

The Telephone Story  
07/13/22  
by Teri Bruno

One of my favorite parts of my job at the Cornwall brothers Store Museum is meeting the people who come in. We have visitors from near and far and of all ages. This week a group of high school aged boys rode their bicycles to the museum and toured all 3 floors. They got a kick out of the race boat downstairs and seemed to enjoy their visit. I could hear their conversations imagining how some things worked, or what they might have been for. One of their conversations was about the telephone system we have, it's the old system that requires an operator to connect the calls. What fun it was listening to their speculation about how it worked.

A week or two ago a man visited, he was out running errands and came in with the same comment I hear the most "I've never been in here before!". He toured all three floors and stopped on his way out to tell me that he recognized the telephone system we have on display. He is now retired but told me the second year he was working for the phone company; he removed that system from the Thousand Islands Country Club! He talked about how it connected to the golf course, the hotel rooms, and the surrounding buildings and what a task it was to take it out. He said the best part was the view of the river.

I have tried to explain how that telephone system works to a 9-year-old. He thought I was crazy! Words like party-line, telephone operator, and 2-digit phone numbers were foreign to him. Imagine picking up your telephone and being greeted by a human voice asking who you would like to speak with! The thought of the phone being tethered to the wall was inconceivable. I remember the day we got an extra long cord for our home phone when I was a teenager. I could go into another room and talk on the phone! What a luxury when you have a house full of people. We had the standard rotary phone attached to the wall. In the museum we have the old black desktop rotary phone and a princess style phone on display with the phone system. None of the young people can figure out how to use the rotary dial.

Back in the days of that phone system, the phone numbers were only a few digits. I have some advertising from the Corner Pharmacy, their number was 33. As more people got phones into their homes, the number expanded to 4. My friend was 2167, I must have dialed it thousands of times to still remember it today. Gradually the 482 was required for Alexandria Bay telephones, 482-2167. You may notice that the oldest businesses in town have local numbers that are 428-99xx, that must have been the business prefix. In those days, there still were operators, but they came on when you were making a long-distance call. Once they saw a long distance, or out of area call, they cut in and asked what number you were calling from. This was for correct billing. Now we need to dial the full 10 numbers for a phone call and the rest is automated for us. Progress.

I recognize some of the faces on the photo we have of some telephone operators. What tales they must have had to tell! Telephone operators are now a thing of the past, another job replaced by technology. These are the kinds of things that we show at the museum. Stop in some time and see what might puzzle you or pique your curiosity.