

# Rose Mielke named grand marshal

ASKOV AMERICAN July 23, 2009

## Willow River Days Friday-Sunday

Kathleen Mandy

Rose Mielke was 9 years old when she began working at the Willow River Telephone Exchange. She often worked the switchboard after school and on weekends for her parents, Herbert and Mary (Stelmach) Mielke, who operated the exchange in the 1940s and '50s. "If my parents were busy or needed help, I would answer the phone."

Sixty years later, Mielke is privileged to sit as grand marshal at the July 25 parade during this year's Willow River Area Days celebration July 24-26. She shares her recognition with the event's featured business, the Willow River Telephone Company, which came to the village in 1914 and is represented on the event buttons available for purchase at various sites throughout the community.

If she could, Mielke would proudly transfer the honor to her parents, who purchased the telephone office with 51 phone lines in December of 1944. "I always wanted my mom to be grand marshal," Mielke said. "But she never was." Long before Mielke's mother passed away 10 years ago and her father in 1971, Herbert and Mary kept the phone lines buzzing for the final 15 of the 45 years the telephone company serviced the area.

Before buying the telephone exchange, her parents lived with Mielke and her older brother, Joe, in a two-room house on a dairy farm outside of town, where Mary tended to the cows while her husband hauled cattle to the stockyards in South St. Paul. Operating the telephone service meant moving to town and into a bigger, five-room home on Willow Street, which also contained a room for the switchboard. "We thought we had a large house," said Mielke, who notes that the original site, though renovated, still stands near the corner of Willow and Main streets.

Mielke started working in the telephone office in 1949, soon after her younger brother, Herb Jr., was born. "I learned how to answer the calls and run the switchboard," she said, while her mother cared for her brother, and her dad serviced the telephone lines. At the time, business had grown to nearly 70 subscribers, and for the ensuing 10 years Mielke worked whenever her parents requested help at the exchange that ran 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

She often assisted her dad in repairing the lines by hoisting his tools along a pulley to his spot on the telephone poles. "I still have some of the old pole climbers," says Mielke. "And I continue to use the old



Photo by Kathleen Mandy

Rose Mielke, grand marshal for the Willow River Area Days parade on July 25, stands at the original site of the Willow River Telephone Exchange near the corner of Willow and Main streets. Although it has been renovated over the years, Mielke says the structure is similar to what it was from 1944-59, the years she helped her parents, Herbert and Mary Mielke, operate the service. The telephone company is featured on this year's festival button. Below are some of the antique phones Mielke once used at the exchange.

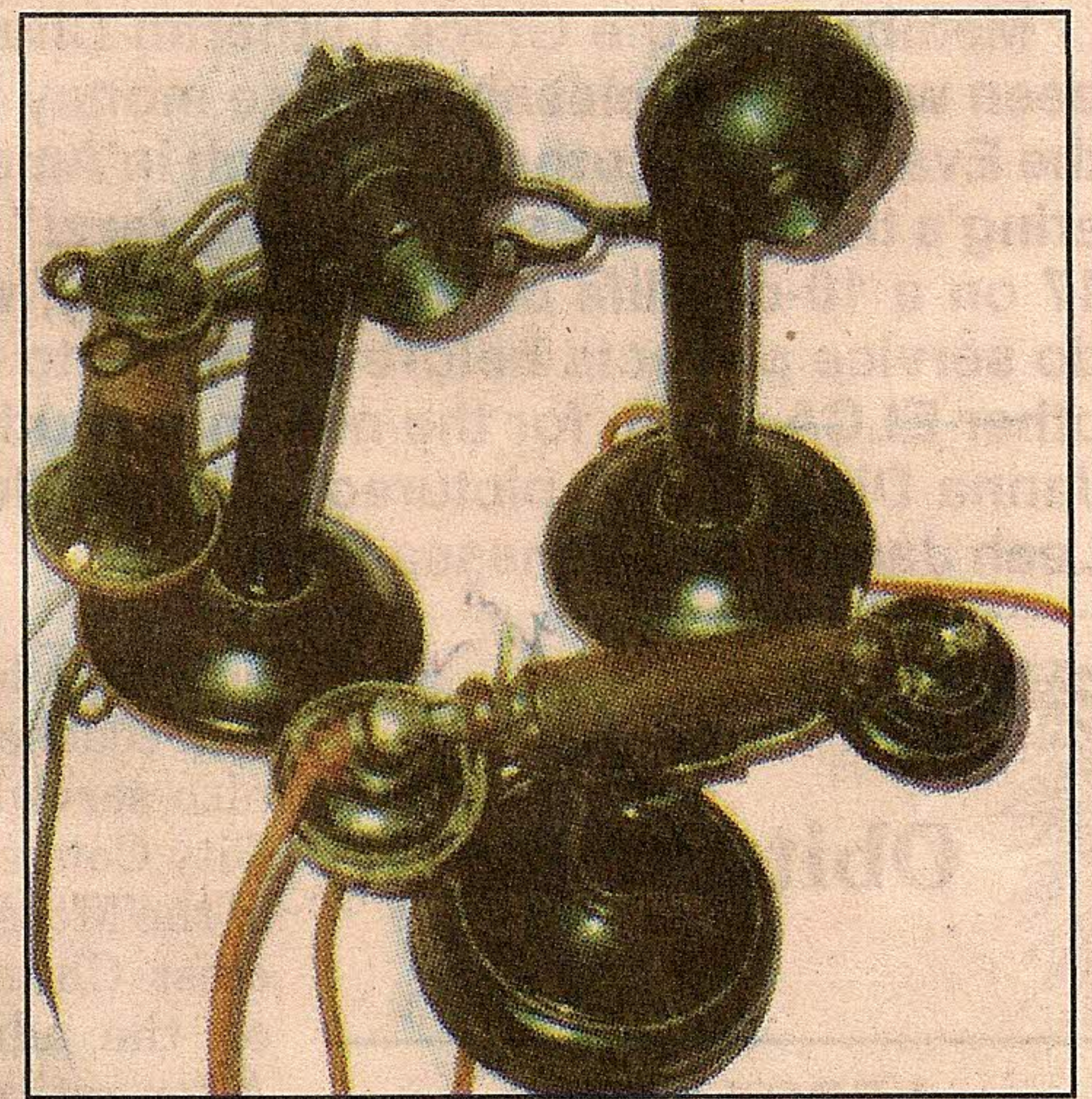
telephone wire for my clothesline."

By 1957 the telephone exchange provided service to 120 subscribers in the Willow River and Sturgeon Lake area.

And eventually, said Mielke, "I knew all the telephone numbers without looking them up." She proceeds to recite some of the phone numbers used at the switchboard, like, "17-F2. That was the number to the Mercantile," she recalls with satisfaction.

Mielke explained the operation. The switchboard of circuits and numbers was run by electricity, with a hand-crank and battery backup. A mouthpiece and ear receiver were extended over the board, and a bell and switch were situated behind the board and turned on at night to alert the Mielkes to nighttime emergency calls.

When a call came into the switchboard (with one long ring), Mielke answered with the reply "Willow" and connected the call using a pattern of rings assigned to each number after the letter "F." For instance, a call to 9-F61 would be transferred by plugging into the number 9 and pressing one long ring for "6" and one short ring for "1." Long distance calls were connected through the main line in Pine City, which forwarded the charges to the telephone exchange. Subscribers were



billed each month for any long distance calls, along with a residential service fee of \$2.50 and \$4.50 for businesses.

The telephone service was used for various purposes and, most importantly, for fire alerts. If someone spotted a fire, he or she would call the exchange to flip a switch to the town's fire bell. Volunteer firefighters would then call the telephone

•GRAND MARSHAL  
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