

Mrs Joseph Vana

----- Vanderhoek

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Vanderhoek This morning we are talking with Mrs Joseph Vana, known to scores of older residents as "Bessie" She was for many years the supervisor of the telephone switchboard in the Village of Lewiston. Mrs Vana and her husband Joseph reside at 708 Ononandaga Street, Lewiston. I am D. George Vanderhoek of Lower River Road

Vanderhoek Bessie it would be interesting if you would tell us when you came to Lewiston, and something of your experiences with the telephone switchboard or other recollections.

Mrs. Vana

I can remember coming to Lewiston from Youngstown in a Gorge Line car in 1918. I got off the car at Burke's store on Center Street at Niagara. This building which is now White's Shoe Store housed the first telephone switchboard I can remember. It was a small two position board.

This board was later moved to the second floor of 728 Center Street which is where the Stevens Insurance business is today. When I recall it it was known as the Pendergast house. Peg Vrooman was the chief telephone operator.

Joe (Vana) and I were married in 1922 and began living in Niagara Falls. I put in an application for telephone work either in Lewiston or in Youngstown. I was fortunate to be hired for Lewiston. By this time the switchboard had been moved to the first floor of the Pendergast house. We began to live there.

The switchboard was in our living room partitioned by a hinged screen. I remember my first day at the board. Two chief operators from the Niagara Falls office came down to show me the details of operation. At noon the ladies walked to the river to eat lunch at the Angler's Retreat. This is now the Riverside Inn.

That was the time of day when the farmers used to make long distance as well as local calls, which we had to ring for them. For example, numbers were like 1 long and 4 short rings , or 3 long and 4 short rings. We handled subscriber's telephone bills and attended the switchboard, with one girl on duty. There was a night alarm on the board so the night operator could go to bed.

I remember one apple buyer named Pew. Who always would say when he called, "You know Pew Pew ". We had about 50 subscribers at that time and we were quite busy. Three families in the Village had radios. They would tell us to take the receiver off the hook and listen. It was a revelation to be able to hear some one in England talking.

My husband Joe also applied for work with the telephone company and soon joined the Cable Department. He was employed there for 40 years. We had three daughters who became telephone operators. My own telephone experience was for 33 years. Our family therefore has a combined total of over 100 years with the Telephone Company.

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When fire calls came in we had to give an alarm and try to alert the men who were fire fighters. Joe , my husband would run over to Vevirit's Shop to get the Ladder & Hose cart to help pull it to the fire.

In 1926, the telephone switch board was moved next door to the brick building which used to be an Opera House. It was called Moss Hall at one time I believe. There was a hall upstairs, and a butcher shop in the basement. It also housed a barber shop and a grocery store at one time.

The new switchboard was a two position board and so high that we could not put anything on top of it. When necessary men came from Niagara Falls to make repairs or put in new lines. Each of the rural lines took care of 10 to 14 families so we were very busy.

When people had to leave their homes they would tell us , and we would keep track of any calls or messages for them and let them know when they returned. Even today I have people tell me that they miss this old personal contact.

In the new location there was a fire siren button next to the switchboard and when a fire was reported we had to sound the siren. Then all the subscribers would call in to find out where the fire was. We became very busy answering them. We also had to sound the siren at exactly noon each day as a test.

In 1949 the dial system was introduced. At that time we had a five position board , and fourteen girls were required for continuous operation. Some of the girls went to the Niagara Falls office . We still get together from time to time and talk over old times.

There are a few things I recall about Lewiston in the early days. When we moved here Hickory College was in use on the Ridge Road. The old Lewiston Academy building was standing where the ball park is now but not used as a school. A family named Patterson lived in a part of it. Mr. Patterson was the ticket agent at the station on Lewiston hill of the Rome, Watertown & Ogdensburg Railroad.

A number of the old buildings are still standing in the Village. Some that are gone include; the freight station on south 8th street, a cold storage plant where Bell's market is now, and Kelly's coal and grain business which was near by. There was also an evaporator plant where Perkins Oil business is now.

I remember that there were large elm trees on each side of Center Street, which touched overhead. At the river there were two hotels, the Canadian Steamship Lines building , a fruit stand , and a depot where the train from Niagara Falls stopped to discharge passengers who wanted to take the steamer for Toronto. Gorge Route cars also stopped before continuing the gorge view trip by passing over the bridge to Canada.

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There was a spur track of the Gorge line which took people and freight to Fort Niagara and Fort Niagara Beach with a stop at Stella Niagara. Later this trip was made by bus.

Fishing in the river was popular, especially so when the fish "were Running". Then the men would go along the river edge toward the Falls and select a spot for fishing. One of the party would always remain there. We often obtained a bushel of perch and had a "cook out".

In 1920 the Town population was 2750 , and a Ford model T could be bought for \$310.00 in 1923. The depression years of 1929 and 1930 were felt in Lewiston village.

The Village population in 1950 was only 1626. By 1970 it had grown to 3321.

Vanderhoek

Thank you Bessie for telling us all these interesting things about the telephone service and life in Lewiston.