

## Illinois Bell Telephone Office By Helen (Robb) Garrett

The telephone office was in a big two-story building on Madison Street—just south of the First National Bank. That building, as well as most of the others along that street, are long gone.

The telephone office was the source of jobs for girls just out of school, and so many took advantage of that opportunity. The switchboard was available twenty-four hours a day with three shifts of operators. The busiest one was from seven in the morning until late evening. All the businesses in town had telephones, but few had them in their homes in the early days. However, neighbors shared theirs. Many times incoming long-distance calls to the Kinmundy Office would be death messages. The long-distance operator would ask, (when told the party had no phone) “Could you please ring a ‘nearby’ to call that person’s family to the closest phone.” Since everyone knows everyone in our town, that was no problem. Phones were more of a luxury then, something that could be done without.

Fire calls came into the office, and we operators set off the fire siren, stayed on the line to tell our volunteer firemen the location of the fire. The operators also rang the “noon whistle” at 12 o’clock each day! Lunch time, everybody!

We had our own business office also. One customer paid their bills there at an old roll-top desk. Repairmen from the Salem Office came to do repairs for out-of-order phones. By this time, the surrounding farm areas also had phones on with “central” as it was called. At first, people seldom gave the telephone numbers. Their response to “Number, Please”—most of the time was “Ring Jesse George’s store” (That number was 95!) or “Ring Linton’s Funeral Home. (That number was 60!) When the Linton’s left the funeral home, the operators took their calls for them, and if an emergency came up, we located them and relayed the message. The telephone office was truly the heartbeat of the town.

Nights seemed endless in that old building when on the third shift—eleven to seven A.M! —Wind whistled through the empty second story—many trips to the back room for buckets of coal for the huge coal stove! Once in a while, the flu (chimney) would “burn-out” from the residue left in the stovepipe from the coal. The stovepipe would get red—all the way! A bit scary! Most of the calls that came through the night were emergencies. One such call came on the night of \_\_\_\_\_1947, saying the St. Anthony Hospital in Effingham was on fire, and they desperately needed all area ambulances and fire fighting equipment sent there. B.F. Linton was awakened and responded immediately. With a sinking feeling, I realized my grandmother Mrs. Matilda Maxwell was a patient there on the third floor! I called my friend, Joann Alexander, also a telephone operator, to come down and replace me while I walked home the four blocks to awaken my mother with the heart breaking news. She fainted when told, and my brother who I had also called, picked her up off the floor. The next few days were a nightmare as the dozens of bodies were so badly burned they could not be identified unless dental records or broken bones could be used in the identification.

At that time, St. Anthony’s Hospital was the premier one in the area, and names of victims were numerous from surrounding communities.