



'Tuxedo Junction'

Robert Hankins, The Record Newspapers
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Former operators recall old times

"Tuxedo" wasn't just a formal outfit.

Back then it was the Orange telephone extension.

The operators of those days had personalities and knew everyone's voice, as recalled in a recent reunion of Southwestern Bell employees.

Hortense Lucas, 101, who worked 38 years for the company with a starting salary of \$15 a week, caught up with Ginger Tubbleville, Trudy Walker, Iva Roddy, Ruth Talbert Bishop, Betty Harmon and Mildred Lemoine. Some like Tubbleville worked in the plant, and others such as Walker worked in the business office and as operators at night.

"Mrs. Lucas is the one that taught us mostly," Walker said.

Lucas, who retired in 1966, recalled the day the infamous "gun-toting" preacher shot Orange's police chief.

In 1935 the Rev. Edgar Eskridge took revenge on Chief Ed O'Reilly after he was arrested for brandishing two pistols and displaying a Texas Ranger's badge in the Silver Slipper roadhouse.

Although the charges were later dropped, Eskridge, who hated law enforcement to start with, didn't get over it soon enough. He shot and killed O'Reilly as the chief stood on a street corner.

"It was a very quiet and warm summer day," Lucas said. "The mayor come running up because he'd heard a shot, and the telephones were blocked because everyone was calling one another.

The mayor come running up the stairs and said the preacher had shot O'Reilly and he may be coming to shoot us, too. It was a very exciting time and the switchboards were all blocked."

Lucas said she hid behind her desk in her office on Fifth Street.

[According to a Time magazine article from 1935, a posse armed with machine guns, tear gas and sawed-off shotguns caught up with Eskridge 80 miles east of Orange].

"Back in those days they had these wall telephones," Lucas said. "I don't know why they hung them up so high. You used to have to stand on your tiptoes to reach them."

"It was a long wall, and along this wall was your switchboard," said Harmon, who worked for Bell in the mid-'50s. "You had all these plugs in front of you and then of course our stations were right next to each other."

Bishop recalled that she was "Operator No. 7" and that anyone who worked the switchboard long enough got to know people from their voices.

Harmon added, "You learned who the people were and there was this one guy and he had the most gorgeous voice. Well I was young, I was 19 and I was like, 'I need to meet this guy.' And finally I did and he was five-foot-two and THIS wide," stretching her arms out.

Lemoine said it was hard to get on with Bell in Orange because either nobody ever left, or if they did someone would know a relative who needed work. She worked in three offices including one in Houston before she was able to return home to Orange to be near family.

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I was a supervisor in Lake Charles, Harmon said. I was told that if I wanted to work in Orange I'd have to 'put in' for at least a year or two in advance."

"There were five of us that all retired at once," Walker said. "I think I was making \$30 to \$40 a week then."

No one had air-conditioning, not even businessman H.J. Lutcher Stark, whose voice Lucas often heard from his downtown office windows.

"He had such a loud voice, you knew when he was in town and when he wasn't."

Former Southwestern Bell employees meet for lunch at 11:30 a.m. second Mondays at Robert's Steakhouse. All former or retired employees are welcome. Just mention at the door you're with the "Southwestern Bell group."