

A Long Distance to Wolfe Island

Behind two small tugs a submarine cable spilled out along the harbour floor between Kingston and Wolfe Island in preparation for dial telephone service which starts Sunday ...at present, Mrs. Mabel McRae and a staff of six handle the telephone needs of the island.

Kingston Whig Standard, September 16, 1960

“Number please?”

“Hello... Hello Mabel?” the female voice on the other end of the line was near panic. “Can you get Doctor Regan? Oh quickly, please!”

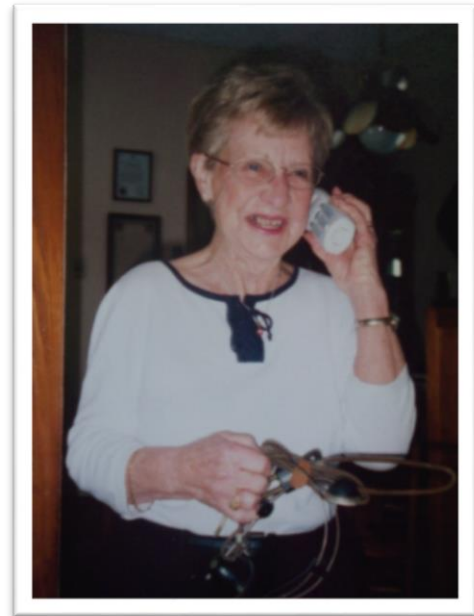
“One moment.”

Disconnecting the line, Wolfe Island’s chief telephone operator Mabel McRae then picked up another plug and placed it into a Kingston circuit. When the Kingston operator answered, Mabel gave her Doctor Ken Regan’s home number from memory. Once Dr. Regan came on line she calmly related the emergency. Mabel also told the doctor who it was and where they could be found on the island.

Soon after, Dr. Regan with his black bag was on his way by horse and sleigh across the ice from Kingston to the home of a sick islander. The caller never even identified herself.

It has been more than fifty years since that frantic call came over the telephone line.

“Oh, I knew who it was, just by the sound of their voice,” said Mabel McRae. She and her husband Mark live on Wolfe Island in the village of Marysville just about a block away from the former telephone exchange office. It was a two story house located beside Mike Johnson’s hotel (later the General Wolfe Hotel) in the former Minnie O’Brien place. By 1960, it was the home of Mrs. Elmer Kane. The exchange office itself with the large magneto switchboard was in the front room, overlooking Barrett Bay. Kingston is off in the distance, over three miles away as the ferry travels.



Mabel McRae today, holding her original headset from 1943

"I knew people right away by the sound of their voice," Mabel remembers. "I still do after all these years."

Today, sitting in her kitchen, Mabel reflects on her career as an operator with the Bell Telephone Company. Photos and clippings cover her kitchen table from another era. The world was still at war with no end in sight when she first put on her head phone set in 1943. "When a call came in from the mainland, you'd have to sit there and time it," she explains. "There was a light on the electric panel board. As soon as it went out you wrote down the time on the card. These cards went out on the first boat in the morning to Kingston and then to Montreal every day." In times of emergency the operators were quick to rally the closest people they could find. From an accident out on the ice to a fire in the village or farmstead, the telephone operator's office became a command centre. "It's a small community," McRae pointed out, "and at times it really was hard to keep your emotions held in. Whatever it was, you knew the family and you wanted to get help as fast as you could."

Mabel and her staff of operators included Connie Fawcett, Donna Grant, Bernice Davis, Lena Davis, Wilda Henderson, Murette Fawcett, Helen White, Jean McRae, and Audrey Gurnsey. It was business as usual until the tug boats with their barges and cables arrived in 1960. Then everyone on Wolfe Island would be connected to a direct dial up service.

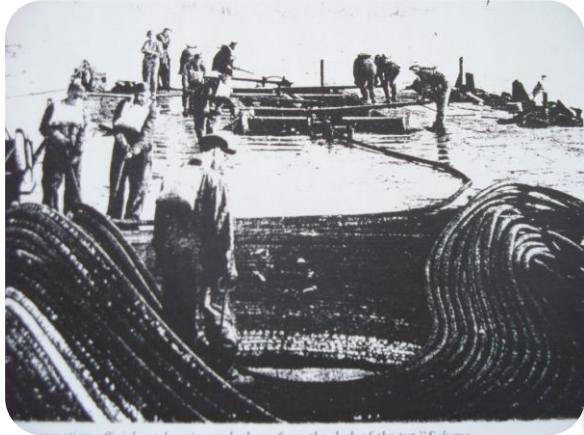
Even though Wolfe Island did not receive electricity completely until after World War II, there was telephone service in place since 1889.

"That first cable came across at Brophy's Point," said Mark McRae. "There is still a cable there." Back then, it was the North American Telegraph Company which installed the service. The telephone exchange office was in Charlie Cummins store in the village. In 1906, service was transferred to the Bell Telephone Company. By 1907 there were 34 telephone users on the island. They were: W. Allinson, Stuart Armstrong, J. Baker, F. Briceland, William Card, William Cooper, James Davis, George Friend, Tom Friend, George Gillespie, Luther Harris, Arthur Henderson, D. Hinckley, William Horne, J. Irwin, Alvin Joslin, James Kingsley, Malcolm McDonald, Allen McLaren, Mrs. Mary McLaren, George Morgan, Thomas Muckian, J. Murphy, Mrs. M. Payne, Grant Pyke, George Rattray, Dr. William Spankie, Rev. T. Spratt, Job Watts, C. Woodman, W. Woodman. Mrs. Eva Prinyer was operator from 1915 succeeded by Mary Davis in 1941.



Wolfe Island telephone operators, 1960

When the Bell Company took over, a new submarine cable was laid to the east of the village at Mill Point. This joined a line all the way across to Horne's Point. In 1909, the 100th telephone was installed on the island and continuous service was then in place. Sunday was the exception when calls could only be made from 10:00 am to noon then from 2:00pm to 4:00 pm.



Tug Salvage Queen laying cable between Kingston and Wolfe Island

“To dial a number in Kingston you had to dial ‘Liberty’ first,” Mabel explained. “To call Wolfe Island from Kingston it was ‘Evergreen’.” The party lines stayed in place on the island until they too, were eventually phased out.

Finally, I had to ask the inevitable question: I’ll bet the lines ‘heated up’ every now and then with the latest ‘news’?

“Oh, we were sworn to secrecy,” Mabel said quickly with a smile.

“She wouldn’t tell me anything,” said Mark.

Is telephone service on Wolfe Island any better today, fifty years later?

Just ask Vicki Stewart who lives on the south side, on Button Bay. During a winter storm two years ago her phone went out and it was almost two weeks before someone in *India* got back to her to sort out the problem. “It was just ridiculous,” Stewart said.

On September 18, 1960 Mabel McRae and her colleagues were out of work. The tugs Salvage Queen and Newfie Queen with a barge spent the early part of a summer day laying 14,300 feet of three inch diameter cable weighing 16 pounds a foot across the channel. Dial service was now on the island.



14,000 foot telephone cable, spinning out from barge



I had to remind her that her house, which once belonged to Stuart Armstrong, has had a telephone since 1907. That's over a hundred years!

And according to Mabel McRae's impeccable records, this was probably the *first* time there was ever a problem with it.

Brian Johnson

***Mabel takes first dial up call at home
Sept. 16, 1960***