

OUR CALCOM FAMILY

Many of us knew the history of Foresthill Telephone Co. before Sebastian took over several years ago from Rose & Ralph Hoeper, but the more ancient history was even more colorful.

By 1906 the Bell System realized it should sell off unprofitable rural areas which led to the formation of the independent company in 1907.

By 1943 a Miss Lockhart purchased the Co. from a Mr. Langstaff for the grand sum of \$350 which included the old switchboard, miles of rusting open wire and twelve subscribers. Huh? She was no stranger to that switchboard as for a long while she had worked for the Bell System as the original switchboard operator, way back prior to the original sale date in 1907. Later, it was reported that after World War II requests for phone service in Foresthill "skyrocketed." The facilities were in a "shabby" state, which led Miss Lockhart to hire Ralph Hoeper who quickly became the "entire plant department". When I had the pleasure later to work for Ralph for a short while, I counted that he was virtually five different departments all at once!

In some sense I can say I lived much of the glorious history and rich tradition of Siskiyou Telephone Co. I drove over the mountain tops where Siskiyou maintained a first rate microwave system. I saw all of the remote "toll station areas" Siskiyou served. General Manager Dave Meyer showed me around all that rugged country; it often took a whole day just to see one rural exchange. He bragged how he would invite the PUC staff up for his long rides and then it would take 3-5 years for them ever to agree to return - - gee I wonder why! I saw first hand the expertise of microwave expert Brent Wilson, the dedication of COE supervisor Jack Stacher and the leadership and vision of Dave Meyer. Dave had an office wall decorated with proof most of his fishing stories were definitely accurate. Course some of his telecom stories included some big smiles and as much flair as his fishing adventures. After years of great microwave success with decreasing capacity, something had to give, so a fiber optic backbone idea was hatched, primarily by OSP engineer George White who coordinated construction of new fiber facilities to eventually replace the old microwave hops.

Of course Eleanor Hendricks was the quintessential telephone company owner, one of several highly successful female executives with which I had the pleasure of working. She was very firm but very fun! She made it very clear my first visit to Siskiyou that she was President of the Board and would willingly answer any questions about Board issues but if you wanted to talk about Co. operations—"go see Dave!" She had hired an expert and never second guessed him once. She loved to talk about how on billing days she would hand deliver bills to business customers in the Ft. Jones town area. There was plenty of time for brief socializing but assuredly no better way to cement business relationships than through personal contact. Eleanor also had a very close personal relationship with the Company switchboard for well over fifty years. True to her style she once told CalCom Connect that as she had seen several other small telcos taken over by giants, she never wanted that for Siskiyou.

Before they had to drop their operator services there was well deserved angst. You see their operators were not just operators they were personal servants and best friends of their customers. Chief Operator Doris Utz personally connected an elderly blind customer who relied on Siskiyou—the lady had a very hard time with impersonal "city" type operators after the service was routed to Oakland. The most recent history of the Company has included the expert leadership of Eleanor's son Jim Hendricks, grandson Rod Hendricks, and President Jim Lowers.



Luanne Silkwood
President
Ponderosa Telephone

Luanne Silkwood has been President of the Ponderosa Telephone Co. for well over thirty years and clearly echoes the sentiments expressed by Eleanor from Siskiyou. She'd like to see the Company remain an independent for another century! Her leadership at Ponderosa has been nothing less than spectacular. She has always prided herself on staying behind the scenes during her years as President, instead trusting the leadership of Matt Boos, Dan Douglas or others. Yet she has always been an active leader and also served several years as Chair Person of the CalCom Board of Directors.

Her father Jess Bigelow told the most colorful stories I have perhaps ever heard during drives up the steep Sierra Nevada mountains to Shaver Lake, Big Creek and beyond. He was elderly with a shaky hand when I first met him yet firm and resolute in thinking and direction for the company. He had a vision for a very large loan to finance major expansion and system upgrades long before his peers.

The stage business to Yosemite is what literally drove the Bigelow family business but also what drove them to launch a telephone business as well. They needed to communicate, make reservations and order products. Jesse not only drove a huge stage coach by age eight, soon he was stringing telephone line for his mom, tree to tree, fence to fence or wherever he could attach. Never one to shy away from a challenge, when later someone [gee I wonder who?] came up with a crazy idea for the Company to head down to the California desert, Ponderosa accepted the challenge and did a bang up job. Cima was population five, so they put the CO on a nearby hilltop – with no customers in sight, and strung a cable down to the town. Then they put microwave hops over half of the empty desert to avoid the desert tortoises. Part of that challenge was providing service to the last US Post Office without a phone! The clincher was Alan Shearer's famous flat rock facing passive reflector that apparently still works to this day.



Sharon Lundgren
President
Volcano Telephone

Sharon Lundgren as President of Volcano Telephone continues the excellent tradition of special and most fascinating female executives amongst CalCom companies. I was privileged to observe how Sharon's strong character traits followed closely upon the success laid down by her father Jim Welch. All of his strength, vision and commitment was designed to further the Company's goals. Almost a spittin image, but really Sharon was a lot more polite! You see when Jim called it was never hello, how are you? Rather a brusque, "Kirby there?" He kinda barked, no small talk from Jim!.

But what has set Sharon apart from her peers is her unrelenting generosity—to her employees in need, to her community in Amador County and to her industry. Unless you've been in her kitchen watching the delight and unabashed glee she takes in whipping up a fabulous meal for a small crowd of 100 hungry golfers you cannot fully appreciate who she really is. And you know what she talks about after cooking and cleaning up? Either the next big community gig she gets to cook for or some new delicious recipe she can't wait to try out. Sharon once even arranged to buy peanut butter in bulk before a rumored price spike, to enhance the value of an upcoming donation. Such generosity is clearly a passion unique amongst Telco executives.



Ellen Tower Calaveras Telephone

I have a special place in my heart for Jim Tower and Howard and Ellen Tower, and the rich tradition of old Barbed Wire Jim who founded Calaveras Telephone way back in 1895 while making an interconnection deal with old Alexander Graham Bell himself!

Some leaders are a bit reserved but not Ellen Tower. She really puzzled me because she seemed to always be putting on an act I could not exactly comprehend. She called Howard "Mr. Tower" as if I was doing something horribly wrong to call him Howard. I was perplexed. Why would any wife call her husband "Mr." and especially in a most polite and respectful way? When I got it that it might be an English formality thing, it made some sense. But it was much deeper and richer than that. Sincerity of the highest order, sacrificial love and respect rarely seen amongst ordinary humans, you might have even thought you were in the company of angels. Clearly the gleam in Howard's eye when Ellen spoke literally spoke volumes. If any man enjoyed an inspiring wife, it was Howard Tower.

Obviously one could go on and on about the pioneering and entrepreneurial spirit of so many marvelous industry leaders such as Bill Sebastian, Bob Edgar, Harry Baker, John Wise, Virgil Roome or so many others. Assuredly telecom is an industry with an adventurous history and rich tradition.