**Lesson Activity #2**

**The life of Mary McIntyre—**

**A Member of the Telephone Operators Auxiliary**

**March 1903, Vancouver British Columbia**

*(A work of historical fiction)*

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**Professional Dress Is A Must At All Times. It forms part of the discipline of a well run telephone exchange**. Library of Congress -USZ62-11823 *public domain*

**Introduction**

In the late fall of 1902, both the telephone operators and the linesmen in Vancouver launched the first strike in the Canadian telephone industry. This is glimpse into the life of one of the women in that dispute.

**Personal Details**

My name is Miss M. McIntyre and I am a 21 years old telephone operator at the Vancouver telephone exchange of the New Westminster and Burrard Telephone Company (NWBTC) whose offices are located at 603 West Hastings Street.

I live with my parents in the Fairview District of Vancouver at 677 West 7th Avenue near Heather Street.

My dad, Mr. James McIntyre, is a carpenter and my brother, Mr. Tom McIntyre, is a **linesman** who works for NWBTC.

Outside of my work as an operator, my church activities, and my social life, I serve on the executive of the Telephone Operators.

**Getting Ready for Work**

As you can see from the photograph of the three women below, my work wear is business attire but not too formal. I have several full length skirts that are wool broadcloth and trimmed on the front and sides as well as around the bottom. The skirts mostly have a flounced looked and are lined throughout.

For a top, I wear sleeved high-necked blouses or waists to go with the skirts. Two of my blouses have mutton-chop sleeves. One of them has a bodice ruffle across the top.

The loose-sleeved blouses allow greater movement for operating the switchboard. All of the blouses I have are white.

I have two pairs of shoes for work use. Both pairs are medium in height and are narrow with pointed toes.

I have a pair of waterproof boots for winter. I also have a suit that I wear to church and another dress that is reserved strictly for special occasions.

“Mother Using Her New Single Treadle Sewing Machine. Library of Congress-USZ62-53209. *public domain*

My mother, a skilled seamstress, makes most of my skirts, blouses and jackets using her new Singer

“Operators Ready For Work”/source: Pinterest: http://www.pinterest.com/creativecostume/1906-shirtwaist/

Sewing machine. It is a treadle model that you power

with your feet. She is both talented and fast.

Mother makes most of the most of the clothes for the family with the exception of shoes and some undergarments

Clothes off the rack are very expensive as are the items that you order from Eaton’s catalogue. For example a skirt, similar to the ones she makes is $7.50 (1/3 of my monthly wage) in the catalogue but she can make it for less than $2.50.

She just made me a new all wool double breasted jacket which will be great for work.

Our dry goods, including fabric, thread and ribbon come from Woodward’s store which has a dry goods department at its Westminster Avenue (Main Street) location. For some things we will use the mail order services of the T. Eaton Company in Toronto. Ordered items take about three weeks by mail.

**Getting to Work From Fairview to Downtown**

Getting to work involves walking from my house to 9th Avenue (Broadway) and then catching

Lucky, my guard dog who doesn’t guard

public transportation to West Hastings Street.

After four years of working downtown, Lucky, my Scottish terrier, still doesn’t seem to realize that his job is to stay at home and stand guard at house and my job is to get to work on time. Despite my protests, he invariably follows me for at least part of the distance and turns around only after I yell at him several times!

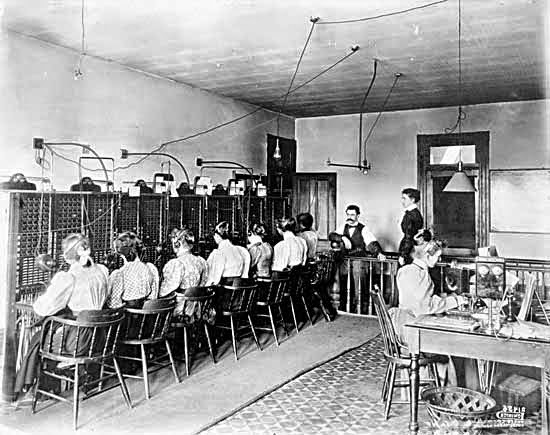
This effort usually adds an extra five to ten minutes to my time, which usually leaves me rushing to work.

**My Work as an Operator**

I have worked at the telephone exchange since 1898. I started when I was seventeen. You can see me and the other **“hello girls”** in the next picture. I am the one at the far end to the left with my back to the camera. I am a proud member of Telephone Operators Auxiliary which is part of **local** 213 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

Our **exchange** office was opened here in 1886 after our company was forced to move its operations from Port Moody when the Canadian Pacific Railway moved its **terminus** to Vancouver.

The telephone service was moved to Tilley’s bookstore on Hastings Street, which managed to escape the **great fire** of 1886 through good fortune. Mr. Tilley’s son, Charlie, a young teen, ran the exchange along with a teenaged friend, J.H. King. The two of them were responsible for ensuring the system ran on a 24 hour basis.



Vancouver Exchange of the New Westminster and Burrard Inlet Telephone Company, 1898. Studio: Dominion Photo Co. Vancouver Public Library 23795 *for educational use*

Charlie slept in the telephone office with a bell near his bed to so that he wouldn’t miss any calls. As there were only 100 telephones in Vancouver at the time, Charlie did manage to get a fair amount of sleep from what I have read.

Everything is different now. There have been some big changes since those early days. When I started working in 1898, fifteen years after the start of the company, our first long distance telephone was installed at the Province newspaper offices. Also that same year, the first pay phone was installed at English Bay, the most popular public beach in the city.

A new friend of Dad’s, Mr. Walter Nichols, says that Dr. James Lefevre and a British investor now own BC Telephone which, in turn, has controlling shares in our company as well as telephone companies in Victoria, Vernon, Nelson, Kootenay Lake, and Nanaimo. They have controlling shares of Canadian Western Telephone and Telegraph. There is talk that the individual companies will soon become one large organization, likely the BC Telephone Company.

Mr. Nichols ought to know, he is the editor of the Daily Province newspaper.

All the workers joined the union by the fall of 1902, because the working conditions were poor. As operators, we were earning $15 per month, we had to pay for the replacement if we were sick, and we were required to work six days per week despite promises that that we would have alternative Saturdays off. There were no provisions for overtime; you simply stayed at work until the job was finished. To top it off, the company employed unpaid trainees for long periods of time.

The linesmen were concerned about the length day, given the strenuous nature of the work.

Prior to the start of the strike, they were working for 9 hours per day at a pay rate of $3.00 per day (or $0.33 per hour). The use of apprentices was not regulated, which meant that the company could use cheaper apprentice labour to replace journey men anytime they wanted.

As of 1901, Vancouver has more than 29,000 residents and over 1,000 telephones. That is one telephone for every 29 people! We now have over 37 operators who work for the company in both Vancouver and New Westminster.

Most of the operators I work with are young single women between ages 17 and 25.

The company has a policy that they do not employ married women. Still, most of the girls are anxious to get married and have a family before they become too old and people start calling them a **spinster** or an old maid—a fate worse than death!

In order to keep their jobs some girls go off elsewhere to get married in the hopes that no one will find out. It doesn’t usually take long before someone tells our boss and they are ushered out the door.

**Limited Options for Women**

While I have my complaints, I am happy to have this job. Even if you are not married there are few respectable sources of employment for women. Other jobs open to women include **domestic service**, day care, dressmaking, working in factories, teaching, and nursing.

I would need more education if I wanted to go into teaching and nursing and I am not sure that I want to spend more time going to school. I attended Vancouver High School at Oak and West 12th for four years and decided it was time to find work.

I didn’t want factory work because the work is dirty, the pay is very poor and the work is hard. Elizabeth, one of my school friends who lives just down the street, works in a clothing factory and she says that her girls have just organized the first union of women workers, a local of the Shirt, Waist and Laundry Workers International Union.

Elizabeth and her co-workers concluded that unionization is necessary because the **sweatshops** are a tough way to survive. She told me one local clothing manufacturer employed a woman hatmaker without pay for one year and then offered her $1.00 per week while the men were making $10 to $15 per week and other women were making $2.00 per week.

**Benefits of Being an Operator**

Compared to most other jobs, telephone work is clean, interesting and carries a lot of prestige with it. We even have visitors come to the exchange to marvel and watch us as we talked to customers who are many miles away from our Hastings Street location. It seems like a miracle compared to the telegraph and the work is exciting at times. Your voice is heard over the line, it is much more personal and more people get to use the system at once, compared to the telegraph.

As a result of our strike in November and December of 1902, the telephone workers, both operators and linesmen, have their first written contract and it has now been implemented.

My new salary is now $20 per month not $15. In two years time, it will be $30 per month.

In addition to the new pay increase, the length of our work week has now been reduced and we now have three paid sick leave days per month.

Under the new contract, the company can no longer employ unpaid trainees for more than 10 days. After that they must employ them on a paid basis starting at $20 per week. All of the employees, with the exception of managers must be in the union.

Despite the new contract, there are still some significant issues that my co-workers would like to fix in our next round of negotiations.

Aside from long hours on the switchboard, our complaint list includes: the requirement to wear the **head telephones** at all times, too few breaks, too much sitting with little chance to stretch or move around, upper body and neck stiffness, writers’ cramps in the hands as a result of constantly inserting and removing cables, and unexpected high pitched sounds that we hear through our head telephones. In the long run, we think that these sounds could prove harmful to our hearing.

http://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2012/06/30/archives/then-and-now/operators-heard-1907.html/attachment/3phoneat500

In addition, we are required to take all the responsibility for electric shocks that we receive from the switchboard. Like the linesmen, we have concerns about whether or not we can be electrocuted while operating the board.

We also have to memorize the position of hundreds of telephone numbers on the board directly in front of us which leaves us with headaches and stress.

While the company is small right now, we can see that the telephone work is becoming more regulated. Individual operators are having less say in the planning and conduct of our work.

We have learned that the manager in Victoria is forcing new operators to sign a copy of the Central Office Regulations when they are hired. We don’t have a copy of them yet, but we have heard they include such things as the requirement to remain at work as long as necessary and sit at their work station with their head telephones at all times. The list goes on. These regulations sound more like the army than working for a company.

Given that there is one supervisor for every three or four workers, we could face a lot of direct harassment from our management if these new work rules are introduced.

Our chief operator says that she doesn’t listen in our calls but she does hear all of our side of the conversation. She is there to make sure that we handle each call correctly and in accordance with company procedures.

We are expected to use only the language approved by the company. Numbers can only be read one way. (The number *2000* could only be spoken as “two oh, double-oh.” *4001* was “four, double-oh, one.”)

The company also directed us to give the time in “railroad style”: not “twelve minutes to nine” but “eight forty-eight.” The rest of our speech is limited to a handful of approved expressions, including:

“Number?”, “They don’t answer.”

“Line busy.”

“Line out of order.”

“I have no such number; please refer to your directory.”

“Telephone has been taken out.”

“I will give you Information.”

“I will give you the Chief Operator.”

Lastly, an operator has to be fast.

**Central** is expected to take care of six or seven customers a minute. During our busiest periods rush hour we can be expected to supply dozens and dozens of connections in a 60 minute period.

**My Brother Tom**

As for **linemen**, my brother Tom is lucky because he is on the permanent staff at the telephone company. Many of the linesmen are only temporary and are called in when there are specific projects underway.

The **linemen** have a difficult and dangerous job that involves constructing the physical plant, setting the poles, and stringing the wire. Serious falls and electrocutions are all-too-frequent an occurrence.

Just to be safe, Tom has had his will and testament drawn up and **notarized** and he has taken out a life insurance policy to look after his family in the event of his death at work.

Tom has mixed views about the women being part of his union. He is appreciative of support that the operators gave the **linemen** during the dispute last year but he doesn’t agree that the two groups should be bargaining together as the operators have much lower wages then the linesmen and he is concerned that this might have a negative impact his wage negotiations when they are bargained together. As well the women outnumber the men in Local 213 and Tom thinks that the married men have more of a stake in the outcome of negotiations than the single women.

Tom and I often discuss the role of women. I think that they should be allowed to work when they are married. He disagrees. I think that women should have the right to vote. He disagrees. Only three years ago (1899), a bill was introduced into the BC legislature to extend provincial voting rights to women. It was narrowly defeated in a vote of 15 (yes) to 17 (no). I hear that here are at least five US states that have given women the right to vote!

Why not here?

**My Boyfriend**

I have a young suitor who usually takes me out on Saturday night. His name is Mr. Ian Stewart. I know him from our church (Fairview Presbyterian Church).

Mr. Stewart is a little older than me and works for a construction company as a carpenter. He has just completed his apprenticeship and is currently working on the new Heather Pavilion of the Vancouver General Hospital which is due to open in 1906.

Now that is settled into his job as a **journeyman** carpenter, I am hoping that he might find enough courage to propose matrimony.

He takes me to church socials which are held on Saturday afternoons, something that my new work schedule will sometimes allow me to do as I now have one Saturday afternoon in six as a holiday.

In the summer we go for long strolls down to Stanley Park or I go to English Bay with Ian and my friends to relax on the beach or a swim in the water. 

Me (centre) and My Friends Relaxing at English Bay (my boyfriend is not In the picture) **(Circa 1901) City of Vancouver Archives AM54-S4-: Be P97.1**

Sometimes Mr. Steward and I will just go window shopping either to Woodward’s new store at Hastings and Abbot or at the Hudson’s Bay Company store at Georgia and Granville.

Other times, we just walk along Westminster (Main Street) to see all of the shops or walk to the other direction to visit the new Carnegie Library at the corner of Westminster (Main) and Hastings. We also participate in the Telephone Operators’ Social events.

The condition of my living with my parents is that I must abide by their rules. As my mother is very religious, that means that Sundays are set aside for attending church and studying the bible. Her Sunday rule is that the only social activity that can occur must relate to a church activity. She prepares all of our Sunday meals on Saturday so that she can keep to her own rule. Her other Sunday rule is that there can be no card playing, dancing or other amusements on Sunday. Under her rules, going for walks is permitted. Ian and I try hard to honour her rules.

**Telephone Operators Executive**

I am now a member at large of the executive of the Telephone Operators Auxiliary of Local 213. I am also sitting on a joint social committee (joint with the linemen) of five women and five men which has the responsibility of organizing social activities for Local 213.

Just six weeks after the end of the strike, we just a great dance and social event at O’Brien Hall on Wednesday, January 28 and a good time was had by all. Eighty couples came to the event. Ian and I went of course. The telephone operators entertained themselves and their friends at dancing, games and food.

Plans are in the works for a union picnic at Stanley Park.

The big event will be in the late fall, close to Christmas. We have already booked the Pender Street Hall. The electrical decorations will be one of the features of the gathering and we are hoping to use coloured lights for the first time.

We are planning for over two hundred. A formal dinner is being planned along with dancing to the live music of a local band.

I am so looking forward to this event!