

# During the war, operators listened in for military secrets

Continued from page 5

from 1941 to 1952. “You weren’t even supposed to turn your head and look at one another.”

Maizie Hanson, who started with B.C. Telephone in 1943 when she was 16 and worked there for 12 years, also recalled a strict atmosphere. “I remember the first time I was tapped on the shoulder to straighten my back. And the clothes—you could not come in slacks; you had to be dressed like a lady.”

June Ramsey, who worked as an operator for 14 years in the 1940s and ’50s, said operators couldn’t have long fingernails or “flashy” nail polish, and had to watch what they wore. “You couldn’t have any men meet you at the door or hang around the front of the building. They were pretty strict about that. But then, that was the times.”

When a radiotelephone operator heard a caller swearing, she was to interrupt and say, “Language of that nature is not permitted on the air,” said Archer. Callers who didn’t comply would be disconnected.

Despite all the rules, there were moments of levity. Ramsey told the story of one young operator she worked with who heard a captain aboard a fishboat mention that his heads were leaking. Not realizing head is the shipboard term for toilets, she jumped into the conference call and asked, “Is your ship in distress?”

Every captain of the 40 to 50 boats participating in the call burst out laughing.

One of the radiotelephone operators’ duties was to read the weather report to ships at sea twice each day. McCubbin recalled one time when she stumbled over a word in the report and “got the giggles” so bad the supervisor had to pull her off duty.

At the reunion, Archer recalled taking calls from Alcan’s Camano project. Workers would wait in line to place calls home from the construction site

*“We heard some dandy conversations. It made you grow up fast..”*

—Maizie Hanson

in northern B.C.; some waited half a day for a chance to get a call in.

“We were so busy, one call tumbling in one after the other, that we would notify them at three minutes,” said Archer. “One time an operator got busy, lost her train of thought and went in to the customer and said shyly, ‘Sorry sir, your three minutes were up four minutes ago.’”

DURING WORLD WAR II, long distance and radiotelephone operators were required to listen in on any call made from a pay phone, and to calls made to the U.S. or overseas. Each time they took a call, they were required to repeat a warning.

To this day, several of them can recite it from memory: “During this conversation, we must not mention ships, aircraft, military transportation, and you must speak in English.”

Some callers—particularly businessmen who made regular calls to the U.S.—grew tired of listening to the warning and would cut off the operator, saying, “Never mind, I know that,” said Audrey Bourne. “A lot of the people who called every day got tired of hearing it every day.”

Those aboard ships were not permitted to mention the weather, but found creative ways around that prohibition. One captain mentioned that he’d had “pea soup” for dinner.

“They were so cheeky,” said Smith.

Bourne recalled a prohibition against relaying calls from anyone of

Japanese descent. During the war, she took a call from a man named Takahashi. “I called the supervisor over, and said, ‘I think this name is Japanese,’” she recalled. “She came right over and cut the conversation off.”

The operators were also expected to monitor calls from servicemen stationed in B.C., to ensure that no military secrets were given away. The operators—most of them young unmarried women in their teens and 20s—silently listened in on intimate conversations between husbands and wives. “There were some conversations between the airmen and the navy men who called home to their wives... whooee,” said one of the operators at the reunion, pretending to fan herself.

“We had to sit and listen to their conversation—make sure they didn’t say anything about the weather, or about the war,” said Hanson. “We heard some dandy conversations. It made you grow up fast. Of course, being a loyal employee, you didn’t talk about them away from the office. Not if you had any pride.”

WHEN AUDREY BOURNE started working for B.C. Telephone as a teenager in 1943, Vancouver telephone numbers consisted of a letter and four digits. Party lines were the norm and even local calls required an operator. Like many who later became radiotelephone operators, Bourne started out at a local telephone exchange. Her first job was at the Fairmont exchange near 10th Avenue and Quebec Street.

It wasn’t exciting work. “You weren’t able to do anything but say, ‘Number please,’ and ‘Thank you,’ and sit there very straight with your feet flat on the floor,” she said.

The radio telephone was much more interesting, said Ramsey. “You were sort of in on everything. You’d be in contact with ships at sea; you knew

Continued on page 7