

Sorry, Wrong Number

by Lucille Fletcher

The Evolution of the Telephone





Alexander Graham Bell
invented the telephone in 1876.

What Early Phones Looked Like





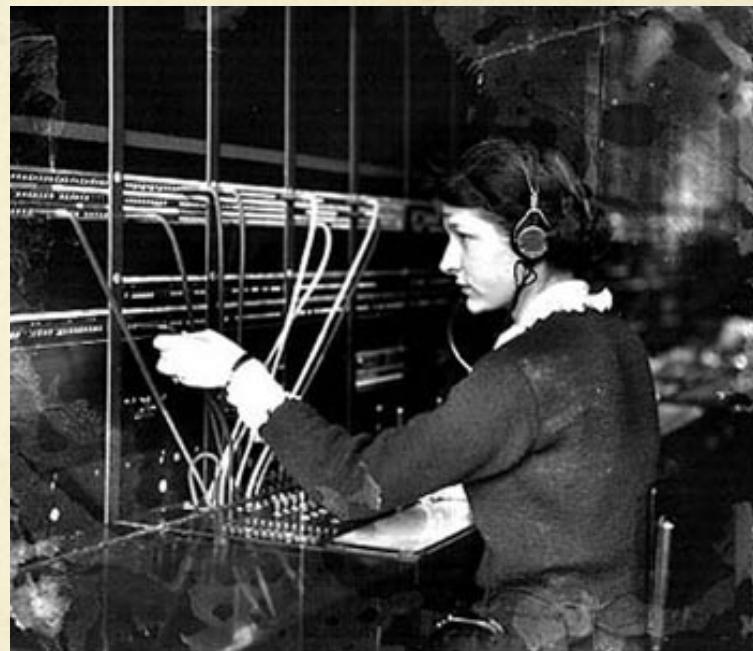
**Any call you made had to
be routed through a
human operator at a
central office.**

Making a Connection

Even if you wanted to call one of your neighbors, the operator had to make the connection using a switchboard.

You'd pick up the phone and tell the operator that you wanted to make a call.

Then, she would connect your phone line and your neighbor's with a piece of wire.



Switchboards in Large Cities

Switchboards were mounted floor to ceiling in order to allow the operators to reach all the lines in the exchange.

The first operators were boys who would use a ladder to connect to the higher jacks.

They young boys were rude to customers and played too much, so women quickly hired to replace them.



The Operator in Small Communities



In rural communities, operators often did much more than connect telephone calls. The operator was a

- message taker
- locator service
- news reporter as well
- weather forecaster
- responsible for spreading the alarm when a fire broke out

Assigning Phone Numbers

- To make phone numbers easier to remember, the phone companies assigned letters to the numbers.
- For example, my mom's telephone number in the 1960's was still CA22-4172.
 - To remember CA, they would say, "My phone number is CADillac22-4172."

Letters Q and Z Were Left Out on Early Phones

Three letters per number took care of 24 of the alphabet's 26 letters.

The least common letters "Q" and "Z" were left out.

Today, these letters are included.



Party Lines

Most people shared a line with two to ten to twenty people.

You could talk only five minutes or so before someone else wanted to make a call.

Anyone on the party line could pick up the receiver and listen in on your conversation.



Malfunctions

Even without a party line, sometimes, “crossed” wires would cause problems.

It was not uncommon to occasionally hear someone in your neighborhood or town having a conversation with someone.

Sometimes they could hear you on the line but other times the two people having a conversation had no idea that a third party was listening.



The End of an Era

When automatic dial switching equipment became available, phone users were able to make a call directly without talking to the operator.

In 1982 the last manual telephone operator was put out of a job.