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Date: Interview recorded in 2010 about events in the 1960s

Description: Interview with Swans Islander Gwen May about working on the Island's telephone switchboard

Interview with Gwen May about about working on the Island's telephone switchboard in the 1960s

I am Gwen May I grew up here in Minturn and moved when I was twelve, over to Atlantic. I was never idle any summer right from the time I was thirteen. I cleaned houses, cleaned houses for summer people. I had to earn my own money for my gas. I had my own vehicle. It was a little yellow, Plymouth convertible. We would get in it with a bunch of girls and just take off and go 'ridin' and 'ridin'.

That was a great car. Ah, I paid fifty dollars, I think, for it. Yeah it was my own money because the summer I was fourteen I worked for the 'um telephone company and the old lady that lived there she was on duty all the time so I just sit there and I loved to do it. I did. I really enjoyed it 'settin' up in that great big chair. I felt like such a little person ya know because the chair was so big and the switchboard was this big black thing with all these chords coming out of it and if somebody rang in and I had the head phones on I would have to say, "Number please" (laugh) and they would say four ring two. Or they'd say hook me up with Normie Burns. So I would plug the phone into the four.

There were four or five lines on the island so the four was the line number and I would plug it into the number four line and then I'd crank and it would be if his ring is two it was two long rings and I would literally with a little crank, crank out two rings. We were four rings thirty one. And it was three long rings and a short one and the ten people that were on that line could hear us. You could hear that number ringing in every house.

So I am going to back up to 1950 when my husband was born. Nine o'clock at night he was born. The switchboard was off. But they let the call come through from the mainland to announce that he was born. So Theo called her mother to tell her she'd had the baby and when that phone rang and everybody knew she was off there, had gone off in labor and so they all picked up the phone all ten people which were probably all relatives and she said that it's a boy and that's how his birth was announced on this phone system we had.

I could listen in. I didn't very often but if it was a couple of the guy like my cousin, David Orcutt that was just a few years older, my very special cousin, I might listen to one of his conversations with one of his buddies for a few minutes and it didn't last and it never was, I didn't ever say anything about it it's just fun. And at nine o'clock as I say the switchboard was off. People that were on the same line, knew they were, and if they wanted to talk and have a conversation after nine o'clock they would pick up the phone, not ring it and wait and pretty quick somebody else would pick up the phone, their

next door neighbor, and they could talk until six o'clock the next morning if they wanted to (laugh)

So my sister did, this is another fun story. My sister and her girlfriend did this one night at the girlfriend's house and they picked up the phone and they heard these women talking, these old ladies. So I guess Lottie let it be known she was on the line, and Lottie said, "Who is this?" She said, "This is Bessie Joyce." Well there were two Bessie Joyce and Lottie only knew one of them and she knew that, that one had died (laugh) She knew that the one she knew had died. And she didn't know about the other one. And when that woman said she was Bessie Joyce, Lottie freaked out. (laugh) Thought she was talking to this dead woman and she hung up. She didn't try that again (laugh) I know.