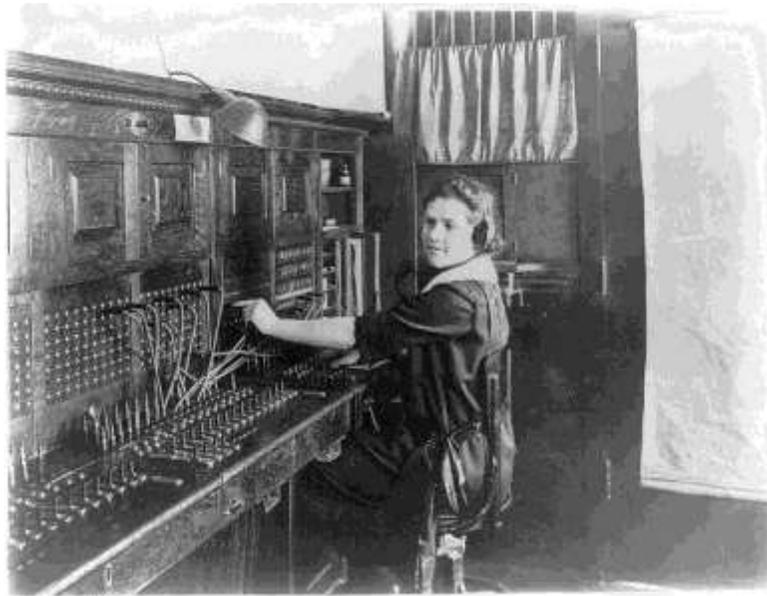


# IOWA HISTORY



*(Courtesy Library of Congress)*

The telephone system in the 1913 required the skills of a switchboard operator

## **Party Line Listener Helps Capture Thief**

On the morning of September 25, 1913, Leon, Iowa Sheriff F.L. Lorey received a phone call from Deputy Sheriff Bob Craig in Shenandoah. The Shenandoah law officer had gotten word from authorities in Fremont County, Nebraska, that a horse thief was hiding out near his town. Craig didn't catch the thief in Shenandoah, but believed he was on his way to Leon. He wanted Lorey to be on the lookout for the bandit.

It was a time when rural phones were part of the “party line” system—phone lines were shared and neighbors could listen in on conversations. It happened that Mrs. Joe Mullin (it was also a time when women's names were lost because they used their husband's names) who lived on a farm east of Leon was listening in on the phone call between Sheriff Lorey and Deputy Sheriff Craig. Sometimes party lines could be an annoyance—especially for law enforcement personnel who wanted privacy in some matters. But Lorey and Craig didn't mind that Mrs. Mullin was a little snoopy because she helped them find the horse thief who had been conducting a brisk business throughout Missouri, Nebraska and Iowa!

Mrs. Mullin quickly notified Sheriff Lorey that a man (and horses) answering the description of the thief were camped near her farm. (It's unclear if she interrupted the phone

conversation—or if she called the sheriff *after* he finished his conversation with the Shenandoah deputy sheriff.)

Mrs. Mullin's tip led Sheriff Lorey to the site of the man camped out on the Mullin farm. And he turned out to be the horse thief from Nebraska. He had four stolen horses and a buggy.

The sheriff from Nebraska traveled to Leon with two men who were able to identify the horse thief who had stolen the teams, buggy and harnesses from their livery barn. The sheriff recognized the bandit as a prisoner he had held in his jail as a "suspicious character" for a few days. At the time he had in his possession a team of sorrel mares and was trying to sell them for \$100. The sheriff had to release the fellow after a few days because he never found the owner of the sorrels. They suspected the thief had gotten rid of the sorrels somewhere in Nebraska before stealing the teams he was caught with in Leon, Iowa.

When he was arrested the thief had \$22.95 in cash along with "several new pocket combs," a razor and several pocket knives. The man's name was a mystery as he went by different aliases—sometimes Webster or Martin. And other times Tom Walker. He was described to be 28 or 30 years old and of slight build with "several weeks' growth of beard."

Sheriff Lorey said he was "evidently a professional and an artist." He had started his crime spree in Memphis, Missouri, coming up through Iowa, into Nebraska and back half-way across Iowa before being captured by the Leon sheriff.

Sheriff Lorey received a \$25 reward for finding the stolen teams and would claim another \$25 after the thief's conviction. It's not known if he shared the reward with Mrs. Mullin.

Source

"Captured Horse Thief," *Leon Reporter*, Sept 25, 1913.

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