



Rose Mielke to be honored

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office for the name and directions to the fire.

"I have a lot of good memories of working at the telephone office," says Mielke. She likens the exchange to an information and answering service and recalls the regular visits from a cemetery monument salesman who would check at the office for recent deaths. Mielke says that many times people would simply call the operator for help in locating "so and so" in town to relay a message. "Most people in the area knew where everyone lived," she said.

Exchange gives way to present

When modern phone lines came to the area in 1956, it was a matter of three years before the town was completely connected with the new lines and dial system. Mielke continued to work at the exchange after graduating from Willow River High School in 1958 and before the Pineland Telephone Company in McGregor bought the updated service from the family in 1959.

A month after graduating, Mielke took a temporary job as a secretary-business manager of Willow River School with then district superintendent Carl Aakhus. After a weeklong vacation visiting an aunt in Kansas, Mielke returned to Willow River and a permanent position in the superintendent's office that she held for 39 years. She assisted in additional posts at the school, including yearbook advisor for about 13 years and deputy



Herbert Mielke sits at the switchboard of the onetime Willow River Telephone Exchange that was located near the corner of Willow and Main streets. He and his wife, Mary, owned and operated the service from 1944 to 1959 — the final 15 years that the 45-year company served the area before the dial phone system took over.

treasurer for the school board.

"Aakhus taught me everything I know. He was a wonderful man," said Mielke, who retired in June of 1997.

After selling the phone exchange, her folks moved into another home in town and took part-time jobs at the nursery in Willow River, where they worked until 1971.

Since retiring, Mielke has joined the Pine County Genealogy Society and is currently

contributing to an upcoming booklet that focuses on life in the northern part of the county from the 1900s to 1950s. "We are looking for old pictures of families, buildings, and such," said Mielke.

She enjoys reading, crocheting, canning and has taken up photography and gardening. Mielke has appeared four times on Duluth's PBS cooking show, "Julie's Kitchen," with entries ranging from a layered salad to

green tomato relish.

She cherishes her artifacts from the reign of the Willow River Telephone Exchange, like some old candlestick phones, phone pole climber, and other equipment. Mielke chuckles at the notion of holding an antique phone to her ear as she cruises along the parade route on July 25 — and perhaps speaking the reply she once used as operator, "Willow."