

- April 7, 1966 -

Phone Operators Mark End Of Era With Party—Dial Phones Coming

Provincetown, the last town on the Cape to use the dial telephone system, will begin dialing Sunday, April 17, and on this Saturday night, April 9, the Provincetown switchboard operators will gather with New England Telephone Company officials from Southeastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island to mark the coming event with a "Conversion Party" at the Provincetown Inn.

A dinner at 7:30 p.m., with entertainment by John Kelley and Bette Wolfe, who performed last Summer at the Surf Club, will be followed by dancing. At least 150 are expected to attend the "Conversion Party," arranged by telephone employees.

Next week will be the last week of duty for the 16 operators who now operate the local switchboard. (In Summer there have been 24 operators). On April 17 local subscribers will be on their own as they learn the routine of dialing seven digits to complete their calls. For some elderly subscribers who have long relied on the local operators to handle their calls, the conversion poses problems they have freely acknowledged to the phone company.

The telephone company, however, will keep four operators in the local exchange for several days after the conversion, not to handle calls but to help unscramble technical confusion when a subscriber fails to dial the correct digits.

Beginning April 17 the local subscriber who dials "0" for operator will reach not the local switchboard but the Hyannis exchange. There will be no one at the fully automated Provincetown exchange to answer him.

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ALONGSHORE.

BY JOHN BELL

Some humorist describing his hectic life with one telephone and three teen-agers said his kids couldn't believe that "we didn't have a telephone when I was your age." How, they demanded, could he have kept in touch with his friends? "I walked over to visit them, or rode a bike over," he said. The kids regarded him with pitying disbelief.

At the Advocate office recently a similarly incredulous look crossed Mrs. Marian Lay's face when I told her how to get in touch with mason Ralph Santos, whose repair bill was headed "Tel. 890." Above it I wrote 487-0890. "That billhead was printed before Provincetown went from telephone operators to the dial system." Marian apparently had never picked up a phone and waited to hear "Number please."

Provincetown was one of the last Cape towns to change over. Frances Raymond, who worked for the telephone company for 38 years and was chief operator here for the last 25, confirmed my recollection that it wasn't so long ago. On April 17, 1966, she and her girls left the telephone office (now the Chrysler Glass Museum), and their personal touch was gone forever.

"We were sorry to lose contact with people," she told me, "especially the older folks. There was one old lady who told us she had nobody left to remember her on Valentine's Day. We chipped in and sent her some flowers."

Customer Fringe Benefits

It was bad enough to have to poke seven times at the dial instead of asking for 45 if you wanted Nelson's Market, for example. It was worse if you wanted someone whose name and occupation you knew, but not his address, and there were half a dozen listings of that name in the phone book. Before 1966 you could pick up the receiver and ask for "Tony Souza, the carpenter," and be connected immediately. The same knowledgeable operator could help you if the request was for "John Smith, who lives on Court Street."

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the dial could

1486
answer, "You won't find him there—he's working at Mrs. Silva's house today" and connect you at once with Mrs. Silva's phone? Jocelyn Lewis did that one time, bless her. Another time she asked, in answer to my request, "You want Junior or his father?" and rang the right phone for me.

The crowning benefit of operator service, however, lay in the girls's intimate knowledge of nicknames. Today, I defy anyone to look up the number of a guy he knows only as "Tony Cheroot." In the old days you'd get the cigar-smoking fisherman in jig time.

Town of Nicknames

The late Harry Kemp, "poet of the dunes" wrote "Rhyme of Provincetown Nicknames" in 1954, listing hundreds of them. In too few cases he told their origins. Like that of the man haled into court and asked by the judge if he were guilty or not. The prisoner turned to the courtroom spectators and asked for a showing of hands on the question. Wrote Harry, "The judge let him go, with a smile on his face, while from floor up to rafter exploded the laughter, and the man was dubbed 'Hands Up' on leaving the place."

Some nicknames distinguish families; the "Fall River" Patricks, for example, came originally from Fall River and are not confused with the Cyrils and Robert Patricks. Other nicknames, also handed down through the generations, serve the same purpose but originated in a long-forgotten incident or personal trait. The "Flyer" Santos', father and sons, got their family nickname (says Jimmy Flyer) because father Francis A., as a boy, had so many irons in the fire that he "flew" from one to another.

Neighboring boatbuilder Frank "Bishka" Taves, on the other hand, says his nickname is Portuguese for a card game he used to play. And Francis "Pie Alley" Valentine says the late Stephen Roderick Sr. hung that one on him, after Roderick returned from a trip to Boston, "for no reason I know of." It stuck.

Directory Assistance

The only real defect in the old operator system was the human factor. If all the operators were busy at once, you might have to wait and wait for that "Number please." The story goes that some complaining customer caused the Hyannis office to send down an inspector. He sat down at the switchboard to show the girls how to do their job efficiently.

The first call left him speechless; he turned it over to Frances Raymond, who quickly made the connection. On the next call, the inspector replied coldly, "No profanity, please!" Again a