

## Mae Long and The Telephone Exchange

My parents owned a small farm located south of Arlington. When I was about eight, my brother and I would ride our bikes to Arlington to see our mother. She worked for Mae Long as a telephone operator. The telephone exchange was located across from the grocery store and was in one room of a big house. Mae and her family lived in the house and she was the main telephone operator. The telephone system was similar to what you see on The Waltons show. There were cords located at the base of the system and several holes located on the wall of the system. When someone called, the operator would plug one of the cords into the hole of the line on which the caller was calling. The caller would tell the operator the number or name they wanted to call and the operator would plug another cord into the hole of the line on which the person being called was. Each telephone line had several different homes that it serviced. When the operator pushed a small lever located at the bottom of the system, all of the telephones on that one line would ring. Each customer on that line had a ring code that they would recognize and would know the call was for them. The ring code could be a variation of rings. For example, three longs and two shorts would be one code. One long and three shorts would be another code.

Many times other customers on the same line would listen in on the conversation. I think maybe that is why they called each line a party line. When you were talking on the phone, sometimes you would hear someone breathing or coughing, etc. You really didn't want to discuss anything that you didn't want others to know on a party line. On the other hand, it was a great way to spread information you wanted to let others know.

A few times I would spend the night with my mom at the telephone exchange. Sometimes, she would be on the night shift. I remember seeing Mae when I was there. She always treated me really nice. One time she took me to one of the restaurants in town and we had some ice cream.

My mother really appreciated working with Mae Long. It was a good job and close to home. Mae was very dedicated to the exchange. The exchange was open 24 hours a day, seven days a week with no holidays. Mae had to make sure the exchange was covered all of the time. I am not sure how many other operators she had, but I am sure Mae spent many hours at the exchange.

The exchange was really an important part of the community. It was the only method of communication other than in written form. It provided customers with a way to talk to others regarding business or pleasure. It helped families and friends keep in touch with one another. It really came in handy in case of an emergency. When there was a fire, the operator would notify the volunteer firemen about the fire and where it was. In addition, many people would call the operator to ask where the fire was and what was on fire.

Yes, Mae Long and the telephone exchange was a very important part of the community. She provided a service that helped almost everyone that lived in the area. I am really glad I was able to know Mae and her family. They left a lasting impression on me.

Story submitted by Larry Martin