

Communication Central

In 1901, Alexander Graham Bell had already sold most of his personal stock in Bell Telephone Company, invented and sold the patent for the graphophone and had moved on to opening the Volta Laboratory. However, 1901 is memorable in Weston's history for the start of the Weston Telephone System established by local businessman Julius Rumpel. The business was proposed to the city council and was granted a twenty year franchise in January. Poles and lines were installed, and equipment up and running by April. In May, the independent Weston Company arranged to be connected to the "Independent line" in Leavenworth. This connection, completed by August of that year, increased subscriber's ability to make direct calls to over a dozen towns in the area rather than having to drive to the central office of the phone company located on the second floor of 707 Thomas Street, currently R.J.'s Bar (Larsen 2). The addition of Weston Telephone provided local job opportunities, created a new social network, and forever changed communication and information transfer capabilities and speed.

It is a misconception that women were not a part of the workforce prior to the "Rosie the Riveter" campaigns of World War II (Shmoop). At the turn of the 20th century, the number of women who were employed in the United States was about 20% overall, as compared to approximately 60% in 2000 (Freeby50.com "Historical Look at Women's Participation Rates in the Labor Force"). While men were employed to run the business and to install and maintain the lines and equipment; the telephone companies at that time almost exclusively employed women to operate the switchboards. Carolyn Bless Larsen states that these women were called "Hello Girls" because they were to answer calls with "Hello, may I help you?"; the title "Operator" came later (3).

A transcript of *The American Experience* "The Telephone" states that initially boys were employed to run the switchboards, but they gained a "reputation for being rude and abusive" (McCullough). Women were found to be better able to remain calm and polite, to follow rules and to be faster than the men they replaced. Larsen notes that the local "Hello Girls" were chosen for their soothing voices, their ability not to panic in an emergency and their sense of humor" (3). Of course, women could also be paid less and were less likely to leave if they found the job not to their liking since there were few job options available to women at the time.

The telephone facilitated and expedited many forms of communication. Emergency services became more accessible. Fire and police departments could be contacted more quickly which allowed them to respond more quickly. It was easier to stay in contact with friends and family, particularly for those who were unable to write. Larsen states that the Hello Girls would even check in on the sick and shut-ins as well as being able to track down the local physician (3).

The party line created a different kind of social networking. While people in town had private lines, subscribers outside town were put on party lines. The party line provided the same convenience and accessibility as the private line; however, it had some drawbacks. The primary drawback was the lack of privacy of the party line. Each home on the party line had its own distinct pattern of short and long rings, indicating for which residence the call was intended. Although there was nothing that stopped nosy neighbors from listening in on someone else's call. So the telephone added to the local entertainment as well. The "People's Telephone Company of Detroit tripled its business by taking advantage of the rural subscriber's apparent eagerness to eavesdrop. They offered party lines shared by as many as twenty homes. It was an enormous success, subscribers delighted in eavesdropping and even got together to listen to banjo-playing on the line" (McCullough). Obviously, private lines lost privacy when calling

those on the party lines, and operators also had the ability to listen in, so it was wise to never discuss any secrets over the phone lines.

The telephone completely altered life at the time it was introduced. It facilitated emergency services, provided additional jobs for operators and linemen, was a form of entertainment and social networking, and offered a more immediate connection with the rest of the world. The year Bell's invention became a convenient service in Weston was indeed a memorable one.

Works Cited

McCullough, David, perf. "The Telephone." *American Experience*. PBS: Radio.

<<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/telephone/filmmore/transcript/index.html>>.

Freeby50.com "Historical Look at Women's Participation Rates in the Labor Force".

Larsen, C. *Weston and the Hello Girls*. Weston, MO: Print.

Shmoop "Gender in World War II: Home Front".