Keeping in Touch

Through the Mail, the Telephone, and the Telegraph

Through most of the forties, postman Ray Brewer used a horse-drawn mail wagon to deliver mail on the outskirts of Lincoln, where the stops were few and far between. The horse, Bill, knew the route, and he was in the habit of stopping to eat grass while Ray covered the Melrose addition on foot. When a substitute was driving, Bill would stop at his usual spot and refuse to go on, which is why "nobody particularly liked to drive that darn thing," says retired Superintendent of Mails Raymond Merry.

But it was substitute mail carrier Ray McChesney who had the awful experience of watching the horse do the splits on ice, ending up "spraddled out, all four legs going in different directions," according to former Assistant Postmaster Les Schmidt. Ray hated to see the horse that way, but he wasn't a farm boy, says Les, and the post office couldn't send help. So Ray had to take some of the mail and go on, leaving the horse to get up by himself.

These days, nary a horse is in sight, as most city mail carriers that don't have foot routes buzz around town in little red-white-and-blue vans, delivering mail that has arrived from Springfield pre-sorted in the same order as their routes. In the post office, employee Don Wolpert weighs a package on a scale that also figures the postage. If it goes as certified mail, he can later go to the Internet to see whether it has reached its destination. The post office sells phone cards that make it easier for kids to call home and ask for money, which their parents can send by Western Union while shopping for groceries at Kroger's. Keeping in touch has never been easier.

Delivering the Lincoln mail by horse power. The horse and cart were privately owned. Usually, when the roads were too slippery, Raymond Merry would use a car. Lincoln Evening Courier, *July 25, 1953.*

"You've Got Mail!" The Post Office

When a "side of bacon" arrived at the Lincoln post office in the fifties and sixties, it didn't get delivered to Alexander's grocery store.

What postmen called a side of bacon was a box wrapped in brown paper, filled with stacks of cash—sometimes as much as a million dollars, to judge from the postage. That meant a phone call to First National Bank and an immediate delivery.

With that kind of mail, it's no wonder the post office contained secret passages where postal inspectors could look down at the workers to make sure nothing illegal was going on.

Publisher's Notes

Ours is the age of information and communication, but nobody claims this is progress. When was the last time you wished you could spend more time on the telephone?

When I was a boy in Kansas, our telephone number was 249. We moved to Illinois in 1955 and found our new state to be telephonically primitive—our new telephone number was "2 longs on 65," and we shared the line with six other families. We rang Central, whom we knew by name, and asked her to look out her window on the second floor of Ike Hirst's grocery store to see if our dad was walking down the street. If we cranked the phone several times before Central responded, we knew she had stepped away from the switchboard for a smoke break.

Telephones have changed mostly in that there are a lot more of them. Telephone etiquette has changed more dramatically than telephones—pre-teen girls now call pre-teen boys, making obsolete as a rite of passage a teenage boy's first nervous call to ask a girl for a date.

Stamps have gone from 4 cents to 34 cents in my memory, but otherwise a letter still looks pretty much like a letter. I receive about 20 pieces of mail a day—10 at work and 10 at home—and I throw away 15 of them unopened. I receive about 30 e-mail messages a day and delete 15 of them unread. Junk mail has become junk e-mail. Handwriting has become a lost art.

Farmers get their mail delivered to their houses, but small town folks make a daily trek to the post office. I guess that hasn't changed. Residents of big towns, like Lincoln, are as fortunate as farmers: their mail is also delivered to their doors. My 92-year-old aunt walked a half mile to the post office every day to get the mail, which is probably why she lived to be 92. Do mail carriers constitute a disproportionate share of centenarians?

If letters still look pretty much like letters, and junk e-mail a lot like junk mail, telegrams have simply vanished. My children's generation knows them only from old movies. Actually, my generation knows them mostly from old movies and from sad stories our parents told us. We associate telegrams with tragic news in World War II and with funny quips in *Reader's Digest*.

When the brutish prison guard in *Cool Hand Luke* said, "What we have here is a failure to communicate," we chuckled at the satire. Standard psychobabble of the era laid the blame for every disagreement on a problem of communication. The cynic's retort was: "What part of 'no' don't you understand?"

With all the cell phones and e-mail, we should no longer have a failure to communicate. But I'm not ready to call it progress—except for the digital images of my grandkids that my daughter e-mails me. They're pretty cool. **SR**

Sometimes their spying wasn't so subtle. Former mailman Trelby Ball remembers that one inspector smoked cigars; the smoke drifting down from above would give him away.

At any rate, "If you're doing your job, you have nothing to worry about," says Trelby.

For most of its history, Lincoln mail traveled by train. In the "railway post office," a letter could be put on at Lincoln and be worked (processed) before it arrived at the next town. In the forties and fifties, John Moore brought the incoming mail from the depot to the post office in his Model A Ford truck.

As late as 1961, when former Postmaster Harold Camp began working at the post office, seven trains a day went through Lincoln, and postal workers either put mail on or took it off of every single one.

Years before, the mail had included baby chicks from Sieb's Hatchery—hundreds of boxes at a time! Two postal clerks would go to the hatchery to weigh and stamp them, hurrying to get them on the 5:00 p.m. train.

What with loading chicks from Sieb's (and plants from Gullett's greenhouse), it wasn't unusual to see the old conductor of the train looking at his watch and being "miffed" because the train was running an hour late, says Trelby.

The clerks at the post office didn't much enjoy the smelly boxes of dead undeliverable chicks that came back, either. They were almost as bad as the unsold cosmetics being returned to Lehn and Fink that got broken and covered everything else in the parcel post pouch with creams.

Although the practice had been abandoned by 1961, in earlier times, the fast train didn't even stop. It just slowed down enough for the conductor to throw a mail pouch out the door, while a hook from the train snagged the catcher pouch full of letter mail that hung from a big pole.

Occasionally, the hook would miss the pouch, or the train would sway and its suction would pull the pouch under the wheels—causing it to rip open, bundles of letters to be torn open, and mail to fly "as far as Lawndale," says Raymond Merry. Someone—usually the postmaster—would have to walk along the tracks and pick up what could be salvaged.

Towns without mail train service got their mail from the interurban and later the highway post office and star routes. The highway post office consisted of buses that ran between Chicago and St. Louis, three men working the mail while leaning against a ring so they didn't lose their balance.

Delivery on star routes was done twice a day by people like Henry Buchholz, who had a contract to take the mail from Lincoln to Clinton, stopping at Beason and other little towns on his way.
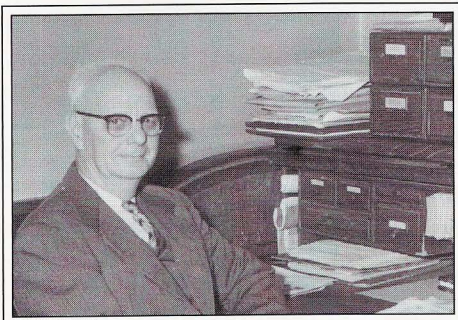
John Cronin, former assistant postmaster and long-time employee, at the time of his retirement. Courtesy Larry Shroyer Photographic Collection/Lincoln Public Library District.

In the sixties and seventies, Ed Craig of Atlanta delivered mail to Middletown, New Holland, Easton, Mason City, San Jose, and Havana.

Then there was all the local mail. In the fifties, a lot of letters were mailed in letterboxes on little posts: one on each corner of the square and at least one on every carrier's route. The uptown boxes were emptied each evening at 5:00 p.m.

The Lincoln post office was busy 24 hours a day, seven days a week for years. All day, clerks took turns sorting the mail, managing to deal with almost all incoming and outgoing mail every day. Before ZIP codes, the sorting case for outgoing mail had 168 divisions, beginning with states and larger cities. Air mail was sorted separately and sent to airports at Springfield, St. Louis, or Chicago.

Pittsburgh Plate, Lehn and Fink, Cutler-Hammer, and the State School all got a lot of mail, says Harold Camp.

D-Liver D-Letter— D-Sooner, D-Better!

Clerks sorted incoming mail to the individual routes, and each carrier had a sorting case for his route, set up by streets and addresses.

Wilbur Wilmert had a rural route from 1970 to 1980. He remembers that every route had a book listing everyone on that route, including family members by name. If someone moved, Wilbur would enter their new address in his book; the next carrier put the family in his.

If questions came up while the mail was being sorted, people would "holler back and forth—someone would call out a name and someone else would yell back, 'yeah, I got him!'" remembers Wilbur.

If a letter was undeliverable, it went to the dead letter office in Chicago or St. Louis, where someone would open it and try to find a clue inside for where to send it.

Today, all mail—even local mail—goes by truck to Springfield, where one machine reads the zip code and the address and puts a bar code on it. Another reads the bar code and sorts the letter. Even so, Don Wolpert says, there are still letters the machine can't read which have to be sorted (or re-sorted) by hand.

After the carriers sorted their mail, whoever was driving the parcel post truck (Wilbur Wilmert from 1949 to 1970) would deliver each carrier's mail to a green relay box, where the carrier picked up one relay of mail when he finished delivering another.

At one time, the uptown route (around the square) had three deliveries a day; special deliveries were made thrice daily and on Sundays.

At Christmas, the parcel post would be stacked almost to the ceiling, says former Superintendent of Mails Charlie Anderson, with "package after package after package" for people at the State School. (Someone from the institution picked them up.)

Postmen who whistled, like Emil Moos and Trelby Ball; father-son teams like Bob and Pat Ryan, John and Leonard Cronin, both Keith Baughmans (Sr. and Jr.), Paul and Mark Yarcho, and Emil and Bill Moos; janitors Ray Roberts and Ralph Davis, who "took care of everyone"—"there's a story about every man and his career with the post office," reminisces Charlie.

Former Lincoln postmasters include Robert Davis, Floyd Durst, Harold Camp, and Ron Baize. In 1971, Congress replaced the Post Office Department with the U. S. Postal Service, which became self-supporting in 1983. ∎
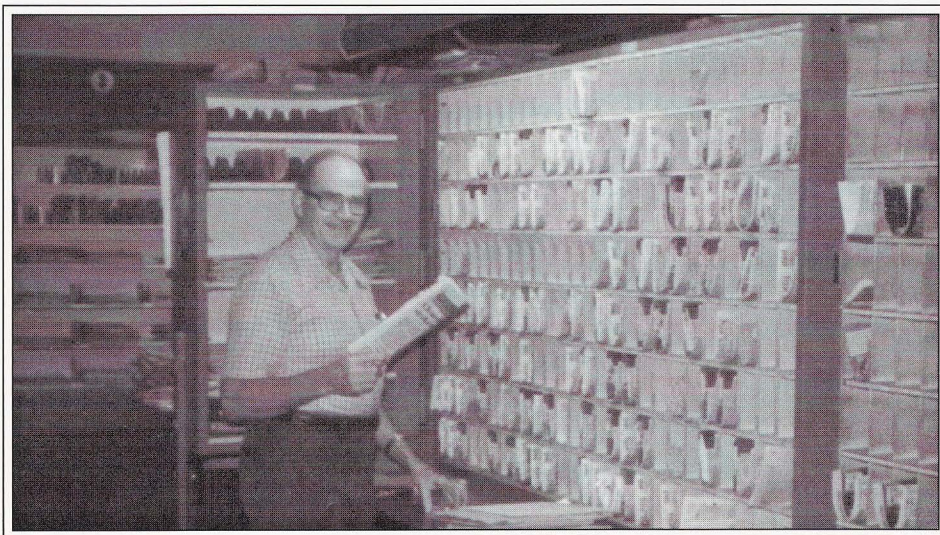
Wilbur Wilmert sorts the mail for his rural route in 1980. Courtesy W. Wilmert.

Fleet Feet—Carrier Stories

Les Schmidt

Les Schmidt worked at the Lincoln post office from 1936 until 1968. For eight years, he was a substitute clerk, but he also carried mail whenever he was needed and did "everything but fire up the furnace," he says.

Most of the carriers were older and ready for retirement before World War II began, and there was a shortage of young men during the war. So older men like Charlie Tiffany, who "turned out to be a good worker," filled in. Helen Redus "was a real asset," working as a part-time clerk and selling war bonds.

Riding a bicycle out to the State School with special delivery letters, emptying the mailboxes downtown and then sorting the mail all night, carrying a route: Les spent almost whole weekends working during the war. He learned to go home and rest between jobs, and "we lived through all of it anyway; they didn't shoot at us," he says.

Sometimes a girl with "a kid or two" hadn't heard from her husband for some time and was waiting to learn whether he was dead or alive. If Les ran across a letter from him while sorting the mail, he would lay it aside to take to her, whether it was special delivery or not.

"It was *verboten*," says Les, "but I did it anyway . . . we knew what was the right thing to do."

Les succeeded Assistant Postmaster John Cronin, who retired at the age of 70, after teaching his successor "all he could think of that I would need."

Les remembers: opening the doors on Sunday morning so people could check their boxes, and putting the flag on the roof . . . working the window and making friends with regulars like Carl Allee (who mailed 10 to 15 baskets to florists at a time) . . . doing payrolls and making out war bonds.

Raymond Merry

Raymond Merry started with the post office as a substitute in 1936, during the Depression, making 65 cents an hour as a clerk or carrier. Jobs were scarce.

"If you could get a job on a farm making 50 cents a day, you were lucky," says Raymond. Furthermore, "there weren't such things as pensions," but the post office paid $100 a month after 30 years.

Substitutes had no regular hours: they might work half an hour or ten hours. So when Congress passed a law that they had to be allowed to work at least two hours, "that was great," Raymond remembers.

After 11 years as a substitute, sometimes going in several times during one day, Raymond was made a regular carrier, with his own route and regular hours, "which was like going to heaven."

"You get your mail all worked up, and you put it in the bag, and away you go," he says. "You're out on your own. And when you're done, you're done."

Raymond's route was Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Streets, from Union to State, and he delivered the mail twice a day. He remembers delivering lots of magazines, among them, *The Delineator*, *American Magazine*, *Colliers*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. More people on the west side of town took the *Chicago Tribune* than any other side of town, he says.

Raymond became a clerk after he traded jobs with Charlie Kavanagh, who wanted to work outdoors. When
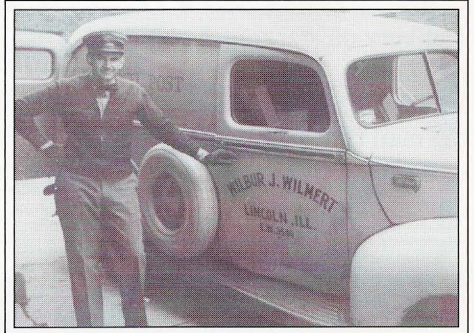
Wilbur Wilmert with his own parcel post truck in 1949. The post office didn't provide one until 1956. Courtesy Wilbur Wilmert.

Jack Primm retired, Raymond took his place as superintendent of mails, making out the work schedules, settling disputes, and dealing with surprise visits from postal inspectors.

Roy McKnight was a rural carrier. A lot of mornings, Raymond says, he'd be standing by the door and wouldn't leave. When Raymond asked him why, he said, "I like to get to my route the same time every day. There's a lady that lives clear up the lane from her box, and I don't like to get there so she has to stand out."

Raymond retired in 1969.

Wilbur Wilmert

Wilbur Wilmert's first job was carrying mail on a foot route during Christmas of 1939. He became a regular substitute in 1940 and was drafted into the service in 1943, serving for three years.

In 1947, he took over John Knochel's route, working Park Place, "an exclusive part of town," whose residents got a lot of mail—magazines and letters and "Christmas cards galore."

When Jack Primm became superintendent of mails in 1949, Wilbur took over his parcel post route. In those days, stores like Landauer's and

Sears got their merchandise in boxes that came by rail, and Lehn and Fink had enough return merchandise to almost require a special truck.

Wilbur began his day by delivering special delivery letters and transferring the mail to the relay boxes.

Then he would start on his parcel post route, making a lot of "short hops" between the post office—where he would fill up his panel truck—and downtown businesses. He also delivered all over town.

The post office put all the boxes together in sacks, and "if a delicate box and a big heavy box go in the same sack, something's going to give," Wilbur says. So a lot of packages were either damaged or open.

Perhaps that's one reason why UPS, which handled pieces individually, gradually took over the parcel post business, leaving the post office to phase out the route.

In 1970, Wilbur took over a rural route, driving 73 miles a day, six days a week, and putting 25,000 miles a year on his own car (he was paid mileage). Still, he thought the job was "the best one down there."

He liked the independence and being out in the open, traveling and enjoying the countryside: the farmers in the field, the colorful trees in the fall, and the flowers around the homes.

The driving could be challenging. The first winter, one of the roads was being rebuilt and was "all mud."

"I had fun on some days, getting through there," he laughs. One time he had to call Charlie Clark to pull him out of the ditch.

Between 1970 and 1980 (when he retired), Wilbur landed in the ditch "a time or two," once had his car torn up on Route 121, and delivered mail on a lot of snowy days.

The worst day was Good Friday, in April of 1978. Wilbur remembers rain, sleet, snow, and "sledding around that route"—having to stop in the middle of the road and walk to the mailbox so as not to slide into the ditch—and wearing out his chains.

Trelby Ball

Trelby Ball worked at the post office from 1946 until 1972, carrying all the routes as a substitute until he got one of his own. He still remembers sitting in a relay box, eating his lunch.

Those were "the good old days," remembers Trelby, when he carried a heavy leather mailbag. By 1962, carrier Dick Small had come up with the idea of using three-wheeled golf carts.

"I carried mail when it was 20 below zero, going out Palmer Avenue, bucking that north wind," he says. Wearing pajama bottoms under his wool pants, though, he says, "I can't say as I ever really was too cold for very long." On rainy days, Trelby wore a cape-type raincoat, but he got soaked from the knees on down. On a cold day, customers would invite him in for coffee.

"The trouble with that is, you got to find a place to get rid of it," he says. "Sometimes it's a long time between stops."

Trelby didn't have much trouble with dogs, with one notable exception: a big dog that was so fierce he had to beat if off with the buckle of his leather strap.

Harry Van Hook

Harry Van Hook was Mt. Pulaski postmaster from 1962 until 1986 and hints that running a small-town post office has its advantages. If a child addressed a letter to Grandma and Grandpa at Mt. Pulaski, postal clerks could usually figure out who they were from the postmark, even without a return address.

One time the post office was ordered to change all the house numbers in town. One lady, who'd had her number for years and years, "wasn't going to change it . . . so we didn't change it," he says. They knew where she lived.

Harry remembers: rural carrier Charles Anderson, who left a piece of gum for every kid on his route . . . the time a kid ordered an alligator through the mail and it got loose in the post office . . . the meeting between area postmasters and an official from Chicago during the dedication of the new post office in 1963, that led to the adoption of a five-day week for postmasters nationally. ■

Retired mailmen Trelby Ball, left, and Raymond Merry. The Courier, *March 26, 1997. Photo by Ann Klose.*

Phone Talk

When Jim Aldendifer was growing up, his telephone number at 226 Delavan Street in Lincoln was #2. His grandfather, Dr. James Collins, had been one of the founders of the Lincoln Mutual Telephone Company, which was incorporated in 1894. Dr. Collins was a dentist, and his phone number was #1.

Dr. Collins was also a founder of the Mt. Pulaski Telephone & Electric Company (1900), the Logan County Telephone Company (1901), and the Decatur Home Telephone Company.

But we're getting ahead of our story.

Lincoln and Mr. Pulaski first had telephone service in 1881. The Lincoln exchange, with at least 65 subscribers, was connected to a long distance line of the Central Telephone Company of Chicago. This arrangement was later called a toll loop.

When enough Mt. Pulaski residents had bought ten-cent tickets (good for five minutes' conversation each), a line of poles was built out Broadway Street and over to the Mount.

The day the circuit was completed, the inexperienced Mt. Pulaski operator couldn't get the system to work.

Postcard from 1910, showing a wall box phone with crank.

So a letter with instructions was mailed from Lincoln on the evening train, and about 9:00 that night, people in Lincoln and Mt. Pulaski could talk by phone at last.

In 1894, the Lincoln Mutual Telephone Company was incorporated, with 92 stockholders—almost all of the businessmen in town. One of its improvements was to bring telephone service to farmers.

In 1903, the Lincoln Mutual and Logan County telephone companies were succeeded by the Central Illinois Telephone and Telegraph Company—still a local affair.

In 1904, the company served almost 700 phones in Lincoln, with another 218 phones among the farmers.

Central Illinois Telephone acquired the New Holland and Elkhart exchanges, which operated separately until all three exchanges were consolidated into the Lincoln Telephone Company in 1919.

The Lincoln Telephone Company was bought by the Central Telephone Company in 1928, then sold to the Associated Telephone Utility Company in 1929. In 1930, it was bought by the Illinois Commercial Telephone Company, whose name became General Telephone Company and Electronics (GTE) in 1952. The Atlanta, Armington, and McLean exchanges were under the same management.

Mt. Pulaski had its local telephone company longer—until 1990, when the Aldendifers sold it to the Rochester Telephone Company. At that time, it served Mt. Pulaski, Chestnut, Latham, and surrounding areas. It has since been part of Frontier and now Global Crossings.

Mt. Pulaski Telephone Memories

Harry Van Hook remembers when the Mt. Pulaski telephone office was located on the second floor of a building on the west side of the square. (When it was converted to dial in 1959, it was moved to 117 W. Jefferson.)

The office had a little portable bed, where the operator on night duty could sleep. If a phone call came through, a big buzzer would ring to awaken her.

One of the operators, Amelia Binder, had spoken German at home. A certain German farmer had an accent that could not be deciphered. When he rang up, the other operators would ask her to speak to him in German.

Some other old-time operators were Viola Drobisch, Norma Kautz, and Frances Turner.

Joe Aldendifer was president of the Mt. Pulaski telephone company for about 20 years. His mother (whose father was Dr. Collins) used to ride the interurban to the small neighboring towns to collect money for telephone bills before she was married.

Joe remembers when the Mt. Pulaski telephone company had its business office in the Scully building. It later moved over to Chicago Street and then to Mt. Pulaski.

Other Telephone Memories

Aileen Cooper Westen hasn't forgotten Emaline McGough, who was an operator at Hartsburg in the fifties, when Aileen and her husband were farming near Emden.

Once, when Aileen's father-in-law was in the hospital in Peoria, the hospital called her home. She and her husband weren't there—but Emaline knew where they were and called them there.

"She was just so cooperative," says Aileen. "She was helpful to the young and the old."

Ralph Martinie agrees that operators had their fingers on the pulse of the community. Once, he says, there was a fire at the Prairie Trails Inn near the fairgrounds in Lincoln; he could hear the sound of quart oilcans exploding.

"I went to the phone and asked, 'Where's the fire?'" says Ralph—and the operator told him.

Marta Rehling Fikuart came to Lincoln in 1931. Her father, Grover, sold his telephone company in Stronghurst to Illinois Commercial and became a district manager.

The telephone company was located on the alley behind the Scully building, with an entrance on Pekin Street. Sometimes, when Marta and her mother were at the office, her mother would suggest that she go upstairs to visit the operators.

"But not for very long," she says, "because Dad was very strict."

Eugene Thompson kept the telephone equipment in the office in working order, while Edwin Wheelwright sent supplies all over the state from the company's stationery storeroom in the same building.

Marta's dad retired in 1950. F. W. Misselhorn was district manager in the fifties and sixties. Later managers were C.C. Merritt and C. W. Gordy.

In 1950, the Atlanta, Armington, New Holland, and Elkhart offices were converted to dial. Lincoln didn't get dial until December of 1960, when a new exchange was built at the corner of Broadway and Kankakee Streets, across from the Methodist Church.

Mayor Edward Spellman made the first phone call over the new dial system—a birthday call to Mrs. Spellman's aunt in Poteau, Oklahoma.

By 1974, the business office and service center were located at 521 N. Kickapoo, present location of the Moose Lodge.

In 1980, the Lincoln operators were phased out, and in 1983, the business

office and service center moved to Bloomington (the Phone Mart remained in Lincoln briefly). The switching center has remained on Broadway.

"Number, please"

Betty Eimer Kinney began working as an operator in Lincoln in March of 1942, and security was tight. When she reported for work, she had to pick up a phone and give her name, which was checked against a list before the door was unlocked.

During the war, there were lots of "camp calls." When a family made a person-to-person call to their son at boot camp, the operator would generally have to leave word for him to return the call.

Operators made out timed tickets for each long distance call. When the young man called back, the operator would ask for a specific operator in Lincoln, Illinois; she would have the ticket telling who was trying to call him.

"It was a slow process," remembers

Carl Donath begins his career at Camp Crowder, Missouri in 1943. Courtesy Carl Donath.

Betty, so most of the time, the young men just called collect.

Working on V-E Day was "horrific," says Betty. "There was no way you could get out all the calls—you'd take them and have to tell them you'd call them back."

In later years, Betty worked as a records clerk, but she still had to be alert and put her headset on to work the switchboard when the telephone traffic backed up.

Eleanor "Perry" Winkel Noble was head operator at the Lincoln telephone office and remembers the drop switchboard. When someone cranked their phone to make a call, a little metal flap would fall; she would plug in below it and say, "Number, please."

(When dial was installed, operators began to say, "Operator" instead.)

Sometimes the operator had to ring the number by hand. She would be ringing the long and short rings on a party line, and "everybody would pick up before you got the number . . . and that just threw everything off," laughs Eleanor.
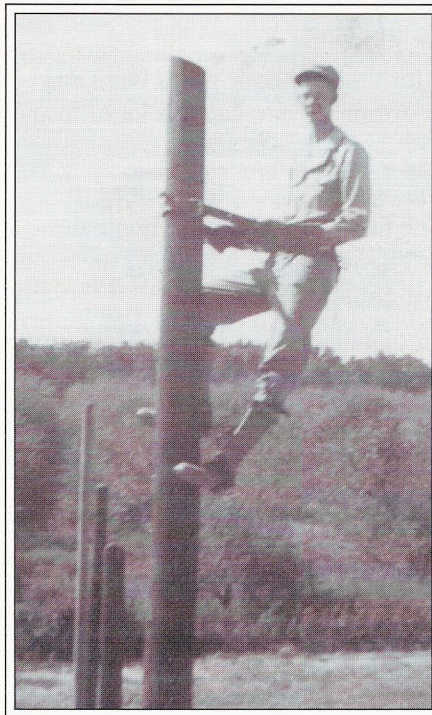
Millie Anderson says when she worked for the telephone company, "you never knew when you were going to be working." For a long time, she worked the 11 to 3 and 7 to 11 shift; she could get her children ready for school, and her husband, Andy, would be home in the evenings.

For a while, no matter how much experience an operator had, she still had to work all the shifts.

The worst part of the job, Millie remembers, was keeping the calls all answered within the time allotted—a hard thing to do on a busy evening.

If three lights came on to answer at the same time, an operator could only answer one, and that would cause a slow answer on the other two.

Even after she became a supervisor and instructor, Millie says, she loved to work the switchboard—it made the time go faster.

In the days before dial, operators did favors for people, remembers Dorothy Eimer Warnisher. If someone went to work at 4:00 a. m., for example, the night operator would call and awaken him. That kind of service probably disappeared with dial phones, but the operator could still be very important.

In June of 1969, six-day-old Weldon resident Mona Wilber became ill, and her parents dialed for an ambulance. When all they got was a recording, the frantic parents dialed the operator. Dorothy was working the long distance board in Lincoln when she took the phone call and heard Mrs. Wilber scream, "My baby isn't breathing—please get a resuscitator!"

Dorothy dialed the same number—and also got a recording. Meanwhile, she said to the mother, "Are you alone?"

When Mrs. Wilber said her husband was with her, Dorothy said, "Do what I tell you to do. Tell your husband to breathe into the baby's mouth and breathe slowly."

"Slowly, slowly," Dorothy repeated, as she kept ringing the ambulance.

Finally, she called an ambulance from Clinton and firemen from Weldon.

"It seemed like a long time," says Dorothy, before Mrs. Wilber reported that the baby had started breathing again. When she did, "I sat for a minute and got deathly sick," she says. " I had to go home."

In August, a grateful Connie Wilber brought little Mona by to have her picture taken with Dorothy. For years, Dorothy sent birthday presents to Mona and got chatty letters from Connie about the little girl whose life she'd saved.

"I am a Lineman . . ."

Carl Donath had been a lineman in the Army when he started working for the telephone company in 1946.

"That was hard work," he remembers. "Digging holes and setting poles and stringing wires . . . it would take a lot of pole climbing."

And it was all done by hand: even the holes for the telephone poles were dug with shovels. And then, tornadoes and sleet storms used to cause a lot of trouble. In the winter of 1947-48, Carl worked 17 days straight after a sleet storm.

Once Carl began working as a serviceman, he went into people's homes to correct things, replacing a lot of cords, for one thing. People were home during the day in those days, and "if they weren't home, you'd just go on in." That was back when everybody left their door unlocked, he says.

It was while he was working as a serviceman that he noticed Norma Herberger working as an operator in the office. They were married in 1950.

Old box wall telephones are expensive today, says Carl, probably because, when the changeover to dial was made in 1960, "we used to throw them in a pile and burn them." The metal was sold to junk dealers.

Carl retired in 1982. The best part of his job was working as record keeper: assigning phone numbers and making assignments for new installations.

Jim Standley came to Lincoln at the end of 1959 to put block cable on the backs of the buildings to consolidate the lines, as well as to change out the phones to accommodate dial.

At that time, the telephone company took care of everything from the outside line clear through to the phone, and there was no way to test the line from the outside, as is done today.

"It used to be, you would go in and put one phone in and they were tickled to death," he remembers. "Put it right here," they would say, pointing to a location in the center of the house. Today, new homes have a jack in every room.

Working as a lineman sometimes meant falling off a pole.

"You'll be working . . . your hooks come out, and all of a sudden, you're standing on the ground," Jim says.
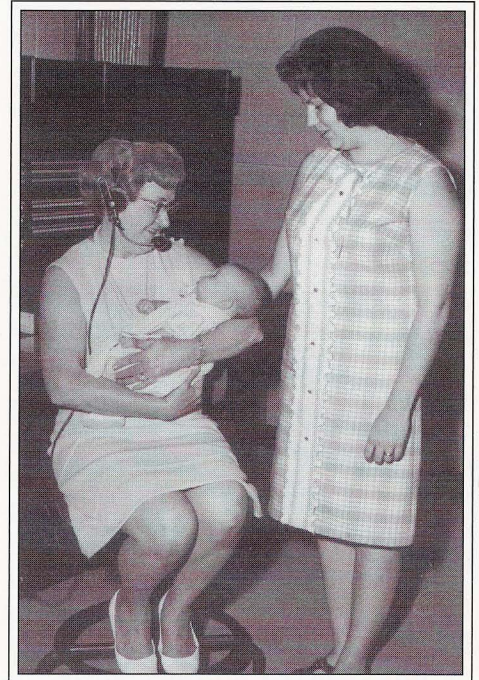
Operator Dorothy Warnisher meets Mona. Courtesy Dorothy Warnisher.

Once, in the late sixties, high water in a storm washed a tree out on Freddy Miller's farm west of Lincoln. It caught on the Mason City open wire toll lines, pushing them all together.

The water was high and rapid, but Jim and three other men went out in a boat to try to free the tree.

They were able to get close enough to saw it loose; the current swept the trunk of the tree and the other refuse under the bridge, clearing the lines. But when they were done, every man said, "I'll never do that again!"

Jim retired in 1994. By then, telephone company jobs had become more technical and specialized and often required computer training. ∎
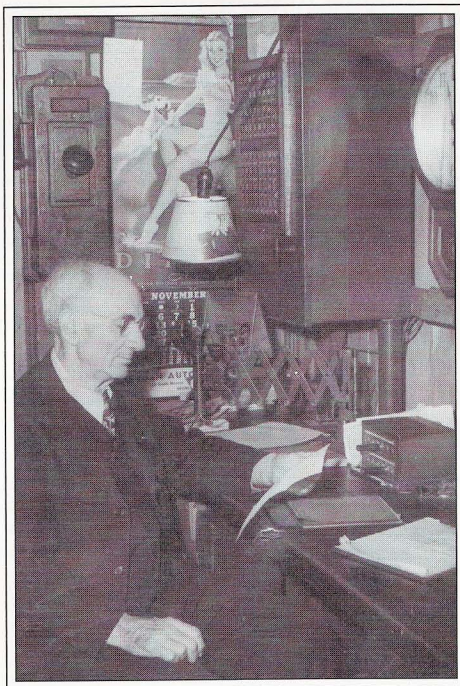
When Messages Came in Code

When Lewis Clendenen retired from the railroad in 1950, he was working at Athol Tower in north Lincoln (where Andrew Peters worked in later years). Like Floyd Sullivan at the GM&O depot, he sent and received messages by telegraph.

Sometimes Mr. Clendenen had a message for the engineer, who would reach out his window and pluck it from a bamboo pole that was handed up to him or attached to a permanent pole.

Meanwhile, Western Union manager Joseph "Fitz" Fitzpatrick was handling an average of 3,000 telegrams a month in his office at 212 S. Kickapoo (in the First National Bank building). Clendenen and Fitzpatrick were both telegraphers, but the two businesses had nothing to do with one another. Or did they?

The two work places were separate businesses, but the railroads and Western Union had a strong connec-tion. In the 19th century, the railroads laid telegraph lines along their rights of way and provided office space in depots for Western Union telegraphers, getting free telegraph service in return.

In Lincoln, the Western Union office was in the Chicago and Alton Depot until 1912, when lines were strung downtown and it moved to 111 N. Kickapoo. In 1914, it relocated to 507 Pulaski (present site of Logan County Title Company), and by 1920, it was located at 212 S. Kickapoo.

Joe "Fitz" Fitzpatrick was manager of the Lincoln office from 1916 until his retirement in 1954. When he began his career, he sent and received messages in Morse code. He would have to write or type incoming telegrams before delivery. Sometime in the thirties, he began using a Teletype machine with a typewriter keyboard. The Teletype printed messages on a tape, which was fed through a glue tube and then cut and pasted by hand onto the telegram form.

His was a one-man office—except for the delivery boy, who wore an olive drab uniform and a cap with a bill as he rode around town on his bicycle, delivering telegrams to businesses and homes alike. His son Greg worked as a delivery boy during the summer when he was in high school, about 1941. He never had to wear a uniform, because they were being phased out at that time.

Businesses like Lincoln Sand and Gravel, Sieb's Hatchery, and Armour's received and sent a lot of telegrams, but ordinary people usually didn't. Nor did they want to. A telegram meant bad news—usually a death in the family.

During World War II, Joe Fitzpatrick had the bad fortune to receive two such telegrams himself: the first told him that his son Joseph, Jr., was missing in action. Months later, a second telegram confirmed his son's death.

Greg Fitzpatrick had a friend from Lincoln who "got a ship shot out from under him," he says, and swam away. He was home on leave when his parents received a telegram stating that he was missing in action.

The company tried to encourage people to use telegrams for more cheerful matters, too. Regular telegrams cost a certain amount for ten words, but there were special rates and forms for Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas, and Easter greetings.

People sent money by Western Union. The person picking up the cash had to answer a test question—like "your mother-in-law's maiden name," says Greg.

Every morning at 11:00, Greg's dad set the master clock in the office. It was wired into the ten or so Western Union clocks around town—like the one at Doty's Jewelers—so they would be reset at the same time.

When "Fitz" retired, Fred W. Longan from Lincoln Sand and Gravel wrote a letter to the *Lincoln Evening Courier*. Dated July 2, 1954, it read in part: "He was definitely interested in the delivery of a telegram and if you were not at home, he possessed the rare gift of knowing your haunts, what relatives you might be with, where your children lived, or what hotel you might be stopping at while in Chicago."

Mr. Fitzpatrick was succeeded by Gilbert Dalton, and the office eventually moved across the street to 219 S. Kickapoo. Later managers, who usually ran the office as a sideline to another business, were Paul Kennedy, Wendell Lewis, Alan Tidaback, and Kent Hamrick. The office was most often located at 101 N. Kickapoo. Today, you can send or receive money (no telegrams) through Western Union at Eagle's, Kroger's, or IGA. ■

L. P. Clendenen at Athol Tower in 1950. He worked at the Lawndale depot from 1934 to 1949. Courtesy Larry Shroyer Photographic Collection, Lincoln Public Library District.

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"Piking" on the Party Line

To call the operator (Central) on a party line, you had to turn or "crank" the little handle on the wall phone several times to make one long ring. (See picture, page 6.) In an emergency, you made the ring extra long, and someone from the other nine or ten families on the line would pick up the phone. That could bring help fast.

The party line was also a good way to keep in touch for farm families, who didn't get to town often and were stranded when the roads were impassable due to snow or mud.

Not that sharing a line with eight or nine other families couldn't be frustrating. As early as 1908, a "country woman" complained to the *Lincoln Times-Courier*. Her husband, she said, only used the telephone for business. Often, when her husband had his horses hitched and waiting and was in "great haste to start on a trip," he would pick up the phone and be forced to wait almost half an hour while neighbor women shared "household gossip" (Aug. 7, 1908).

Every family had its own ring. For example, Albert and Iola Gehlbach's number was 35F13. The F signified a rural line. The 13 stood for one long ring and three shorts. Other parties on their line didn't need an operator to call them; they could crank the longs and shorts themselves. When the phone rang, everyone on the line heard their ring and knew they were getting a call.

Listening in or "piking" on the line was so taken for granted that nobody said anything on the phone that they didn't want everyone to hear. When Albert called Annie Meibohm in July of 1943 to report that Iola had given birth, he said, "You can go out and kill the old red rooster for dinner,"—the prearranged message for, "It's a boy!"

Thirty years later, when teenagers Kathy Prather [Schmidt] and Linda Allspach [Sheehan] wanted to have a private conversation, they spoke in the German they were studying at Mt. Pulaski High School.

Sometimes the party line paid off. Every week in the fifties, radio station WPRC called a different phone number, giving the person who answered a chance to win a prize by identifying a mystery voice. With a ten-party line, a lot of people would be listening. "If you didn't know [the voice], they would tell you," says Aileen Westen. ■

The People, History, and Culture of Logan County, Illinois