

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Ma Bell lives again

Until I start to make it big in the writing business, October 26 was my last day of work - for money. My working outside the home lasted 30 years, with a 13 year break from 1962 to 1975. After being born and raised in Kewanee and graduating from Knox College in Galesburg, at age 22 I found myself working for Illinois Bell Telephone Company in the heart of the Chicago Loop. Knox taught me many things, but this first job was a master's degree in real life.

I was trained for nearly a year to be a service representative and we were taught to answer the phone, "This is Miss (last name)," instead of "Mrs." because in 1958 society frowned on married women having jobs. In this large office, we handled mostly business accounts. Two of my assigned accounts were Continental Illinois National Bank & Trust and Patricia Stevens, the modeling agency. There were full-time representatives in the field assigned to these large accounts and they organized the phone systems and placed the orders, but if there was a question in the billing, I got the call.

In those days, each push button on a phone was billed separately, like 30¢ a month. The full-time job of one woman at that huge bank was handling the enormous monthly phone bill and being head switchboard operator. I'll never forget Mrs. Fruth. She scared me to death. She would call me and say, "Mrs. Goltermann, we had a charge last July for one pick-up button. Could you tell me what phone that's on?" And I would have to go scrambling through orders and figure it out. She invited me to have lunch with her at the bank one day, and that was a big mistake. She almost gasped when she saw me. I had a pony tail and looked about 15 and she was shocked at my youth. I don't think I ever had the same credibility with her again.

Our business office had 40 service representatives, six supervisors and two managers. My supervisor was a funny, extremely competent woman in a man's world. While I was at Ma Bell's I voted for my first United States President. Of all surprises, it was John F. Kennedy. I was thrilled with him and many of us in the office had a lot of fun with that campaign. My ardor for politics was already evident and one day my supervisor came to my desk and whispered in my ear, "Kennedy will be passing by our building in about five minutes. Don't tell anyone where you are going but you may go down to watch him pass by." I'll never forget her kind attention to me.

The first week or so I was "on the line," I ended up in the coat room in tears. We were dealing with tough business people whose livelihoods depended on accurate telephone information in the phone book and were no-nonsense about service and billing. It was also my responsibility to call customers who were late in paying their bills. This was not fun. In those days, if there



was a question about a long distance call, we could go to a drawer and find the actual ticket written out by the long distance operator with the name of the person making the call and to whom. No direct distance dialing here. We could say, "Well, Sam called Janet at Standard Oil that day," and the customer would be quite happy.

Next door to our huge office was the biggest public office in Chicago. When they were short of help, we were recruited to go out and serve customers face to face. My times in the public office were not my finest moments. One day I was fiddling with one of those "rubber fingers" on my finger and it flipped right in the customer's face. Embarrassed as I was, I was still convulsed with laughter. She was not amused.

On another occasion, I was explaining the cost of a new phone to an African-American lady, who in those days would have been referred to as "colored" or a Negro. I was explaining to her that our basic phone was black and was not considered a color, so there was no extra charge. If she wanted a white, red, or green phone, however, they were colored phones and would involve an extra charge. She zeroed in on me. "You mean the black phone is not a color, but the white phone is?" With a silly grin spreading on my face I answered, "That's right." We both started to giggle.

After this first full-time job I was a housewife and mother for 13 years, then had a series of jobs, ending with my twelve year old marketing, public relations and freelance writing business, Caroline Porter Ideas. But that's another column.

My brother sent me an article from the Chicago Sunday Tribune recently, about a huge, fancy building of new condominiums at 212 W. Washington in the Loop. "Isn't this where you used to work?," he wrote. It certainly was. We have to ask, where did all those offices and workers go?

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