

Nuggets from the Past
Ida: Part of Telephone History
By Norman McLeod

Picture if you can the sleepy village of Foresthill around the turn of the century. There was no electricity. Lighting was furnished by candles and kerosene lamps. Can you imagine a hotel the size of the Forest House without electricity? With only kerosene lamps throughout? And there were very few, if any, automobiles on the streets. People still walked to most places, except the better off, who drove their horse and buggies.

Telephone service was primitive. Around 1907 AT&T, the telephone giant, shed many of its unprofitable exchanges in small towns throughout the country, according to Ralph Hoeper, owner of today's Foresthill Telephone Co. The Bell System, a subsidiary of AT&T, around 1900 had installed a small wall-type magneto switchboard with 10 incoming lines in Foresthill.

Bell's policy was to arrange with some local resident, in whatever town, to act as its agent, with said agent having the authority to hire additional help as needed. In Foresthill this was the procedure until 1907. One of these agents was Ida Lockhart, who, after acquiring a teacher's certificate in Auburn, accepted the telephone operator's position in Foresthill on a temporary basis. She was only 18 at the time.

After a few years on the job, Ida moved to San Francisco, where she lived for 40 years. This left the town without an operator. This was when small-town cooperation came into play. Ralph Hoeper, addressing the local historical society, smilingly related how the old switchboard was transferred from house to house, to wherever a family with daughters resided. The daughters, of course, were placed into service as operators. There were times when even the sons were stuck with the job.

At one time, the switchboard was installed in a rented house, and each family moving in automatically became the telephone operators.

Ralph also told the romantic story of Annie. The two Langstaff brothers, Matt and Chris, owned the telephone exchange but could not find an operator. Annie, their sister, was 24 or 25 years old, and the brothers considered her a future old maid. So they offered the job to Annie, principally to give her something to do. She accepted. A short time later, a dashing young mining engineer, Charles Austen, blew into town, right away noticed Annie, "swept her off her feet and

married her.”

But our story is about Ida Lockhart. After 40 years, she returned to Foresthill where she was born and reared. This was in 1943. Matt Langstaff (the son) owned the telephone exchange then, and Ida not only went to work for him as operator, but bought it from him for \$350.

“Matt was losing money on the operation,” she said later, “but I thought I could make money by extending the hours of service.” Included in her purchase was the old switchboard and 11 worn-out magneto telephones, plus a dozen subscribers.

With the completion of the town’s first lumber mill in 1943, Ida’s business slowly increased, eventually to the point where there no longer were slack periods. Her switchboard duties became more and more a grind. Part of the increase undoubtedly was due to wartime demands.

“I came to Foresthill to rest,” she said. “What a joke!” Her new venture turned out to be one requiring long hours, day and night. In her spare time she also managed the Foresthill Library. “Once in a while I found time to read a book,” she said. Still, she considered this busy period as the most interesting of her career.

Ida’s methods were unique. When a subscriber wanted to speak to someone in town, he or she simply gave her the party’s name being called. Ida, knowing firsthand the names of every subscriber, made immediate connections without using phone numbers. It is said she also recognized the voices of every family member in the exchange.

Any way you look at it, that’s efficiency.

Ida’s proficiency on the switchboard did not end with her voice recognition. The system worked with all incoming calls entering through bell boxes, with lines extending from them to the board. With the sound of a bell, normally, the operator looked for a wiggling line to identify the box carrying the call. Not Ida. She knew the tone of every bell and worked from that knowledge rather than the wiggling line.

Her years of switchboard experience helped her keep her finger on the town’s pulse, with pathos, tragedy and humor almost a daily exposure. She saw the exchange expand from its original dozen subscribers to 165 in 1954, when many more potential customers were awaiting telephone services.

Her business acumen left something to be desired. “I was the world’s worst business woman,” she complained, “and if it hadn’t been for the complete cooperation of businessmen in town and the utility reps outside, I never could have kept going. I had no more business sense than a baby. I was bankrupt all the time and didn’t know it.”

Ida’s worst experience was in 1952 when unusually fierce storms broke off poles and tore down lines.

When, in early 1954, Ida Lockhart removed her headpiece and rose from the Foresthill Telephone Exchange switchboard for the final time, her retirement began. This lowered the curtain on an era of rustic, quaintly informal—even primitive by today’s standards—telephone service that has been rarely equaled in any town anywhere.

Ralph Hoeper, who was her partner since 1949 and who had taken responsibility for the maintenance of all lines and equipment, took over the business when Ida retired. He initiated new policies and changes by notifying all subscribers that in the future they would need to place all calls by number rather than by name. This was not exactly high-tech, but it spelled out the end of a delightfully casual telephone operation found only in rural America.

With her retirement, Ida found the rest that she came to Foresthill to enjoy. “There’s something here, the scenery, climate and history, that makes it an ideal place to retire,” she mused. “And now that the town has water, it probably will attract more retirees.”

When asked by her friends why she retired, Ida replied, “My voice was going, one ear is no good, and my eyes are weakening. The Lord gave me three signals that it was time to quit. So I did.”

Upon her retirement, one unidentified Foresthill gentleman was quoted as saying: “When Ida retired, she made a million friends and \$5.”

Ironically, Ida didn’t remain in Foresthill long. She soon moved to Placerville to be among close friends. She died there in the fall of 1960.

Ralph Hoeper, who knew her well, disagrees that Ida was a poor business manager. “Bookkeeping was her trade and she was a good one,” he said. “Her main problem was that she trusted people too much.”

Ralph was a pallbearer at her funeral. “I’ve long wanted to drive over there to see her gravestone, he said, “to see for myself how old she was. But somehow

I've never found the time."

Today the local telephone company under Hoyer is totally computerized and serves 2,100 customers. His long-term goal of a 100 percent underground line system in the town of Foresthill is better than 50 percent completed.

[This article was written in 1991]

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