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newsletter

Forest Hill

Nuggets from the Past

By Norman McLeod

Ida: Part of telephone history

Picture if you can the sleepy village of Forest Hill around the turn of the century. There was no electricity. Lighting was furnished by candles and kerosene lamps. Can you imagine a hotel the size of the Forest House without electricity? With only kerosene lamps throughout? And there were very few, if any, automobiles on the streets. People still walked to most places, except the better off, who drove their horse and buggies

Telephone service was primitive. AT&T, the telephone giant, around 1907 shed many of its unprofitable exchanges in small towns throughout the country, according to Ralph Hoyer, owner of today's Forest Hill Telephone Co. The Bell System, a subsidiary of AT&T, around 1900 had installed a small wall-type magneto switchboard with 10 incoming lines in Forest Hill.

Bell's policy was to arrange with some local resident, in whatever town, to act as its agent, with said agent having the authority to hire additional help as needed. In Forest Hill this was the procedure until 1907. One of these agents was Ida Lockhart, who, after acquiring a teacher's certificate in Auburn, accepted the telephone operator's position in Forest Hill on a temporary basis. She was only 18 at the time.

After a few years on the job, Ida moved to San Francisco, where she lived for 40 years. This left the town without an operator. This was when small-town cooperation came into play. Ralph Hoyer, addressing the local historical society, smilingly related how the old switchboard was transferred from house to house, to

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Ida Lockhart demonstrates her switchboard skills to a young Ralph Hoyer in this 1954 photo. This office was inside Hoyer's present Main Street home.

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Ralph Hoeper, who was her partner since 1949 and who had taken responsibility for the maintenance of all lines and equipment, took over the business when Ida retired. He initiated new policies and changes by notifying all subscribers that in the future they would need to place all calls by number rather than by name. This was not exactly high-tech, but it spelled out the end of a delightfully casual telephone operation found only in rural America.

With her retirement, Ida found the rest that she came to Foresthill to enjoy. "There's something here, the scenery, climate and history, that makes it an ideal place to retire," she mused. "And now that the town has water it probably will attract more retirees."

When asked by her friends why she retired, Ida replied, "My voice was going, one ear is no good, and my eyes are weakening. The Lord gave me three signals that it was time to quit. So I did."

Upon her retirement, one unidentified Foresthill gentleman was quoted as saying: "When Ida retired, she made a million friends and \$5."

Ironically, Ida didn't remain in Foresthill long. She soon moved to Placerville to be among close friends. She died there in the fall of 1960.

Ralph Hoeper, who knew her well, disagrees that Ida was a poor business manager. "Bookkeeping was her trade and she was a good one," he said. "Her main problem was that she trusted people too much."

Ralph was a pallbearer at her funeral. "I've long wanted to drive over there to see her gravestone," he said, "to see for myself how old she was. But somehow I've never found the time."

Today the local telephone company under Hoeper is totally computerized and serves 2,100 customers. His long-term goal of a 100 percent underground line system in the town of Foresthill is better than 50 percent completed.