

Ex-Whitefish Operator Recalls That Switchboard

I found your Autumn issue to be positively eerie. My son brought me a copy of your magazine, and I was stunned to see a picture of little Dorothy Johnson sitting at the old switchboard and in the same chair that I used when I, too, was a phone operator. I am the "Carrie" she referred to along with "Faye."

Dorothy's description of Mr. A. P. Tills gave me a big laugh — she pictured him so accurately. I used to complain about him when I went home from work, but my old Irish mother would say: "You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, so flatter Mr. Tills and tell him how great he is." Well, I tried that and he agreed with me and was as mean as ever. There was one time, however, when he almost chuckled. He was getting out a new edition of the local telephone book. I always had my name listed instead of my parents, as I could get a small discount in price. Mr. Tills was constantly and sickeningly yelling at us for better service, three-second service, faster service, more courteous service, etc., etc. Well, this day he snarled at me and asked me if I had a middle name and I said: Yes! My middle name is *service!* Believe it or not, he smiled. And when the phone book came out, there I was — "Carrie Service Ragor." The next edition had me listed as just "Carrie S." And do you know that over these fifty-odd years I've carried that "S." on personal checks, legal documents, etc. So, like the S. in Harry S. Truman, it's just an initial.

Dorothy wrote of relief operators and some of them were dillies, especially one named Ida Lynn. She was my best friend, very witty, the life of any party, and a total nut. She drove me up the wall trying to teach her the switchboard duties, and at the same time protect her from old Tills and his bullwhip. One time a lady was calling the Roundhouse, where it was usually so noisy a person could be three feet from the phone and not hear it ring. Ida told her the number didn't answer, but the lady said something like: "Well, ring again, you know there is someone there." So Ida rang again and again. Finally, the old gal blew her top and said: "You dumb idiot! Isn't there any way you can contact the Roundhouse?" Ida answered sweetly: "Well, I could send a carrier pigeon or a Western Union telegram." Well, as you can guess, Ida sure caught it from Tills when the lady reported the incident. And if we hadn't been so short of relief girls, that would have been it, as far as Ida's job was concerned.

Ida wasn't the least concerned and really pressed her luck a little later. I was at home one night when I heard the fire siren. I lived just a few blocks from the telephone office, so I rushed down there, knowing Ida was on duty. When I walked in, I couldn't believe my ears. Nearly every "drop" on the board was red — people trying to find out where the fire was — and Ida was giving a different answer to each call: the fire was at the Methodist Church — Hori's Cafe — Palm Pool Hall — Cadillac Hotel — Haines Drug — the depot — and on and on. Needless to say, that was the end of Ida's career as an operator.

I left the telephone office to work as relief operator for the Great Northern Railway and a couple of years later Ida went to work there, too. There was no monkey business allowed there, and she turned out to be a great telegrapher. But when she was filling out her application for work, in the blank space following the word "born?", instead of writing her age, she wrote: "Certainly."

Our jobs with G.N. were really no work for women, but they paid big money for those times and you couldn't find a finer class of men than the railroaders. I could write volumes about things that happened in that job. I still laugh when I recall one instance. I was working at Nyack (which I understand now has a different name). There were two operators who had been there for many years. One of them — an old lady — resented me, not only for coming to relieve the third operator, but because I wore "pants" with my highlaced boots and sheepskin jacket. The railroad men kidded her a lot and would say: "Mrs. Mullen, why don't you wear pants?", giving their question a sort of double meaning.

One night I was working the four o'clock-to-midnight shift at Fielding. Shortly after dark, two men came into the darkened waiting room. I tensed up and tried to remember if I had locked the office door.

In just a few minutes, one of the men came to the ticket window. To my great relief, I saw it was the local forest ranger on whom I had a teenage crush. He asked if "Number 1" (the Oriental Limited) was on time. I said that it was, but that it didn't stop at Fielding. He laughed and said, "I bet it will tonight," and went back to join his companion. I called the dispatcher in Whitefish and asked if Number 1 would stop and he said, "Yes, you have a passenger, haven't you?"

In a short time, I saw Number 1 in the "block" and could hear the train in the distance. I took my electric lantern and went out on the platform to flag the train down just in case it didn't stop. The two men came out also and the ranger asked me who I was betting on in the coming Dempsey-Gibbons fight.

I said I wasn't a fight fan, but I was all for Tommy Gibbons because he was such a clean-cut, virile, and sexy type, and rattled on as only a teenager can, and said I'd sure love to meet him in person.

Both men laughed heartily and the ranger said, "Well, gal, you have your wish. Shake hands with Tommy Gibbons."

And there, in the glare of the train's headlight, stood my ideal. As Gibbons boarded the train, he threw me a kiss and said, "I'll always remember my little fan at Fielding."

I felt like an idiot for chattering on as I had, but was mighty thankful I hadn't been talking against Tommy. I learned later that he had been visiting the ranger, an old friend of his, and was fishing, hunting and just relaxing before the fight.

Needless to say, when I went back to Whitefish, I had my story written up in the local paper and felt mighty important.

I am so very pleased and proud of Dorothy Johnson's literary honors. But I think she would make a lousy honorary police chief as she would be expecting A. P. Tills to be looking over her shoulder.

As Bob Hope would say: "Thanks for the memory." It took me back over fifty years and I enjoyed it immensely. And thank Dorothy for remembering "Carrie".

CARRIE S. SWEET
Portland, Oregon