

The Phone Box



For weeks all the talk had been of a public telephone coming to Enniskillen.

I claimed to have insider knowledge thanks to the two Telephone Exchange girls who lodged with my grandmother.

'They say it's coming,' I proudly informed my school friends. 'Anyone will be able to make a call.'

'But, who would you call?'

'Anyone,' I said, although truth to tell I knew no one who had a phone.

Not even my two uncles who lived in England had one. But, the idea of being able to talk to someone on the phone thrilled me. Of course we had all seen how important a telephone was at the truppenny matinees in the Regal cinema: the trembling dialling of 999, the mysterious caller at the end of the line in murder mysteries.

The Diamond, at the top of Eden Street where I lived, was fenced off and work began at the side of Blake's pub. Then, coming home from school on Friday, there it was; a red telephone box.

'Do you think we can go into it?' my friend Bridie asked.

We cautiously pulled open the heavy metal and glass door. The phone sat on top of a black contraption with slots for money and buttons. Button A on top and Button B at the bottom. All shiny, new, just waiting for someone to make a call.

'What is it for?' an elderly man coming out of Blake's asked.

'It's a phone.' I said.

'A what?'

'A telephone. You make a call and you can talk to someone who's far away.'

'Do you mean to say that I could talk to someone in Lisbellaw and they would hear me?'

'Yes, you could. And, even over in England.'

'Daughter dear, don't let anyone hear you saying things like that. They'll put you down in Omagh.'

How we longed to make a call. I failed to persuade my grandmother to call someone. As she pointed out, no one she knew had a telephone. Then one day the magic happened. The phone rang as I was walking home from school with

Bridie. We stood looking at the box, not daring to answer.

'Go on, ' Bridie pushed me forward, 'answer it!'

It stopped ringing, disappointment washed over me, I had been too slow. Then it began to ring again. This time I didn't hesitate. We hauled open the door and I lifted the heavy black receiver.

'Hello?'

'Hello. Is that Enniskillen 7809?'

The American drawl was from all the Saturday matinees I had ever watched.

I carefully read the number on the dial before confirming that it was.

'This is a collect call for a Mrs O'Malley of 19 Eden Street. Is she willing to talk the call?'

I was flummoxed. Collect call?

'Hello? Are you there? Mrs O'Malley?'

'I'll get her!'

'Who are you?'

For a moment I considered hanging up. It was probably an offence to answer a public telephone when you didn't know anyone with a phone.

'I'm Chris Campbell,' I confessed.

'Not O'Malley? Is this a public telephone?'

'Yes,' I managed waiting to be scolded for my audacity.

'OK. Can you fetch Mrs O'Malley? I have her daughter on the line from Pittsburgh.'

'Get Mrs O'Malley! Her daughter wants to talk to her!' I roared to the wide-eyed Bridie still holding the door open. She tore off down the street.

By now several children had gathered and through the open door listened to my conversation with the operator.

'Hello caller, are you still holding? Someone in Enniskillen has gone to fetch Mrs O'Malley.'

'Thank you. I'm still holding,' Mrs O'Malley's daughter, in faraway Pittsburgh replied.

'Hello Chris Campbell. Are you still holding?'

'Yes,' I said, gaining in boldness by the minute.

'Stay on the line now Chris Campbell, don't you hang up.'

Mrs O'Malley arrived, in her best Sunday coat and hat escorted by the excited Bridie. She stood hesitantly outside the box.

'Hello Mary-Lou? Mrs O'Malley is here!' I said.

By this time the Operator and I were on first name terms.

'OK. Put her on now and, thank you for your assistance Chris Campbell. You have a good day now, you hear?'

'I will. It's been a great day!'

It was to remain a day that I would always remember.

I handed the phone to Mrs O'Malley and, as she squeezed in beside me, I

noticed she had put on lipstick and there was a gentle waft of *Evening in Paris*. I slipped out and we all stood in a circle around the open door listening unashamedly to a mother talking to her daughter in far away America.

Magic!

The phone on The Diamond would come to be the harbinger of news from afar to our local community. Families reunited, romances conducted, and a lifeline for our emigrant population.

As public telephone boxes disappear from our towns, replaced by Smart phones, Skype, Facetime and Internet Cafes, it behoves us remember the magic of those Transatlantic calls to the red phone box on The Diamond.

Chris Campbell retired to her native Enniskillen after working and living in Belfast and Belgium for many years.