

M Montana Episodes



Mansfield Library, University of Montana, Missoula

Dorothy Johnson (right) and friends clown for the camera on a senior hike, circa 1922

Confessions of a Telephone Girl

INTRODUCTION

DURING A WRITING CAREER THAT LASTED NEARLY SIXTY YEARS, Dorothy Marie Johnson wrote articles, short stories, and book reviews almost beyond counting, and a total of seventeen published books. *When You and I Were Young, Whitefish*, a funny, nostalgic, warmly personal volume, was the last of the seventeen. First published in 1982, this collection of personal reminiscences about growing up in a small northwestern Montana town has just been republished by the Montana Historical Society Press. The Montana Historical Society Press edition is, in a way, a homecoming because much of the material that comprises *When You and I Were*

Young, Whitefish appeared originally in *Montana The Magazine of Western History* in the mid-1970s. Vivian Paladin, who edited *Montana* during those years, has written a biographical sketch of Dorothy Johnson's life, which is the basis for what follows here and serves as an introduction to the new edition.

Dorothy Johnson's work has been compared by critics with that of Ernest Hemingway, Mark Twain, John Steinbeck, Mary Austin, Willa Cather, and Montana's own A. B. Guthrie, Jr. She is probably best known for her stories that later became movies: *The Hanging Tree* (1959), *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), and *A Man Called Horse* (1976).

Her greatest body of work brought the early years of the American West to life through the vivid characters she created. "To write about the American West," she once said, "wasn't just some decision I sat down and made. It was just what I happened to know about. Anytime I write anything that isn't the West of the nineteenth century I'm sort of off my track."¹ As she clearly shows in *When You and I Were Young, Whitefish*, she also knew about the Whitefish of her youth, when, as she put it, "it was too raw to be pretty and too new to be quaint, when it was boisterous and howling and always outgrowing its britches."²

Born in McGregor, Iowa, in 1905, to Lester E. and Louisa

Barlow, Dorothy Marie moved with her parents to Montana at age four. They settled first in Great Falls, then in Rainbow Falls, and, finally, in Whitefish. The town that would become first in the heart of Dorothy Johnson was still being hacked out of the woods when she arrived there with her parents on a cold March day in 1913. Dorothy Johnson lived in Whitefish until she left for college in 1923. She returned home after her health failed in 1924, but returned to Montana State University (now University of Montana) in Missoula a year later. She graduated from the university with a degree in English in 1928 and immediately left to look for work. She held a number of secretarial jobs, first in Okanogan, Washington, and then in Menasha, Wisconsin, where she worked her way up in the advertising division of a local paper products firm. Later she moved to New York, where she worked as an editor for Gregg Publishing Company, and then managing editor and finally executive editor of a digest-format magazine, *Woman*.

Meanwhile, Dorothy Johnson was writing. In 1930, the Missoula, Montana-based literary magazine *Frontier* published her story titled "The Fruit Tramps," the tale of a young couple who followed the fruit harvests in the West. After 1941, her short stories appeared regularly in the *Saturday Evening Post*. In 1942, Dorothy Johnson published her first book, *Beulah Bunny Tells All*, a compilation of *Saturday Evening Post* stories about a likable, romantic, spinster schoolteacher named Beulah Bunny. In 1949, *Cosmopolitan* published her story, "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," and the next year "A Man Called

Horse" appeared in *Colliers*.

Feeling secure as a writer, Dorothy Johnson resigned her position with *Woman* in 1950 and returned to Whitefish. There she lived until 1953, when financial troubles forced her to move to Missoula to become secretary-manager of the Montana Press Association and teach magazine journalism at the university. She worked until 1967 at the Montana Press Association, a job she relished. She remained in Missoula until her death in 1982. All the time, she continued to write, for, as



Dorothy Johnson, probably in the early 1960s during her tenure with the Montana Press Association and the University of Montana School of Journalism

A. B. Guthrie, Jr., explained in his foreword to Steve Smith's 1984 biography of Dorothy Johnson,

Miss Johnson is a writer. As she said to me once when her eyesight was dimming, "Writing is what I do." Amen. Her works are marked by clean prose, a fine sense of organization and contrast and a laconic wit. . . . By turns—no, by mixture—she

has been newspaperwoman, editor, teacher, and, first of all, writer. Her course must have been set when she was a girl in Whitefish, Montana, a place she writes of with keen memory and bright humor in the recently published *When You and I Were Young, Whitefish*.³

When You and I Were Young, Whitefish reveals the strength of both Dorothy Johnson's prose and her character. She clearly enjoyed her youth in Whitefish, but her childhood was also laced with pain and hardship. Her father died of kidney disease just before Christmas in 1915, when he was forty-five and his daughter almost ten. In *When You and I Were Young, Whitefish*, Dorothy Johnson does not talk much about her father's death, but her and her mother's bravery, perseverance, and good humor in the face of real tragedy comes through. Her memoir is peppered with honest, funny stories about hard work, as survival required the labor of both mother and daughter after Dorothy's father died.

One of Dorothy Johnson's better jobs as a youth was as a telephone operator, which she started at age fourteen. She later wrote about the experience in "Confessions of a Telephone Girl," saying at one point: "it is a good thing there were no laws effectively restricting child labor, because I needed that money to help pay for an education."⁴ Originally published under the title, "Number Please: Confessions of a Teenage 'Central'," "Confessions of a Telephone Girl" was the first essay on her growing up that Dorothy Johnson submitted to *Montana The Magazine of Western History*. For those who did not have a chance to read it when it appeared in 1973, we offer it again here.

1. Quoted in Steve Smith, *The Years and the Wind and the Rain: A Biography of Dorothy M. Johnson* (Missoula, Mont., 1984), 94.

2. Dorothy M. Johnson, *When You and I Were Young, Whitefish* (Helena, Mont., 1997), 163.

3. A. B. Guthrie, Jr., foreword to *The Years and the Wind and the Rain*, v.

4. Johnson, *When You and I Were Young, Whitefish*, 100.

Confessions of a Telephone Girl

by Dorothy M. Johnson

I USED TO BE A SWITCH BOARD OPERATOR IN WHITEFISH. Not everybody had a telephone—at \$1.75 a month on a four-party line, it was a luxury that lots of people could do without.

I was relief operator at Whitefish for two years in high school and every summer when I was home from the University. I started at age fourteen, and it's a good thing there were no laws effectively restricting child labor, because I needed that money to help pay for an education.

The Mountain States Power Company had both the electric power and telephone franchises in our neck of the woods. The local manager was a portly, pompous man named A. P. Tills. The telephone girls carried on a running battle with him, which nobody won.

The roster of operators included three girls "on steady," each working eight hours a day with one day off every two weeks; one girl "on relief," who worked those off shifts (every Sunday and every other Friday night); and one who was learning. She came in whenever she felt like it, helped out or got in the way for a few hours, and didn't get paid at all.

A girl on steady, working fifty-six hours one week and forty-eight the next, got \$50 a month. The relief girl was paid \$1.65 for eight hours. If she worked part of a shift for one of the steady girls, that girl paid her 20 cents an hour. When I was

relieving, I maintained that \$1.65 divided by eight hours ought to be 21 cents, but the steady girls stood shoulder to shoulder against inflation.

These jobs were much in demand. There were usually two or three girls hopefully waiting for a chance to learn. The relief operator (unless she was me, not intending to make a career of it) hoped that one of the steady girls would get married, move away, or drop dead.

We all taught the learners willingly; it gave us status to have someone to admonish, because nobody hesitated to admonish us. And any of us could tell, after a couple of hours, whether she was ever going to be any good. If she was phlegmatic and didn't get upset when she made a mistake, there wasn't much hope. Slow and steady did not win that race. The plowhorse type would never learn to be nimble, to keep track of the time on a long distance call while handling a lot of local calls and trying to hunt down a doctor and the Great Northern call boy. The fire-horse type worked out best—nervous, dedicated, quick. To this day, when the timer on my electric range buzzes, I jump a foot.

There were no flashing lights on our switchboard. It had rows of black eyes, each with a number under it. When a subscriber wanted to make a call, he ground a crank. The little black eye above his number flipped over and showed red. Our board was modern enough, though, so that the operator didn't grind a crank to ring. She pulled a little peg called a

key—and it had better be the right key or she'd ring somebody a blast in the ear, which was a dreadful thing to do because it hurt.

The board was a vast expanse of eyes, with, at the base, a dozen or so pairs of plugs on cords for connecting and an equal number of keys for talking, listening, and ringing. On a busy day these cords were woven across the board in a constantly changing, confusing pattern; half the people using telephones were convinced that Central was incompetent or hated them, and Central—flipping plugs into holes, ringing numbers, trying to remember whether 44 wanted 170-K or 170-L, because if she went back and asked him, he'd be sure she was stupid—was close to hysterics.

It was every operator's dream that when her ship came in she would open all the keys on a busy board, yell "To hell with you," pull all the plugs, and march out in triumph, leaving everything in total chaos. Nobody ever did. We felt an awful responsibility toward our little corner of the world. We really helped keep it running, one girl at a time all by herself at the board.

We were expected to remember quite a lot of things. There were two rural lines with lots of people on them and multiple rings, like three shorts and one long for a store out in the woods somewhere. Mostly these subscribers tended to their own affairs and did their own





Switchboard operator was one of the better jobs Dorothy Johnson (above, circa 1924) had in her youth. Begun at age fourteen and continued every summer through her college years, Dorothy's telephone job helped finance her education.

"These jobs were much in demand," Johnson writes. "The relief operator . . . hoped that one of the steady girls would get married, move away, or drop dead."



All of the long-distance calls from Whitefish went through the main office in the nearby big city of Kalispell (left, 1923), home of the “Chief Oppiteh” of Mountain States Power Company, which had the telephone franchise in Dorothy’s neck of the woods.

handle grinding, calling between isolated lumber camps, timber claims, and ranger stations. We were supposed to ignore them unless they buzzed one long ring. That meant they wanted the switchboard to connect them with someone on another line. The theory was fine. It just didn’t work very well.

Consider: A girl is trained to stab a plug into every hole that buzzes, but she is also trained to ignore two of them. That’s hard enough. But she is supposed to NOT ignore them if one long buzz sounds. When there are buzzes all over the board, she probably does the wrong thing. Either she forgets to ignore those two lines, says “Number, please?” and is told by an impatient caller twenty miles away to get off the line, or she remembers to ignore them and doesn’t notice when one of them gives a long buzz that she’s supposed to answer.

So way out there on a mountain somewhere a frustrated smoke chaser grinds the crank harder and harder and gets madder and madder because he has a forest fire to report and why the hell doesn’t Whitefish answer? When she finally remembers not to ignore that long buzz, the smoke chaser naturally gives her a piece of his mind, hot off the griddle, and her feelings are hurt and maybe she cries. It’s a wonder ALL the forests didn’t

burn up, with the flames fanned by gusts of high emotion.

We were also supposed to keep in mind that two other lines were pay stations, and when anyone phoned from there, it cost money. We were suspicious of anyone who was willing to pay a nickel for a local call. He was obviously up to no good. Why didn’t he call from the pool hall? So he wanted privacy, did he? He didn’t get it. A charming fellow I had met while swimming over at Whitefish Lake once called from a pay phone. Recognizing his voice, of course, I kept the key open. He made an appointment with a fallen woman over at the Red Flats, so after that I didn’t need any more swimming instruction from him.

On a pay-station call, when the operator got the called number to answer, she said, “Hold the line, please,” closed the key, opened the key to the pay phone, said, “I have your number. Deposit five cents, please,” and waited until the nickel clanked. Then she connected both lines and advised benignly, “Go ahead.”

For long distance it was harder, counting clanks of varying tones for various coins and doing mental arithmetic. Mr. Tills collected the money from the pay stations once a month. There was always too much money, and this he couldn’t forgive. We always thought he ought to be pleased. But we were supposed to make out a ticket for

every dratted five-cent call, and when we were busy, we couldn’t. When the monthly day of accounting came, we quivered under the lash of his tongue—“Two dollars and sixty-five cents too much in zero—what do you girls think you’re doing?” We would gladly have divided the surplus among ourselves to keep him happy, but he had the key to the money boxes.

On one ghastly occasion the total was almost nine dollars short, and of course collecting too little money was worse than collecting too much. It was my fault, too. A man had phoned all the way to New York from the pay station at the Cadillac Hotel. New York, mind you! Who ever heard of such a thing?

The combined efforts of operators in cities all across the United States, their voices getting fainter with distance as they banded around a lot of bewildering code abbreviations, put the call through in a hurry. It didn’t take more than a couple of hours. And I was so flushed with triumph when the connection was completed that I forgot to tell him to drop in his money. By the time the shortage was discovered, he had left town—the rat—and the hotel had no forwarding address for him. Mr. Tills came close to apoplexy.

There were two other lines about which we had to remember something special: “Don’t say ‘Number, please.’ Say ‘Whitefish’.” Those lines were long distance connecting Kalispell, and we stood, in relation to any Kalispell operator,

as an erring child to a stern step-mother who is a practicing witch. All our long-distance calls went or came through Kalispell. Why, over there they had an operator who handled nothing but long distance!

We couldn't really imagine so idyllic a situation. A girl at our switchboard was everything—local, long distance, and information. We also turned on the fire alarm and the police signal. We used to tell inquirers what time it was until somebody missed a train because our clock was slow. After that, Mr. Tills made us refer such inquiries to the Great Northern depot, and the agent on duty there didn't like it a bit. Some subscribers even expected us to know whether No. 2 was going to be on time, but the railroad didn't think we ought to be responsible for information like that.

FOR MR. TILLS, LIFE WAS A CONSTANT BATTLE, HIM AGAINST US. We seldom came up to his standard. He had spent some years in Chicago, and he mentioned it often. Telephone users in Whitefish didn't come up to his standard, either. Everybody tended to be too informal.

If Mrs. Smith asked for 73-x, which was her sister, and we knew 73-x wouldn't answer because she wasn't home, we were likely to say, "She's at 190-L—I'll ring there." This was fine with Mrs. Smith and her sister, but Mr. Tills couldn't stand it. They didn't do things that way in Chicago. We were supposed to keep ringing 73-x until Mrs. Smith got tired and hung up or we got tired and announced, "That number does not answer."

Since our switchboard had no lights to flash on or off, the only way a girl could find out when people had finished a conversation was to open the key, listen, and

inquire, "Are you waiting? Are you through?" If nobody said anything, she pulled the plugs. If somebody did say something, it was usually, "No, we're not through. Get off the line!"

The telephoning public had a dark suspicion that we spent our spare time listening in, and very often the public was right. Mr. Tills felt that listening in was a crime just short of manslaughter. They didn't do it in Chicago. Of course not. Nobody in Chicago knew anybody.

Another thing they didn't do in Chicago was to ring a number that the calling party couldn't look up because she had mislaid her glasses or the baby had torn that page out of the phone book. In cases like this, Mr. Tills expected us to assume another aspect of our triple personality. The local operator became Information. When requested to ring Charlie Turner's house she mustn't admit that she knew the number. She was supposed to refer the calling party to Information. Then she said, "This is Information. May I help you?" and after letting enough time elapse to look up "Turner, Charles," which she didn't need to do, she announced his number.

Naturally the calling party then said, "All right, ring it, will you?" But Information was too superior to ring numbers; all *she* did was reveal them. So Information said with a tinge of reproach, "I will connect you with the operator." Thereupon she clicked the key a couple of times to indicate that big doings were afoot and came back on the line to say, "Number, please?"

This nonsense puzzled the customers, who knew very well that there was only one girl on the board, so what was all the fuss about? But Mr. Tills liked the formality: it was as close as possible to the way they did it in Chicago.

Sometimes in the evening when he had nothing better to do, he strolled around downtown and checked up on us from various phones. He was seldom successful in catching an operator doing something wrong. We recognized his voice. We recognized a lot of voices. Voices were our business. If he tried to make a girl mad by being grumpy or downright rude, she became sweeter and sweeter; she dripped the honey of courtesy until he was up to his ankles in it.

If he tried to catch her knowing a number without referring to her all-wise other self, Information, she gave him more key clicks than anyone else got; also she kept him waiting a while and came back on the line to apologize abjectly for the delay and explain that the board was terribly busy. This was part of our continuing war with Mr. Tills. We insisted that only a genius with four hands could handle the job. He was convinced that we had nothing to do and really should mop the floor once in a while.

Once he tried to prove we weren't overworked and couldn't possibly need two girls during the busiest part of the day. (Occasionally a day operator, pushed past the endurance point, simply burst into hysterical tears.) He would have us keep an accurate count of local calls. So he gave us a little gadget that we were supposed to tap every time we plugged in. If there was anything an overworked operator didn't need, it was one more gadget to keep track of. Naturally, what we did was ignore it until a lull came; then we caught up with our tapping, plus a good big bonus on account of resentment.

One of the perquisites of Mr. Tills's job as manager was a rent-free apartment just down the hall from the room the switchboard was in, and one of his duties (he said) was to supervise; i.e., to snoop and try to catch the night operator

taking a nap. He removed the lock from our door, leaving a big round hole suitable for peering through. We always knew when he was there, because the floor squeaked. Mr. Tills had an affliction that made one of his eyes roll around sometimes. It was enough to stand your hair on end to glance over at the peep hole and see that whirling eye.

One night a newly trained girl on her first all-alone shift saw it and was terrified—but not paralyzed. With great presence of mind, she switched on the downtown light that signaled the police, rang the police station, and left the key open so the night cop could hear her death struggle if it came to that, and then ran to the open window and screamed for help. It was all terribly embarrassing for Mr. Tills. After that there was a big cork in the peep hole.

I CAME HOME FROM THE UNIVERSITY ONE JUNE TO FIND THAT A NEW GIRL HAD BEEN HIRED, and she was trying to reform our methods, also Mr. Tills's. She worked in Minneapolis, which was almost as awesome as Chicago, both being big cities way back east. She was determined to introduce big-city usages in little old Whitefish. For her, the Great Northern depot was nigh-un nigh-un and Hori's Cafe was thurrrree thu-rrree. She said "Oppiteh" when she meant operator, and her "Number please" came out like "No place." These elegances confused the customers quite a lot, they being used to our home-grown pronunciation. Unless, I suppose, they had lived in Minneapolis.

We resented her, partly because she was married and didn't need the job, but we grudgingly admired her, too, because she bullied Mr. Tills and sometimes seemed to have him on the ropes. After all, his

gospel about how they did things in Chicago was only hearsay; he had never been an oppiteh there. But Florence, or whatever her name was, had the True Word about Minneapolis from personal experience.

She yearned to be our Chief Oppiteh and sometimes claimed she was, but Mr. Tills said she wasn't. Our real Chief Oppiteh was in Kalispell. We never laid eyes on her. We thought of her as a goblin that would get us if we didn't watch out but we loved her as compared with Florence. So we went along as before, without any resident Chief Oppiteh. In Whitefish we were all first among equals.

When Florence departed, she left us a legacy. She used very fancy penmanship on long distance tickets, and for a while we all put little circles over our i's instead of dots.

I was a pretty good operator but not the best one Whitefish ever had. We had two girls in the years I worked there who were wonders. Carrie and Faye were the fastest draws in the West. Either of them could ring a number (front key plus a button for L, K, Y or X) with the left hand while flipping a back plug into a hole with the right hand and caroling "That party doesn't answer" with no hands to somebody else. Meanwhile she could remember that 90 had blinked before 144 and therefore deserved to be answered first and, when she had a second to spare, open two or three keys to inquire "Are you waiting? Are you through?" and pull out the plugs without disconnecting anybody. Those girls' hands darted around like a pair of hummingbirds.

Along with all this, Faye or Carrie could remember that when Kalispell called back to report, "On your 15 to Spokane, w.h." the man who had placed the call on Ticket at the Cadillac Hotel pay station

wasn't in the booth any more but she should ring the desk clerk, who would trot down the hall to his room to get him.

w.h. meant "We have the party you want, anyway within shouting distance, so now try to find yours." w.h.l. meant "We have the party on the line with the key open, so let's be formal." h.l. meant "Hold the line, I'll be right back." d.a. stood for "Doesn't answer; might as well give up." n.a. was less final—"No answer, but remind me later and I'll try some more." a.y. meant "The calling party will talk to anyone who answers at that number." a.b. meant he would settle for anybody who could talk business. b.y. meant "The line is busy."

We never knew why long distance operators had to communicate in that esoteric way. We simply accepted the idea that ordinary people trying to connect with someone far away were not supposed to know what was going on until one or another operator emerged from the sacred mystery and translated into plain language. I loved those code letters. They made me feel like part of an international spy ring instead of a relief operator whose eight-hour shift was worth \$1.65.

Automatic telephone equipment sometimes baffles me. If I get a wrong number, I have to accept the idea that I dialed it wrong. It was nicer in the old days, when the calling party knew darn well that Central had made the mistake and should, therefore, be chewed out. If I make a person-to-person call to Los Angeles and it isn't completed, the ticket—if there is one—gets lost in some orderly shuffle at the local switchboard and an hour later I have to give all that information over again. Sixty years ago, at the Whitefish switchboard, the girl would have been all agog to keep trying on that call as often as

Kalispell would let her. But nobody ever called Los Angeles. We weren't even sure how to pronounce it.

We took care of a lot of little things that a dial system won't do for you. If a brakeman's wife, expecting the doctor to phone because the baby was sick, asked us to ring lightly because Henry had to catch some sleep before going out on his run, we rang lightly.

Sometimes we were trapped. When the roundhouse whistle wailed over and over, we braced for a flood of calls because that signal called out the wrecker. Somewhere east or west a train was in bad trouble. Men might be hurt, might be dying. Frantic wives phoned, demanding the dispatcher's office, wanting to know at least in which direction that wrecked train was. But everybody who might know was busy getting a crew together, making arrangements for the emergency, and couldn't answer such calls. All we could do was help the women worry. A dial system can't even do that.

Another difference between now and then is that teenagers didn't

monopolize telephones. They hadn't thought of it. Most of them were half scared to use the telephone. In fact, teenagers hadn't even been invented back in the early 1920s. There were just big kids, little kids, and babies.

One of our sins that I'm not sure Mr. Tills ever caught onto was what we called "talkin' to a fella." Late evenings and at night there was nothing much to do at the switchboard. When a girl had read all the dog-eared confession magazines, frowning because some other girl had already clipped the coupons that would bring a free sample of face powder, life was pretty dull. There wasn't room to lay out a game of solitaire. So when some man about town called in and crooned, "Hey, kid, you wanna talk?" she usually did.

The conversation was utterly pointless, small talk at its most pulverized. Neither party said anything worth listening to or answering. But the idea was romantic. This was a kind of pillow talk that involved no obligation. It was voice to voice, not face to face. Mostly Central murmured, "H-m-m?"

Umm, not really. . . . Umm, maybe . . . Oh, you go on!" Followed by a gurgle of giggles.

A really bold romeo might ask for the privilege of walking Central home after her shift was over (the evening shift, that is; nobody cared to walk home the night girl who got off at seven in the morning), and she might lead him on a little. But she refused him in the end and sneaked out the back way, just in case he might be the type who wouldn't take No for an answer. She didn't really want to meet him. He might be an absolute monster. She just liked the sound of his voice, and he helped pass the time.

I carried on an affair intermittently all one summer with a smokechaser far away in the woods. Both of us had to stay awake. He could make a conversation about nothing last until 3:00 A.M. and sound like Don Juan arranging a seduction without ever saying a thing I couldn't have repeated to my mother. I remember his voice fondly and with gratitude. Murmuring and cooing, we kept each other awake while he guarded the forest and I took care of Whitefish. *m*

The downtown of Dorothy Johnson's "little old Whitefish" had come a long way from the dirt streets and wide plank sidewalks that greeted the Johnsons when the family arrived in 1913. By 1923, about a year after Dorothy began working at the switchboard, Central Avenue (below) boasted street lights, a boulevard, and paved lanes.

Stumptown Historical Society, Whitefish

