Hold the Phone!

When Alexander Graham Bell's famous phone came to town

By Ryan Rogers

Few devices have transformed the human experience as much as the telephone, and its inventor Alexander Graham Bell spent great periods of time experimenting in his labs located in Canada, on his way to being awarded the U.S. patent that declared him the telephone's inventor.

Bell was much more than Canadian, and invented much more than the telephone, but he spent many years experimenting in his laboratories in Brantford, Ont. and Nova Scotia. Born in Scotland, he fittingly chose Nova Scotia to build his summer retreat, and he died there in 1922.

Telephone service first came to Scugog around 1884, housed in a Queen St. drugstore. Stats show phone subscriptions grew modestly. In 1891 Scugog had 13 phones, 54 by 1905 and 673 by 1916.

By 1921, Pearl Kent, mother of Kent Farndale, moved to Port Perry, and she became chief operator in town. Farndale was lured away from her family's bakery to work as a switchboard operator at 13 years of age.

"I enjoyed it thoroughly," says Farndale. "I think probably the best part was learning the switchboard and where all the numbers were. You knew who everybody was," she says. "You knew who No. 35 was and our bakeshop was 32W, and our house was 32J."

These days it's considered a great offense to listen in on someone's call, however there was only one phone line in town, and you had to wait your turn before asking the operator to connect your call.

Farndale says there was one customer who she could always tell was eavesdropping because her phone sat by a noisy clock, which could easily be heard ticking away while conversations were being held on the line.

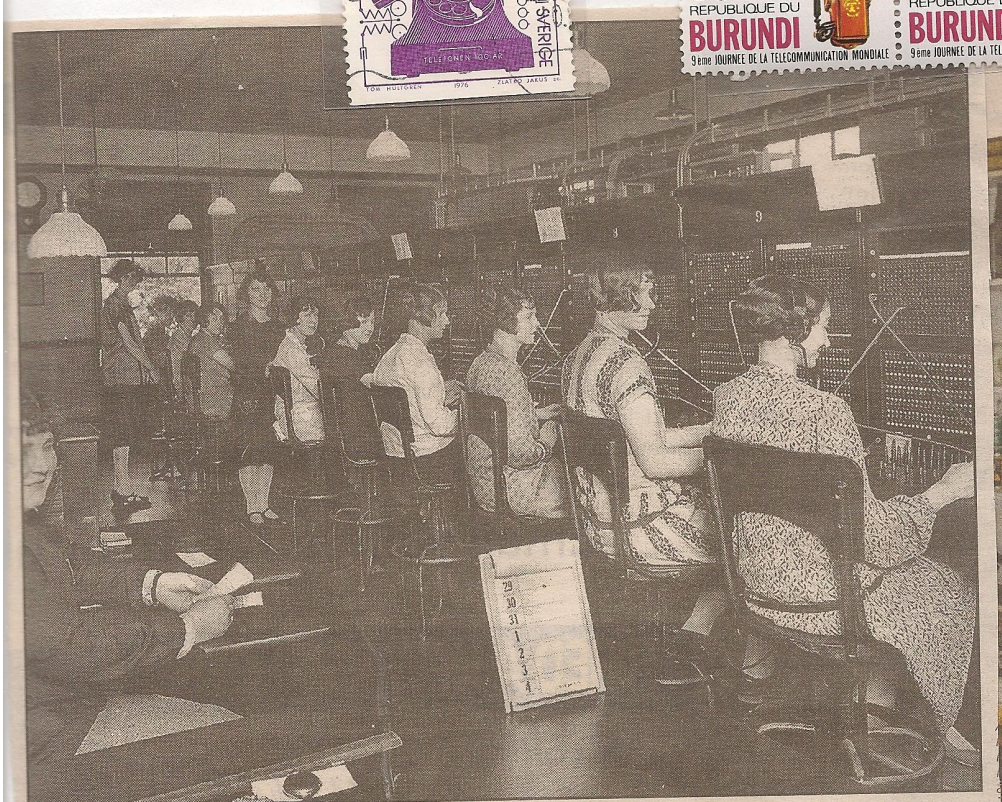
"You were always told, 'Please listen before you ring in, in case somebody else is using the line,'" recalls Farndale.

The calling routine required a clear line, and the operator had to be at the switchboard, or else there was no one to connect your call.

The switchboard was never more important than in times of emergency, when people called in desperate need for a doctor. "You didn't call the ambulance," recalls Kent. "There was no 911."

"The telephone was very important. The hub of the community, so to speak," she adds.

Photo right: Kent Farndale stands with a section of the old switchboard that once served Scugog Township now on display at the Scugog Shores Museum Village. The museum is hosting an exhibit called "Scugog 150" to celebrate Canada's 150th anniversary, including a handmade replica of Port Perry's historic Queen St., featuring its successful businesses and influential citizens.



Telephone technology has changed dramatically since the days of the call center. However, some still remember the days when placing a call required a switchboard operator - like one of these ladies who worked at the Bell call centre on William Street in Lindsay - to make it happen.