

Rotary dial phone connections took a toll

By Jerry Bowen

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It took a lot of work and coordination to complete a phone call just 50 or so years ago. Gone are those halcyon days when a friendly human voice would assist connecting you to someone by way of a toll call.

Thomas Wilson, a retired employee of Pacific Telephone & Telegraph worked for the company through 44 years of change beginning in 1927 and retiring in 1972. He was proud of the company as it once was, even to the point that he built his own private museum located on Willowbrook Farm in Napa County. He installed and maintained equipment from the old single-wire farmers telephone system that ran from Vallejo to Napa, serving many of the outlying districts of Solano and Napa County.

Now in his nineties, Tom Wilson recently made a video of the operations of various equipment that was used over the years, ranging from an 1880s' telephone to the "modern" dial system, teletype operation and how the rotary switching network made it work.

Being a retired electronics technician and manager myself, I found the tape very interesting. The operations of the system were explained so well that you don't need to be a technician to understand the series of operations he demonstrated. It is obvious that Tom, a member of the Telephone Pioneers Association, is proud of the work he did and his loyalty to a company, something that is somewhat rare today.

Wilson, an uncle of local historian Bob Allen, wrote a description of the steps it took to make a "toll" call, record the call and finally bill the customer for the transaction. For you young folks, a "toll" call was a long-distance call back then. In his description, he also tells a little history about the system that may evoke a few memories in some of the old-timers who read our articles.

Tom wrote, "I was accepted to work in the Vallejo Pacific Telephone and Telegraph (PT&T) control office as a job transfer during WWII.

"I had to accept a night job as all of the switchmen gained their job status of "working days" as the most desirable time to work. So I worked from midnight to eight in the morning. That was my shift. This forced me to sleep during the day at home.

"During my tenure on the night shift in the Vallejo SXS Central Office, I used the circuit

diagrams to place the office into action and cut off the old system of 'hello' girls taking calls from the public and transferring them to the desired location. John Q. Public was then able to dial their own numbers.

"In Vallejo before that time, if the customer wanted to talk on a long-distance line, the local operator had to set the call up using an array of identification trunks on the toll switchboard when the customer dialed 'O' for operator. That was the only way to make a long-distance call in those days.

"The operator who answered would make up an 'LDC' (long distance call) card for billing purposes to the customer. This card was introduced into a time-stamping machine - one at each toll position.

"She would then, if the customer wanted to know what the charge would be, call a special group, who would take the customer's information. Then she would determine if the call was completed, what the cost was and set up a route for the Toll Operator to follow to connect to the correct trunk line. It was then that the operator would finally try to complete the connection. She was guided to plug in the correct connection by information provided by various lamps on her switchboard. The lamps would remain off until a customer answered at which time it would turn on.

"When her cord lamp went 'on,' she placed the ticket under a stamping machine and pulled the lever. So the call went ahead until the calling party hung up.

"When the message was completed, the cord lamp would go 'off' and the ticket was again placed under the time-stamping machine, the lever pulled and bingo, there was a record on the toll-ticket of beginning and ending time in minutes as shown by the clock mechanism on the hand-operated stamping machine.

"The completed ticket was then sent via a pneumatic tube to an operator who sorted them out all day long to be delivered to the accounting department daily.

"All this changed when the customers were able to dial their own toll calls and the charging was done by electronics which did all the necessary operations to bill the customer automatically.

"That's pretty much the end of the long-distance call handling in those days at Vallejo and other locations throughout the Western States.

"It presented a big job for the Plant Department for which I worked, to successfully provide this long-distance dialing method of signaling. It was very complicated and we employees had to be well-versed as to how it worked."

When he retired, Tom Wilson built and kept his little museum open to the public for several years, but it is now closed. Too bad. It was a compelling and personal encounter with a past that was much different than today's impersonal and sometimes frustrating fast-paced world as we know it.

A copy of Tom Wilson's video made at the Willowbrook Museum will be made available on loan at the Vacaville Heritage Council for those who wish to view this interesting history of the past.

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