# Bygone jobs—Meryl Hunter Audio transcript

Meryl: A girlfriend who lived in the same street, her father worked in the post office. He said, “Oh, I’ve got just the job for you. They’re looking for telephonists at the moment and you’re training on the job.” Telephony was something I’d never really thought about or heard about. The only jobs available for girls in 1946 were, you could work at JB Youngs, or in a chemist shop, or you joined the public service.

So I signed on at the GPO and I was trained to be a telephonist. It was very rigorous. It was hard work. It was incredibly intense work because at that point in Canberra’s history, the GPO was the centre of communications. You couldn’t just ring Melbourne from your phone on your desk. You had to go through the telephone exchange.

Parliament was sitting all the time. There were only three lines to Melbourne and two lines to Sydney, I think it was. So there were frayed tempers and angry people because of the delays and the wait. It was fairly fraught sort of a job, but it was an interesting job because you were part of a GPO family or PMG family.

While I was at the GPO, they needed another telephonist over here during the sessions because there was always a permanent telephonist here who was a good friend of mine. So I started coming over here and taking on the switchboard board work here, which was fascinating.

We had a gorgeous little room downstairs virtually on the Senate side. Opened out onto the courtyard so in the summertime we could have the door wide open. It was a small switchboard with room for two operators. All the members of Parliament knew us. Lesley Haylen, who was a Labor member at the time, used to ring up and say, “Is Mrs. Haylen’s little boy here?” We knew exactly who it was. Some of the members at the end of a session would bring us boxes of chocolates and just pop in and say hello.

When you’d come in at whatever time you were told to come in, they were shifts. You’d be from … I think it was nine in the morning until five or something. But you didn’t go away for lunch either. You had to sort of stay there. We’d have the door open out into the veranda and one of the telephone technicians would come and have a yarn. We’d sit there and have sandwiches. If the board summoned you, well you went and answered it, it was simple as that. Summoned you with a light and a buzz.

Those were the days of telephonists wearing headphones, hot headphones and a mouthpiece strapped here. It was all quite hot. I’m not a hot person. I don’t like heat. This thing sitting on your chest seemed to generate heat somehow, but it was cord and plug. You had the vertical board in front of you with the lights and you had to know exactly where everybody had to be connected. You had to memorise this.