The Hello Girls

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Alexander Graham Bell is credited with making the first telephone call in 1876 when he demonstrated his ability to "talk with electricity" by transmitting a call to his assistant, Thomas Watson. Bell was awarded the first U.S. patent for the telephone that same year.

This new invention created a new profession – that of the switchboard operator. Back then, people would "ring" the telephone exchange by picking up their receiver and waiting for an operator on the other end to respond with "hello," and then manually connect the calls. This procedure gave rise to the nickname the "Hello Girls."

Early Johnstown Hello Girls
L to R: Ferol Minore, Florence Tembey, Minnie Anderson, Brownie Minore

Despite relatively low pay, women were eager to work these jobs, earn their own income, and feel useful outside the home. Telephone companies in larger cities sought to attract educated, well-mannered women. They imposed strict hiring standards – operators often had to be single, of "good character," and able to remain calm under pressure.

In Johnstown, telephone lines were installed in 1907, and the first Hello Girls operated the switchboard from the Davis-Hartford building on the SW corner of Charlotte St and what is now Parish Ave.

By the end of World War I in 1918, the swine influenza epidemic (aka - Spanish Flu) was sweeping the country. The flu epidemic struck Broomfield early on, and the office personnel were taken ill. Florence Brandt was managing the office and her eight-year-old daughter, also named Florence, stepped into the vacancy and took charge of the office until a relief operator arrived. The youngster continued over the next week to fill in during the operator's meal breaks.

Shortly after the elder Florence recovered, the company moved her and her two children to Johnstown so she could manage the small exchange switchboard. The flu epidemic had taken the lives of the Johnstown manager and both operators, and none of the city-trained operators could take over.

The family arrived in Johnstown in a bad storm and was dropped off at the telephone building. Because of the deaths and flu, the building was being fumigated and the living quarters were sealed off. The family lived in the small office and switchboard area until the quarters were cleaned and ready for occupancy.

In 1920, Willard Letford, of the First National Bank, invited Florence to work for him at the bank. She accepted, and served for 43 years, retiring three months before her 80th birthday. She died in 1969.

By the early 1950s, there were approximately 50,000 telephones in service in the U.S. – nearly one for every three persons. The 50-millionth telephone was given to President Dwight Eisenhower on November 26, 1953, the same year the new rotary "dial" telephone system replaced the original switchboard operation in Johnstown and Milliken, thus ending the need for the Hello Girls to connect the calls.

Sources: Excerpted in part from *A Tribute To Johnstown,* Rebecca S. Healy, 1977; The Johnstown Breeze; Wikipedia; *The Monitor*, Mountain States Telephone & Telegraph Co.

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