



Telephone Exchange Recollections

Judith Lewis

Sue Watson and unknown girl operate the switch.

A number of people who worked at the Riverstone Telephone Exchanges have kindly shared their memories of that time.

Esme Flynn (Platt), Norman Wallace and Ken Magennis all worked at the “old” Exchange when it was in the Post Office at the Railway Station. Esme and Ken also worked at the “new” exchange after it opened in the “new” post office in 1943.

Esme Flynn recalls: ... I started there when I was 15 and that was in 1941. I was taught by Mona Richards and, when I learnt the job properly, was employed for weekends only. Mona and her mate left and Nancy Schofield and I took over. I think we started at 7am and worked until 10pm. We were then relieved by Ken Magennis who worked the all-night shift.

It was only a small office and after hours we would answer a knock at the door through a peep-hole. We would take the number the person wanted and they waited on the other side of the post office for their call. It usually took a while for a call as we only had one line to Sydney or elsewhere and we had to share with incoming calls.

I cannot remember when we moved to the new post office. It was a strange day. We had someone from Parliament to open it. Mr. Knox was the Postmaster. Eva Turner was another girl on the switch and I have an idea May Fisher was another, and maybe June Freeman. I stayed at the Riverstone Exchange for about five years and went on to be a telephonist for 25 years until I married and had a family.

Norm Wallace worked at the Exchange for around 12 months in 1940/41. He recalls: I worked on the night shift, seven nights a week, commencing at 10pm and finishing at 6am. There were three ladies who worked the day shift—Dorothy Dalton, Betty Strangemuir and Mona Richards.

I got the job through Dorrie Johnston who lived opposite our place (in Elizabeth Street). She had heard through the assistant stationmaster, Jim Walsh, that there was a job going. During the day I'd work on the bread cart, for my father's bakery. I didn't get paid for that job. The Exchange job paid £1 (\$2), which I would give to my mother. I would be given 2/6 (25c.) pocket money for the week.

At the Exchange there was a small fold-up bed near the switchboard and I'd switch over to the night alarm and then go to bed. There were no toilets at the Post Office. I had to use the toilets on the Railway Station. I was generally woken, every morning, by Tommy (Freeman?), from the Meatworks ringing

to put through an order to Sylvesters' in Redfern. That order would be out to Riverstone on the train later in the day.

I recall that the Police Station's number was extension 44 and, when I checked recently in the 'phone book I noticed that their present number ends in 44. (I presume this happened with all the old exchange numbers when Riverstone switched to automatic connections.)

Ken Magennis was a Night Boy at both the Old and New Exchanges. People he remembered working with included Esme Platt, Eva Turner, Dawn Byron, Mona and Jean Richards (Jean married Horace Beazley), Jean Ryan, Nancy Schofield and Hilton Richards.

Shortly after they moved to the New Post Office there was a violent storm, which caused the whole of the building to leak and be flooded. Frank Knox was the Postmaster and Jim Walsh, who boarded with Mrs Matt Johnston, was his assistant.

Ken, as well as being Night Boy, also delivered telegrams, filled inkwells and did other general tasks around the Post Office. He left in May 1945 to go to work in Richmond Post Office but didn't like it and, when his application to join the railways was accepted, he was happy to leave.

Bob Fell, Real Estate Agent, was someone Ken remembered who would habitually ring at 3am wanting to be connected to Dr. Lapin whose advice was to "take an aspirin".

Phone numbers Ken recalls were :-

Rosenthals' - no. 4,

the Railway Station – no. 18 (present no. 9627 1518),

The Meatworks – no. 21,

Vic Knight's Garage - no. 38

the Police Station - no. 44 (present no. 9627 1144).

May Fisher, Fred Becke and Monica Wolffe worked at the "new" Exchange, after the Post Office had moved to its present position on the corner of Garfield Road and Pitt Street.

May Fisher (Alcorn) began working at the Riverstone Telephone Exchange as a part-time telephonist when she was aged 15 years and 3 days!

May worked every Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday night from 5 to 10pm. At 10pm the "Night Boy", Bill Floyd, would replace her. If Bill had been to the city and was late getting back May would have to stay until he arrived. If he had missed the last train home from the city she would need to be there all night. This rarely happened, but when it did, May's mother Annie Alcorn would come to the Exchange to stay with her.

May recalls it was "scary" in the Exchange. She likened it to what she imagined it would be like to be in gaol. There was a small sliding opening in the door and people wanting to make a public call would have to knock on the door for May to open the slot. The person would give May their name and tell her who they wished to call. This was recorded on a small docket. May would then close the slot and ring the required number. When the person had finished their call they would again knock on the door and May would give them their account (probably about 1/- - (10c.) worked out according to the length of time of the call. The bill was then to be paid.. It was an "honesty" system and it was rare for anyone to "scarper" without paying.

May remembers at least three people who had accounts and were not required to pay at the time of the call. They were Charlie Fisher, the local baker, and later to become May's father-in-law when May married Alec Fisher; "Aunt" Mary Freeman who had a general store where Civic Video is now located and Mr. Martz, a poultry farmer. She recalls Charlie Fisher's number was 17 and Charlie Murrell, who owned the Olympia Theatre was number 1.

There was one line through to the Sydney Exchange, two lines through to Parramatta and three lines through to Windsor. One of the calls May received each evening was from the Council directing her to turn on the switch which would turn on the town's street lights. May left her job on the Exchange when she was 17 to take up full-time employment at Anthony Hordern's City Store.

Fred Becke was a Night Boy at the Riverstone Exchange for about 1½ to 2 years in 1946-47. At that time he was 14 years old and still going to school. He would be on duty from 10pm till 7am. A loud bell was installed that was set to go off if any calls came in whilst Fred was sleeping. At 7am Fred would ride his bike home to Crown Road then ride it back again to the station to catch the train to school at Westmead.

June Freeman (Whelan) was head girl. The other two were Doreen Doolan (Welk) and Zela Crozier who later married Ken Magennis. Charlie Tuckwell and later Cedric Voysey were postmen. Cedric, a very big man, around 6' 4" (6 feet, four inches, almost 2 metres) tall, was the first postman in Riverstone to do deliveries on a motorbike, a small BSA Bantam. Gerry Sullivan, from Cargo, a small town 40 kms. south-east of Orange, was the telegram boy. He boarded with the O'Kane family in Oxford Street.

Fred also remembers the SP Bookies "laying -off" their big bets. He remembers the Alcorn family, who had a poultry farm in McCulloch Street, as frequent users of the Exchange.

A lasting memory for Fred was the time Mrs Moulds, whose trotting stables were near the Post Office, rang to say she had a prowler and wanted the police. Charlie Crawford was the policeman in those days so Fred called the Police Station and got him for her. Charlie, of course, responded straight-away. He combed the area for her but could find no one. About an hour later Mrs. Moulds rang again, same problem. Fred called Charlie. He was there very quickly again. He wasn't really happy the second time but still searched the area, to no avail.

Another night Fred had a call from someone who wouldn't say who they were but said someone was trying to break in to the Commonwealth Bank, which was next door to the Post Office. Fred rang Charlie who once again arrived quickly. Charlie could find no one and no sign of anyone trying to get in. Charlie came over to see Fred and said, "I think someone is having us on".

Monica Wolffe's Memories:

This is Monica's account of her employment by the P.M.G. at Riverstone Telephone Exchange Post Office building.

I started work in 1949 at the age of 16 as a Telephonist on the Manual Exchange, which had two switchboards, Plugs & Keys -each subscriber had a hole into which the plug was inserted when they were making or receiving a call - (P.B.X.).

There were approximately 160 subscribers and the following lines:

Sydney & Parramatta – each had one direct line (shared with another exchange on the same line) and one dial line. A dial line would put them in touch with the Sydney Exchange who could then put them through to country or interstate;

Windsor had two direct lines (shared) with party lines at Post Offices through Windsor. A party line could go through a number of subscribers and the switchboard operator would have different rings for each subscriber;

Rouse Hill – Post Office (Mrs. Cooper) line – as there was no exchange there we would ring to Parramatta for calls to Rouse Hill numbers.

I worked with June Freeman (Whelan), Doreen Doolan (Welke), Dorothy Haywood, Jean Elliott and Heather Mangold. (Heather came from Sydney's Main Trunk Exchange to fill in for the girls who were taking holidays or other form of leave. She came in late 1952 and did this till 1954-55.)

There were four work shifts:- 7am to 3pm/3pm to 10pm/8am to 4pm/4pm to 9pm, with alternating weeks being night work.

At 10pm the night boy would start and he would work through till the girl rostered on for 7am started. The night boy slept on a fold-up bed. The two night boys at this time were Jim Gallen and Laurie Greenacre. Laurie was the Telegram Boy at the Post Office during the day. Laurie's mother "Greenie" was the Post Office cleaner.

During the day Jean Ryan read out the number to be called and we wrote the number on docketts. After hours callers would knock on the hatch door. When we rang the number the call would be connected in one of the two 'phone boxes. Sergeant Crawford did his rounds at about 9pm and he would knock on the hatch door and enquire if all was okay.

Twice a year Sydney Head Office would send a Supervisor, Miss Mallon, to the Riverstone Exchange. She would stay for a week to monitor the way we worked, checking how we answered calls and checking all our docketts and prices. She was very strict.

The characters we encountered made our work always entertaining and never boring. At Christmas time we received calls, cards and gifts. Dr. Carroll sent us chocolates. Ambrose Driscoll, Real Estate Agent and Auctioneer, sent chocolates and a card to each of the girls – June's would be inscribed "love from Errol Flynn", Doreen's "from John Wayne", Dorothy's "from Gene Kelly" and Monica's "from William Holden". Noeleen Abell (Kelly) who worked at the Exchange at a later date recalls hers being signed "love from Gary Cooper".

Saturday, Race Days, we were interested and amused by a character lady with the alias of "Harry". "Harry", an S.P. Bookie, would ring and ask to be connected to "Harry" at Parramatta (UW9813). The call would be connected. Later a call would be answered from Parramatta. The caller "Harry" would ask to be connected to "Harry" at Rivo. Lots of calls were made in the same manner on Saturday afternoons. (The following extract from a previous Journal article "Two Bob Each Way" sheds some light on the activity of the two "Harrys" – "If Sheck (another Riverstone SP) took a bet for a large amount of money he would "lay it off" with a Sydney bookmaker. The girls at the local telephone exchange knew about this and would always ensure there was a line available for him.")

These are some of the subscribers and their phone numbers that Monica can recall:-

1	Charlie Murrell - owner of the Olympia Picture Theatre;
2	Connie Moulds - trotting owner, driver, trainer;
3	Williams – Schofields’ Hardware & Produce Store;
4	Rosenthal’s - Riverstone General Storekeeper;
5	Dr. Boag;
9	Royal Hotel, Riverstone (later to become 9627 1009);
10, 13, 23	Rumery families;
12	Riverstone Hardware (Taylor’s Produce);
16	Frank Mason;
18	Riverstone Railway (the present phone no. is 9627 1518);
19	Coulter’s Bike Shop;
21, 84, 85, 86	Riverstone Meatworks;
22	Mr. Len Parry – Riverstone Fire Brigade;
24	Butchers’ Shop;
36	Commercial Bank;
39	NSW Produce – Mr. Bert Lillia;
40	Eileen Hynes;
43	Chemist Williams;
44	Riverstone Police Station (to become 9627 1144);
47	Ambrose Driscoll Real Estate (later to become 9627 1047);
51	Conway’s Newsagency (present phone no. is 9627 1051);
52	Dick Stacey’s Fruit & Vegetables;
53	George Trahanas’ Milk Bar;
57	Horace Bambridge;
101	Commonwealth Bank;
102	Dr Carroll (present. ’phone no. for that surgery is 9627 1102);
103	Gosden & Dunstan’s Sawmill;
157	Bill McNamara.

The Switchboard Operators (“Switchies”) gave wonderful service to the people of Riverstone, from December 1914 to June 1963, a total of 48 years. Their service often extended beyond the call of duty. One of the many examples of this was told to the writer by Moira McHugh whose husband, John, was a serving member of the Royal Australian Navy from 1950 to 1965. They had no ’phone in the late 50s early 60s, and when John was stationed at Garden Island he would make arrangements with the Riverstone “Switchies” and Moira would take her children, and the dog, at a designated time in the evening, to the public ’phone box at the corner of their street and the “Switchies” would put John’s call through to her there.



Taken around 1960 inside the exchange.

Left to right: Anita Cox, Sue Watson, Jan McGiven, June Tobin.

Photo: Sue Orr (nee Watson).

Riverstone farewelled the “Switchies” when, on 1st June 1963, the Exchange was converted to a portable automatic step-by-step exchange. The step-by-step exchange was bulky and needed weekly maintenance. On 27th July 1974 the exchange moved to a new building, in Riverstone Road, and was replaced by a regular L/P cross bar automatic exchange which was smaller and needed less maintenance.

Countrywide, the “Switchies” at the Local Exchanges provided a service which was far greater than the service offered by today’s myriad of Telephone Providers. Gone are the days when a cheery voice would say, “Sorry to keep you waiting. I’m putting you through now.” When making a call to a busy number these days you are usually greeted by a recorded voice telling you, “The number you have dialled is busy. You have been placed in a queue and your call will be answered by the next available person.” You then spend a lengthy time listening to recorded music, which is regularly interrupted by, “Thank you for waiting. Your call has progressed in the queue”. When you finally get through you are quite often confronted with another recorded voice giving you instructions about which numbers to press and, more than likely, will end up hanging up the ’phone in frustration! Welcome to the age of advanced technology!

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