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Doris Chase, Brownville Telephone Operator, Awarded Vail Medal, Part 2

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Transcript of a sound recording in MS 608, WLBZ Radio Station Records, Bangor, Maine, 1931-1973

Title: Doris Chase, Brownville Telephone Operator, Awarded Vail Medal, Part 2

Date: Circa 1952

Recording number: D 16.60; CD 9, track 3

Length of recording: 10:35

[transcript begins]

[Remarks of Leon W. Weir, Assistant Vice President of the Personnel Department of the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company, continued from part 1.]

WEIR: The thought of service first is more than devotion to an organization, inspiring as that may be. It comes from a sense of individual responsibility in the public service. Many of these acts and services are so outstanding that they deserve some token of recognition more enduring than the congratulations of associations and friends. Vail Medal Awards were created to give this recognition. A Bell System fund was set up in 1920 as a memorial to Theodore N. Vail, former president of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, to perpetuate his ideals of responsibility for public service. This fund provides awards to telephone people in cases which reflect the Bell System's highest tradition of loyalty and devotion to duty and for performance of acts beyond those required in the normal, ordinary pursuit of the business. They are associated invariably with emergencies and the appraisals are the results or accomplishments are necessarily coupled with the consideration of the nature of the emergencies. In an appraisal of the degree of accomplishment in any case, the main fact to consider is the extent to which the emergency was controlled by the action of the employee concerned.

The requirements for a Vail Medal are high. A recipient must have exercised good judgement, initiative, resourcefulness, courage, and fortitude. The act accomplished must have been worthwhile and outstanding and beyond that which would be expected of an employee through his telephone training as a part of the day-to-day job. The Vail Medal Committee of the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company unanimously agreed that Mrs. Doris Chase, night operator of your Brownville office, met every requirement in her response to an emergency caused by fire on this very site on February 4th, 1951. She displayed courage, resourcefulness, and made effective use of telephone facilities at great personal risk. A recommendation for the award of a Vail Medal was forwarded to the national Vail Committee in New York. This committee reviewed the case and without hesitation, unanimously awarded a silver medal to Mrs. Chase. This silver medal is the first ever awarded to an employee in the state of Maine since the inception of the plan in 1920. It is but the 9th such award made in the entire territory of the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company since 1920, or a period of over 30 years. You will thus appreciate the great honor so richly deserved that has come to Mrs. Chase.

The Vail Medal Committee of the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company extend their sincere personal congratulations to Mrs. Chase and are very happy that their recommendation in her case was favorably acted upon by the National Vail Medal Committee.

HUTCHINSON: Thank you, Mr. Weir. Mr. Erskine N. White, Vice President in charge of Operations for the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company has been good enough to take the time to come up here this evening to present the Theodore N. Vail Silver Medal Award to Mrs. Doris Chase. Mr. White.

WHITE: I'm going to let you people in on a secret. When I came in tonight, I saw many people working like beavers and under such circumstances I'm always interested to know who's responsible for the success of such an event as this. I asked many people and I got several different answers so that I know many people were involved, but I finally got the truth. And I want you to know what I got because I think you'll agree with me. I finally ran into Mrs. Chase, and I said, "Mrs. Chase, Who is responsible for this?" "Well," she said, "Mr. Barker did the work and I did the worrying." [Audience laughs.] I'm sure that we are indebted to both Mr. Barker for his work and to Mrs. Chase for her worrying and I strongly suspect that if there is something worthwhile that you want done in this town of Brownsville, get Mrs. Chase to worry about it a little bit.

The presentation of the Vail Medal is of particular significance to us in the New England Company. It's significant for several reasons. One, because of its infrequency. We don't often have the chance to present a Vail Medal. It's rare, and therefore when it occurs it's an outstanding event. The second reason is that in recognizing acts of noteworthy service, it emphasizes the importance of the human factor in our business, which is rendering public service. I don't treat that lightly, either, because in the final analysis it's people who perform these acts. It's people who display courage, and people who manifest fortitude, and people who render service, and we try never to forget that the strength of our organization is in the people that make it up and not in the poles and wire and switchboard that make up our physical plant. In addition to that I think there's another reason why this is a significant event and it's because of the very definite thrill that there is, that comes when we have the opportunity to say, "Well done," to one of our people. And nonetheless significant is it is the fact that at a time like this we can share this experience with our friends. And may I say that your presence here tonight has meant a great deal to us, I know it has to Mrs. Chase, but it has to us also. And so I say that this event tonight is of particular significance to us. The New England Company takes pride in claiming Mrs. Chase as a member of its family of telephone workers. We are indeed very proud of her.

Now I have a very pleasant task, but before I actually make the presentation to Mrs. Chase, I think that it is only fitting that we review the events of that evening once more while we are here together tonight. And I shall read as it is outlined on the citation which I shall present to Mrs. Chase.

At approximately 5:20 a.m. on the morning of February 4th, 1951, a pounding came on the locked door of the central office and a woman screamed, "Fire, Doris. Get out quick. " And I believe those words will never be spoken as they were probably spoken that night. The woman who occupied the apartment across from the room housing the switchboard, on the second floor of the frame building, escaped with

her family by crawling on their hands and knees down the already smoldering stairway and was unable to save a single possession. Heavy black smoke immediately came sweeping into the central office. Mrs. Chase repeatedly pushed the fire alarm button and then heedless of her personal safety, she remained at the switchboard calling the Fire Chief, the agent, and the owner of the general store located in the building to acquaint them with the seriousness of the fire. She requested exchanges in nearby towns to generally spread the alarm and connected three outside circuits with telephones in the town so that communication could be continued. Smoke veiled the switchboard, but she worked by memory until she could no longer render service. By that time, the fire escape was cut off by the fire and the stairway was ablaze. She made her way to the window, the only means of escape, and still clad in her nightclothes climbed out and stood on the 8 inch ledge that ran around the building.

[Although it is clear that the program continued, the recording ends there. A note on the original 16-inch record says, "Small cut not included."]

[transcript ends]

For more information about this transcript, audio recording, or other materials in Special Collections at the University of Maine, contact:

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