

The first organization Heath suggests collaboration with is the one he works for.

Students in UO programs such as Arts and Administration, he says, could benefit from involvement with the museum, helping it keep more constant hours, building a functional web presence or even developing a phone app.

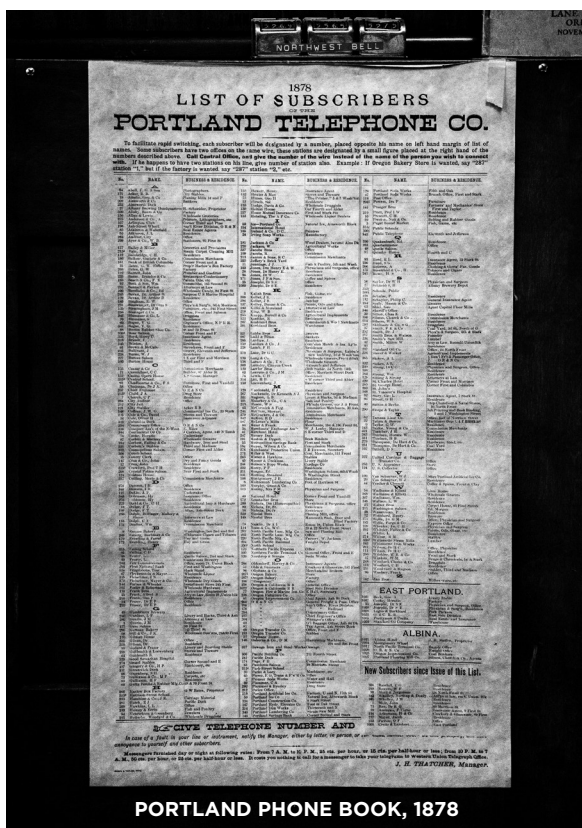
Heath also mentions the Lane County Historical Society, which has formidable archives and its own staff — “but they’re struggling like everybody else.”

However worthy the contents, Heath notes a general struggle among small museums in recent years because “the visiting public has changed.” Instead of touring historic places and viewing artifacts in person, “now people can access them through Google.”

What this means, in effect, is that museums are pushed to be more interactive, offering information and experiences that internet research can’t.

In its own ways, the Telephone Pioneer Museum is already accomplishing this. When a group of Weebelo Boy Scouts visited last month, Knight says they played happily at the switchboard for more than an hour. “They must have thought they were on the Enterprise or something!”

These hands-on convergences of old and young are the museum’s lifeblood, and Heath says they’re not just fun but integral to teaching younger generations how modern American culture was built.



PORTLAND PHONE BOOK, 1876

The atmosphere in which the telephone came of age, Heath says, was “one of increased empowerment and spatial mobility.” It accompanied an increase in electrified homes and automobile use, as well as a pre-Depression prosperity that facilitated exploration.

“In terms of American culture, the telephone is a key, iconic artifact,” he says, “and we shouldn’t just put it in the trash heap of time.”

The Telephone Pioneer Museum’s significance — historically and culturally — all circles back to Judy Knight and the others who sit at the desk. They’re the ones who are happy to see you, who are always poised to talk about the good old days without trivializing them.

“They opened the museum because, at least when I worked for the company ... we were really family,” says Knight. “And I think they wanted to see something to honor and remind people of what they’d been through.”

Whatever the museum’s future, it’s already a thing to be treasured. Its contents chronicle the history of human communication in this country, of ordinary interactions. Hardworking people like Knight are what bring it to life, and hopefully those are the same kind of people who will step up to keep it alive. ■

The Telephone Pioneer Museum is open from 10 am to 2 pm most Thursdays. Free admission. Call 484-8268 for more information.

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