

# Operators followed strict rules

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Archer had to relay the message back to the caller in Ioco.

"I thought, 'What do I say to these fellows?' All I could say to them was, 'Would you please be advised there will be no fire boat. There will be no fire boat.'"

She later learned the burning ship had been towed to the middle of Burrard Inlet, where it burned out without exploding.

Another emergency call Archer handled ended in tragedy in the '60s. It came from two men aboard a houseboat that had set out from Squirrel Cove on Cortes Island. They called to say they were in trouble and sinking in the Strait of Georgia. She connected them to search and rescue.

"Time passed, and I hadn't heard, and I thought, well, [search and rescue] got the message," said Archer. But then the houseboat called a second time. "They were really going down. Search and rescue said to them, 'Get onto your life raft,' but they said they didn't have one. So there they were, the two of them in the water in just their life jackets.

"It was April, and the water was pretty cold. I think they died of hypothermia."

She paused, then added, "That was my saddest part on the radiotelephone, having something like that happen. It takes a long time to get over that, especially when it was so close to where they could have been rescued."

THE FIRST TWO "talking boxes" in B.C. were installed in 1878, connecting a Vancouver Island mine with loading docks at Departure Bay. The first telephone company formed in 1880, in Victoria. By the turn of the century, the province had more than 40 small phone companies. B.C. Telephone was created in 1904, when the Vernon and Nelson Telephone Company bought up a number of smaller companies and changed its name.

While much of southwestern B.C. was connected by telephone, the province's rugged terrain made it difficult to lay telephone lines. Communities in northern B.C., the coast and parts of Vancouver Island had no telephone connection with the outside world.

That changed in 1929, when Cyrus McLean began experimenting with high-frequency radio. He fitted out the motor launch *Belmont* with sending and receiving equipment, and puttered up



**As a radiotelephone operator in the 1950s and '60s, Joan Archer handled emergency calls in the days before 911.**

photo Dan Toulgoet

and down the coast, testing the possibilities of radiotelephone communication.

"He was the equivalent, I think, of someone like Marconi or Bell in British Columbia," said Archer.

When McLean successfully transmitted from as far north as Ketchikan, Alaska, the *New York Times* excitedly reported the results of his experiments. A year later, on May 1, 1930, B.C.'s first radiotelephone system was up and running under the B.C. Telephone subsidiary Northwest Telephone.

The June 1930 edition of *Telephone Talk*, a publication of B.C. Telephone, announced the opening of the service. Radio sending and receiving stations in Powell River on the mainland and Campbell River on Vancouver Island allowed Powell River residents to telephone the outside world for the first time. The calls were routed by radio to Campbell River, by copper-wire landline to Nanaimo, then by submarine cable to Vancouver.

The radiotelephone operators worked from a switchboard in B.C. Telephone's long-distance office at 555 Seymour St. The board was originally staffed by four operators and a supervisor, but had increased to six operators by 1942. Three shifts kept it open 24 hours a day.

The operators sat in a row at a board, with headphones on. As a call came in, a white light would illuminate on the board. The operator plugged one of the back cords into the hole beneath the light, asked the caller which number he or she wanted to be connected to, then plugged one of the front cords into the appropriate hole. Then she listened in on the call, to ensure that the connection was maintained. The lines could also be very noisy.

"You tried not to involve yourself in [the conversa-

tion] but if push came to shove and they weren't hearing each other, you relayed the message," said Archer. "You seemed to have an ear that was trained to pick out the voice from the noise."

Polly Smith, who worked with B.C. Telephone for 33 years, said when she thinks of the radiotelephone, she remembers the difficulty operators had hearing the ships. "Weather conditions would make it difficult—they were breaking up more often than not. It was a great difficulty to try and get what they were saying, or what they wanted.

"If you were struggling along like that, you'd have another ship come in and say, 'Operator, I can hear him and he's asking for such and such.' It was quite a network of working together."

The operators worked an eight-hour shift with two 20-minute breaks.

"After a shift, your ear would just ache from the crackling," said Smith. "It wasn't an easy thing, but it was always a very fulfilling job."

Engineer Bob Grisenthwaite told the story of one static-garbled conversation. A young man speaking to a woman in Vancouver said, "I love you. I want to marry you." When the operator began to relay the message, the young man interrupted her. "Not her—you."

"The guys were flirting with us all the time," said Smith.

Some of the ships' captains sent presents of canned fish to the operators at Christmas time; others sent bottles of liquor.

Like many companies in the 1940s, B.C. Telephone had a policy of hiring only unmarried women as operators, and they had to conform to a strict set of rules.

"You weren't allowed to talk to one another," said Doreen McCubbin, who worked for B.C. Telephone

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