

# Girls Who Never Talk Back

*They're The 35 Phone  
Operators You Hear  
On WE 6-2222, Giving  
The Weather Forecast*

By Ralph Reppert



Loretta Cain, one of the "weather operators" at the telephone company's Madison exchange, reads a forecast to a magnetic wire recorder for use on the WE 6-2222 service.

EVERY day some 30,000 Baltimoreans dial WE 6-2222 for help in deciding such things as whether to wear a raincoat, go shopping, buy another can of anti-freeze or take the dog for a walk.

More than any other single source of information, the dial-it-yourself weather forecast that the telephone company offers around the clock regulates the lives of Baltimoreans.

Local telephone subscribers have been plugging in on the forecasts since March 1, 1940, when Baltimore became one of the first American cities to inaugurate them.

A unit of the United States Weather Bureau, 35 operators of Baltimore's Madison Exchange, and two or three maintenance technicians form the staff that puts the local forecasts on the wire. Forecasts are sent by teletype from the weather station at Friendship Airport to the Madison Exchange, 1915 Madison avenue, four times daily—shortly before 6 A.M., noon, 6 P.M. and midnight.

As soon as a new forecast comes in, a telephone operator takes it to a recording room and edits it down to a size that can be read unhurriedly (fast reading sounds "yakkity") in 20 to 25 seconds. She is allotted 30 seconds, but must allow herself time to begin with "The latest weather forecast for Baltimore and vicinity . . ." and to have a few seconds of silence at the end. After a few tries operators learn to edit the reports at a glance and hit the timing within a second or so.

THE operator reads the forecast to a magnetic wire recorder, then plays it back to check for errors and clarity of voice. The flick of a switch, then, starts it playing, over and over, every 30 seconds. Automatic equipment amplifies it and sends it out to all local trunk services.

Technicians at the exchange keep three

playing devices in working order—one in actual service, one ready to record the next forecast, and one as a standby.

Although new forecasts ordinarily come from Friendship only four times a day, extreme and quickly changing conditions sometimes necessitate extra ones. Changes in temperature, humidity and wind direction and velocity are teletyped in hourly, and operators must record a whole new report hourly to include them.

Thirty-five operators have been trained to record the forecasts, so that several will be available on every shift. It isn't difficult, for a well modulated voice and good diction are requirements for telephone operators anyway. Some of them are unable to read the forecasts, however, because they cannot use casually such words as temperature, northerly, diminishing, variable, and considerable.

BALTIMORE'S weather forecasts are presented much the same now as they were nineteen years ago when they were begun, although certain aspects of the service have been smoothed out.

In the beginning, for example, recordings were made in an unused office. Even with the windows down, the cries of passing street Arabs filtered through, so that Baltimoreans sometimes got their forecasts with unintentional commercials thrown in—"Pressessh freeesh!" and "AnnannnArannelllll canalooboo!" The company quickly had the room sound-proofed.

Relative humidity is a part of the weather report, but on one occasion, when a rainstorm was forecast, the operator left out the humidity in order to get in the wind velocity, which she considered more important. There was a quick complaint from a woman who grew orchids and had to check the humidity regularly to keep her plants healthy.

And there was the Baltimorean who called every evening for the forecast,

but always used one wrong digit. When he got his bill at the end of a month he discovered he had been getting Washington's weather—with a toll charge for every call. The telephone company adjusted his bill, and then adjusted the system so that local callers could no longer make such a mistake.

THE operators themselves have been criticized, too. One man complained that the weather girl was "putting on airs" in pronouncing tem-per-a-ture.

There were other carping letters in the beginning, most of them complaining that the "snooty" operators wouldn't give



James Cronin watches over the equipment that keeps repeating the forecast every 30 seconds.

additional information when asked. Many subscribers phoned for the weather report and then asked whether school had been called off because of the snow.

The company has, however, added some things to the reports. Conditions of streets and highways during icy weather are now included. It is announced when small craft warnings go up. Baseball scores are reported, inning by inning, during the World Series. Holiday greetings and brief advertising slogans are sometimes used.

For additional information, subscribers must call other numbers, among them TJ 4-2222 for the correct time, which emanates from a permanent recording at phone company headquarters, 320 St. Paul place. There are also commercially sponsored dial-it-yourself information services which provide stock market quotations, the playbills at various movie houses, prayers and inspirational messages.

BALTIMOREANS quickly made a habit of calling the weather service, with the majority of calls made between 7 and 8 A.M. Callers who check the weather just before going to bed create a secondary peak at about 10 P.M.

The service gets its greatest number of calls during changes in the weather, with winter weather usually outpacing the hurricane season. Hurricane Hazel in 1954 caused 90,000 weather calls in 24 hours. A year later Hurricane Connie set a new record—163,000 calls. The snowstorm of December 4, 1954, however, brought in 106,000.

Letters and calls about the service continue to come in. Most of them are complimentary now, although a few merely request additional information. "Who," for example, "is the weather girl with the sunshine in her voice?"

Sorry, boys. That's information that even "Information" mayn't give out.