

# Progress of sorts: Pacific Telephone closes switchboard

In 1883, Watsonville had one telephone operator. Next week, nearly 94 years later, it will have none.

The 24 telephone operators on duty in Watsonville today will finish up their shifts Friday, and that will be it. The switchboard will be closed.

Fred Witmer, Pacific Telephone manager here, said operator calls henceforth will go through the Santa Cruz switchboard. Of the local operators, 15 will be transferred to the Santa Cruz office, five to Salinas and one to Monterey. The remaining three have left the company.

The move has come as the result of speedier and less expensive Direct Distance Dialing which requires fewer long distance operators.

Since the first telephone came to town in 1883, the "old way" has made sacrifices to progress. The handcrank and magneto phone was phased out in the downtown area in the early 1900s, and "Hello, Central" operators went the same way a half century later with the appearance of dial phones.

Witmer cited two other aspects of the move:

—It will provide additional space for electronic equipment at the company offices on Rodriguez St.

—Consolidating remaining operators in fewer offices provides economies that come with greater flexibility of work schedules.

There are still some 80 telephone employees in town at four locations: the two equipment buildings at 340 Rodriguez St., construction and phone installation garage at 555 Chappel St., and the public business office at 25 East Beach St.

Watsonville's first telephone came to town back in 1883 — just seven years after the

phone was invented and 32 years after the town was founded in 1852.

(Watsonville was incorporated 16 years later — in 1868.)

"Nora Fouts may have become the sole operator because she had some connections down at the phone company," said Witmer. "That's because her dad, A. G. Fouts, brought that first phone system to town."

Fouts was proprietor of the Hoffman House at 245 Main St., which is now the site of Ford's Department Store storage and repair facility. Nora became the first chief operator and was later married to Fred Krough.

"Her dad was a progressive thinker and provided his hotel with the most up-to-date message service imaginable," Witmer said. Fouts hooked up a line to the nearby San Francisco-Santa Cruz long distance line, which was itself one of the first such lines in the west of 1883.

Beyond serving his guests, Fouts served the community. Whenever a call came for one of his neighbors, he or a clerk would hail a passing horseman who would deliver the message while passing the appropriate home or farm.

After there were enough customers for an exchange, the first switchboard was set up in a corner of the Hoffman House and operated by Nora — smack dab between the first two phone booths in town.

First subscribers were R. P. Quinn, real estate broker; J. Horgan & Co., general merchandise; Lewis & Co.; and Charles Ford, Ford and Sanborn Co., general merchandise.

The number of subscribers shot up from six in 1893 to 122 by 1899. By 1940 there were about 4,000 phones in town, and today there

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This photo of Watsonville's first telephone office was taken in 1893 in the lobby of the Lewis House (later to be called the Old Hoffman House), 245 Main St. It shows the telephone switchboard and booths in the right background. Nora Fouts, first operator, occupies her "office" and exchange from the corner cranny. This exchange had three lines.

are nearly 31,000 Watsonville telephones.

By 1928, Witmer said, there were over 2,500 phones and a need for more equipment space which resulted in a move to the present location on Rodriguez St. In 1947, a three-story building was constructed next door to house all company facilities and personnel.

A fourth floor was added in 1956 to house more equipment, and by the late 1960s there were two other expansions: the business office moved to 25 East Beach St., and construction and installation crews began to work out of the Chappel St. garage.

Reflecting on the changes in local

telephone technology and the expansion of facilities over the years, Witmer noted that the ratio of operators to customers has changed over a hundredfold since Nora Fouts' day.

She took care of six customers. Her one-to-six relationship changed to a one-to-782 relationship between the 23 operators who just left and the approximately 18,000 customers they served.

Witmer cited these statistics as a major reason phone rates are lower now than when the telephone was introduced here, and very little higher than the rates of the Depression years.

## New service catching on

Pacific Telephone's new optional service, which allows limited toll free calls to Santa Cruz for a modest additional monthly charge, is proving attractive to subscribers.

Nearly 300 customers have signed up for the new service which went into effect Tuesday, local Pacific manager Fred Witmer said.

The service is available to single-party phone subscribers only. That's because the automatic equipment isn't set up to give the service on multi-party lines.

Party lines, incidentally, still are in

demand, Witmer said, especially for subscribers who don't use the telephone very much, since it's cheaper.

About one out of four customers in the Watsonville area share their phone line with one, three, five or seven other people.

People on two-party lines are able to dial long distance direct — the phone company's equipment can tell which phone was used for the call; on all other party lines, the operator intercepts the call to identify the phone being used, so that the bill goes to the proper address.

REFERENCE



Page from 1896 directory; no private individuals had phones