

1972

## Phone Call to Hitler

Georgie Orcutt

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Story: "Phone Call to Hitler"  
Storyteller: Georgie Orcutt  
Town: Ashland, ME  
NA 2864 CD 455 Track 3  
Collector: Helen K. Atchison  
Date: 1972

The story heard here centers around the early-ish years of the telephone and the under-researched history of prank calls. The telephone was the product of invention and improvement by many people, the best known being Alexander Graham Bell. From its inception until many decades later, phone calls, especially long distance calls, required operators to manually connect lines on a switchboard. Georgie Orcutt, who worked for many years as an operator in Ashland, Maine, said that even in the earliest years her job was very busy and she connected many long distance calls. The switchboard and phone lines worked such that households on a single line (that is, physically connected to the same wire along a street) could call each other without assistance from an operator. However, local calls on different lines required an operator to move plugs connected by a wire around the switchboard to patch calls through. For long distance calls, operators patched through to one switchboard after another, which required an operator at each location, along the way between the caller and his or her desired destination. This required considerable time and could be stopped at any point along the way if the line was busy. In the story heard here, this explains why Georgie was talking to the operator in Presque Isle, a larger call center through which she likely routed many long distance calls.

This story also points back to a unique picture of a woman working outside the home at a time when that was still fairly uncommon. Though the time frame of this story - the early 1940s - saw many women going to work during the war, by this time Georgie had been an operator for many years. When she began as an operator in 1906, her place in the field was still unusual. Telephone operators were mostly young men in the beginning, but for many reasons the workforce shifted to young women. Among these reasons were the pranks young men liked to play on each other, some of which were probably the earliest forerunners of the prank call (although people have almost certainly always played practical jokes on each other). More importantly, however, Victorian gender norms and social mores made telephone operator an acceptable job for women who wanted or needed to work outside the home. The glaring exception to this set of values was the somewhat technical nature of the work, which was usually the province of men. Operators were originally paid low wages, but by the time Georgie began the job wages had grown to a respectable one dollar per day for a twelve to sixteen hour shift.

Transcript:

I was working one night, and, during World War II, and I got a call from Portage. A couple flyers - what do I want to say there? - Bud McKinney and Jerry Slead were having a party and Jerry wanted to put in a call to Hitler. I didn't know hardly what to do with the call, but I talked to the Presque Isle operator and we kept telling him the line was busy. And finally he called in and said, 'Well, I'll talk with Mussolini.' So after a while I told him they were both out. He said, 'Hitler may be out, but I know Old Moosey isn't!'

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Source: For more on the history of women as telephone operators, see Martin, Michele. "Feminisation of the Labour Process in the Communication Industry: The Case of Telephone Operators, 1876-1940," *Labour/Le Travail*, 22 (1988), 139-62.

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