conversations, it was not true, because of the earnest and sincere efforts of the operators.

Operators kept communication open between communities, assisted anxious mothers looking for children or for husbands late from work, helped in illness emergencies or accidents and gave time to the lonely and elderly. In those days there was a certain security in being able to call "central" or operator" and receive a caring voice to help.

At this time, operators were stationed at various neighboring towns, manning small positions and putting calls through to the main switchboard or position at Holbrook. These “up country” operators,” many of whom have died, included in Springerville, Lovelle King and Elda Brown and three sisters – Ethel Brown Burke, Melba Brown Butler and Deanna Brown Penson.

In Eager, a most remarkable legally blind operator, Sherman Lumpkin and his wife, Lula, worked out of a small store on Main Street. Lumpkin was known for his “time of day accuracy”, as the other operators checked with him. Lumpkin was always pleasant, and although he had been blinded as a young man in a dynamite accident, he had learned to be self-reliant and able to do many things.

Other operators included Jewell Cowley in St. Johns and Mata Peterson, who worked in her own home in Pinedale. Show Low had a great and caring pioneer in Jennie Stock, who worked steadily until the telephone company went into the dial system.

McNary was operated out of Southwest Forest Industries and the three sisters from Springerville worked on that switchboard until its closing. Emmett Pipkins kept Whiteriver going and at that time also maintained the 40 miles of frail lines that came through the mountains and countryside.

Agnes Clark is one of the operators who began in the old Henning building and is still a faithful and “one of the best” on the new TASS system in the Show Low Division office. She has the credit and honor of having worked with the old and new equipment.

Beulah Jordon of Holbrook began working for Henning in 1947 in a building that is still standing and is known as the Henning Building. She worked as an operator at a 13 switch cord board, made of soft wood. It utilized the “drop” system and was manufactured by the Kellogg Company. The work atmosphere was dark and somewhat scary, especially for those who worked at night, but Henning’s operators were dedicated to service and not readily upset by adverse working conditions. There were major problems when it rained, and oftentimes lightening would “spark” the switchboard so an operator had to be prepared for a shock or two.

Telephone service at that time was very personal, and there was a feeling the operators genuinely had some part in meeting the necessities of a community, which had only one line link with other towns and long distances areas. Jordon remembers mice running across the switchboard, prank calls, needy calls and emergency calls. She is proud that many times she felt she could truly help people.

All long distance calls were put through on one toll line to the Mountain State Telephone operator in Winslow, who handled the long distance call, ticketed the call and timed it. Switchboards interconnecting with Holbrook were located in Springerville, Show Low, St. Johns, Lakeside, Pinetop and Eagar. Whiteriver had only one telephone and McNary had a telephone operator who worked for Southwest Forest Industries as well. Service was maintained in this manner for several years.

Emma O'Connell of Holbrook remembers coming to work for Henning. She wanted to be a secretary. Henning let her do secretarial work while working at the switchboard all night. During the night shift, she made out the bills for the telephone customers and kept Henning's books for him. She retired a few years ago when the company was known as Western States Telephone.

Greg Berrera of Concho still has the old metal phone he used while working for Henning. He took telephone calls and messages.. His specialty was telegraph messages, which were sent first to Holbrook, and then on their way to distant locations.

Recently a diligent search was made for one of the old switchboards that Henning used, but none could be found. The Show Low office of Contel Telephone Company has on display a switchboard that is a duplicate of the switchboards used during the Henning era, but this particular switchboard is not from Holbrook.

On May 31, 1957, the Navajo-Apache Telephone System ended more than half a century of service. On that date the company was sold to Carl Jennings and his son, Ed Jennings, who re-named the company Western States Telephone.. Later the company was acquired by Continental Telephone Company, now Contel.

The Holbrook Tribune stated that Henning, feeling progress was too much for the telephone company to handle as it was, sold the company to the Jennings so the company would be able to provide better service to its subscribers. The announcement of sale also stated the company would provide dial service to its customers as soon as possible. Few personnel changes were made at the time of the sale.

On Aug. 2, 1957 new switchboards replaced those in service in Springerville and Show Low. The Eagar office was put on a 24 hours basis. Stromberg-Carlson manufacturers installed new switchboards and equipment, which would speed up service, pending the completion of dial equipment at a later date. In 1957, Carl and Ed Jennings stated 1,793 telephones were in service in the vast Western States Telephone service area serving large portions of Navajo and Apache counties.

Carl Jennings was born in West Virginia and reared in Oklahoma. He bought his first telephone exchange at the age of 21 in Owarso, Okla. He was active in the telephone business in the Southwest until his retirement in 1968 when he sold Western States Telephone Company, Inc to Continental Telephone Corporation. Western States has services area in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona and had grown to more than 11,000 customers in 1968. Carl Jennings's background was similar to that of Woods and Henning's in that he was a shrewd businessman and a Mason.

Edward Jennings, now living in the Phoenix area, is still fascinated by the telephone business, though retired; He is credited with much of the growth of the industry in Northeastern Arizona because he became general manager of the Rocky Mountain Region of Continental Telephone

and served as a ranking executive in several other independent telephone firms. Jennings's managed exchanges in Arizona, West Texas, New Mexico, Utah and Montana.

Jennings was born in El Paso, Texas, and learned about line repeaters and "crosstalk" as soon as he was in school because his father was in the telephone business. He worked with his father from the ground up, which gave him a background in the workings of the telephone industry.

He came to Holbrook in 1957, where he became vice president and general manager of Western States Telephone Company. He supervised 14 dial exchanges with many dedicated employees in plant, commercial, accounting, engineering and traffic. Like the other owners of telephone companies servicing the area, Jennings was very active in civic work of the community during his residence in Holbrook. In 1966, he was named Boss of the Year.

New state-of-the-art switching equipment is now in place in White Mountain area of Northeastern Arizona. Operators in Show Low now use TASS (Traffic Assistance Service System) computerized equipment which is highly automated and enables one operator to handle many more calls than the cord board operator could handle in the same period of time.

The cord board in this area of Northeastern Arizona has justly earned its honored place in history, as have the countless operators who helped to activate these boards in bringing telephone service to this 8,000 square mile area. Though gone, the cord board is remembered fondly and with love by those operators who have used its cords to link telephone users with loved ones far and near, here in Arizona and around the world.

In August, 1983, Betty Decker McDermott retired from a career as a telephone operator that spanned many years and several telephone companies. She first worked in 1962 for Western States Telephone, a predecessor of the current Contel of the West, and has seen telephone service in Northeastern Arizona grow and develop since that time. Allen P. Rothlisberg, who assisted McDermott in the editing of this article, is director of Learning Resources for Northland Pioneer College in Holbrook. He began working as a telephone operator for Continental Telephone part-time in 1980. His last date of service was the evening of Sept. 7, 1983, shortly before the cord board passed into history in this area at midnight Sept. 8 1983.

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It is through assistance like this that we can publish the History of the Telephone in Arizona.

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