

Dispatch centre - vital link

By Linda Kirby
Second of 2 parts

It's midnight Friday and by all indications this shift could be hectic. Within the hour the bars will shut and the fun begins, I am told by a couple of the dispatchers.

There are four to man the telephones and dispatch.

Merry-Anne Glazin and Delores Lepage will take complaint calls while Karen Murphy and Sheralee Pennington dispatch for the entire region.

Cadet Paul Delaney, receiving part of his police training in communications, will help with calls.

At the rear of the room sits Sergeant Bill Puskas, a combination of supervisor and trouble-shooter, if there are any problems the dispatchers can't handle.

I fasten my headset and prepare to listen in on the complaints line for the first part of the shift.

Eagerly I wait for the first police chase, armed robbery or some other "good" news item. Perhaps there will be a prison riot at Maplehurst in Milton, I suggest.

The dispatchers smile and tell me not to get my hopes up too much.

12.02 a.m.—a barking dog. The woman is very irritated and lets it be known. Merry-Anne calms her down and gets the address.

12.15 a.m.—a loud, drunken party. This is the third time the woman has called, she tells Merry-Anne. A car is sent over.

It is beginning to pick up, but most of the calls continue to be for wild parties and a few boisterous drunks.

After 1 a.m.—a frightened young woman calls up and in a barely audible voice tells Merry-Anne all the hydro has suddenly been shut off by her drunken step-father. He lives in the bottom half of the house and she is scared.

Merry-Anne talks to her, getting the details of the location and tries to make her feel a little less apprehensive.

She instructs the young woman to lock all the doors and not answer the door until police arrive. She makes sure there is no way the step-father has access to the woman.

Within seconds, the information is relayed to a car and the officer is warned the man has been drinking and there is a record of previous domestic problems at this residence.

Although this call does not appear to be a big problem for police, domestic calls are considered the most dangerous. Police are often walking into the middle of a domestic dispute and are often the target of an angry, or violent husband.

A cab driver calls in. He was forced off the road into a ditch and provides police with a description.

Cabbies are frequently a great help to police, helping out with information and calling police as soon as they spot trouble.

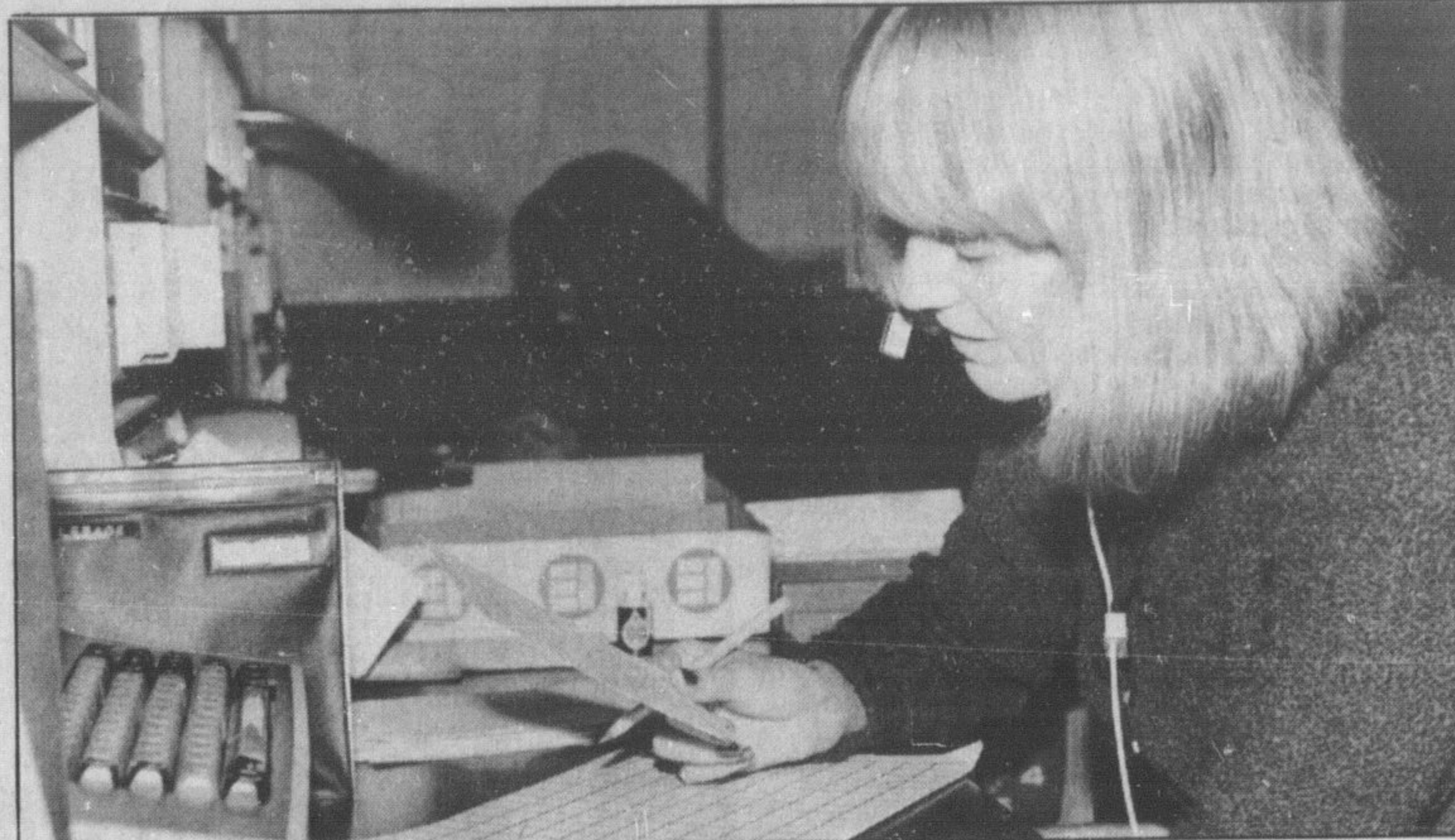
1.30 a.m.—a man phones in to say there is a break and enter in process at his neighbor's home. Merry-Anne keeps the caller on one line, while she dispatches on another, providing details as she gets them.

It turns out a kid was pounding on the door of a house and running around the house to see if anyone was in it. He takes off before police arrive at the address.

2 a.m.—a very relieved father phones in to say his missing teenage son has returned home.

A call comes in about a bunch of drunken drivers fooling around in a parking lot. A front window of a variety store is kicked in, but nothing stolen.

A citizen calls in to say there is a drunk lying in



On the job study. University of Toronto sociology student Karen Murphy gets to see a great many social problems and their temporary solutions in her role as one of Halton's police dispatchers.

the middle of a highway near Acton. Another complaint of a noisy apartment party. A drunk is making a nuisance of himself at an all night submarine shop.

Once again the drunk step-father has turned off the hydro and a police officer makes a second visit. A frantic woman calls in. She has just been hit by a drunken driver who took off. She is not injured, but obviously upset and her car is damaged.

For the most part the night has been uneventful but steady.

It is nearing 3 a.m. and the pace slackens. The women relax and chat back and forth, but are constantly aware of the officers' movements and what is going on outside on the streets.

(Last week's story reported there are up to 80 units to dispatch on any given shift. The number should have read 30 units of patrol cars and foot patrol.)

There is constant communication between the dispatcher and the officers. Merry-Anne checks in with each officer about every three minutes.

"You don't dispatch an officer to a call and then forget about him," explains Merry-Anne.

"The majority of the officers appreciate it, when you keep in contact. It shows you care."

"But some get ticked off. They feel they are big boys and don't need somebody watching over them," she added.

One can't help but be impressed with the friendliness and relaxed atmosphere in what is considered a "pressure pot" job.

The key is to relax but remain alert, I am informed. There is a no-nonsense approach to their work, but they also make time to become friends.

Working closely together, it is important the dispatchers learn to get along.

Like the officers on the road, they must be ready to back each other up if needed.

Almost 4 a.m.—the highlight of the evening. Loose cattle on a road and a sergeant sets off to round them up and herd them back into their appropriate field.

It's after 4.30 and I decide to pack it in but return

for a Saturday midnight shift.

For a change of pace I sit in on a dispatching unit, listening to the directions being issued to officers.

It is after 1 a.m. and the major concern is a large bush party in north Halton.

A stolen car is found gutted by fire.

1.45 a.m.—a quiet few minutes and a couple of officers report they are off to gas up in Burlington. This is done at special town pumps at one end of the city.

A few minutes later—one officer, somewhat embarrassed calls in that he has run out of gas.

This usually doesn't happen, said Merry-Anne, but it can and she dispatches an officer to get some gas. Luckily, this happened at a quiet time of the night.

2 a.m.—a brand new sports car was just stolen from the rear of an Oakville discotheque.

A call comes in that a drunk or drugged youth is trying to get into a house. Police arrive to find him collapsed on the lawn.

It is the weekend of the Milton Fair and a drunk who obviously enjoyed himself too much is found lying in the fair grounds.

A very distressed Burlington resident calls up to report a wild driver is carving up front lawns down one street.

A Milton constable dispatched to a drunken brawl at a bank parking lot gets bopped on the nose. An assault police charge is laid.

Although I am sitting with a copy of the dispatch code in my hands, it is still like trying to follow the conversation of two very excited computers as the dispatcher and the officer chatter back and forth in a rapid succession of numbers and abbreviated forms.

It is after 3 a.m. and another fairly quiet night. The women are not forgotten as an officer walks in with some popcorn and a box of donuts.

Crime, I learn, is somewhat seasonal. In the winter, aside from road accidents, many nights can wind down by 4 a.m.

In the summer however, it is often non-stop until 6 a.m.

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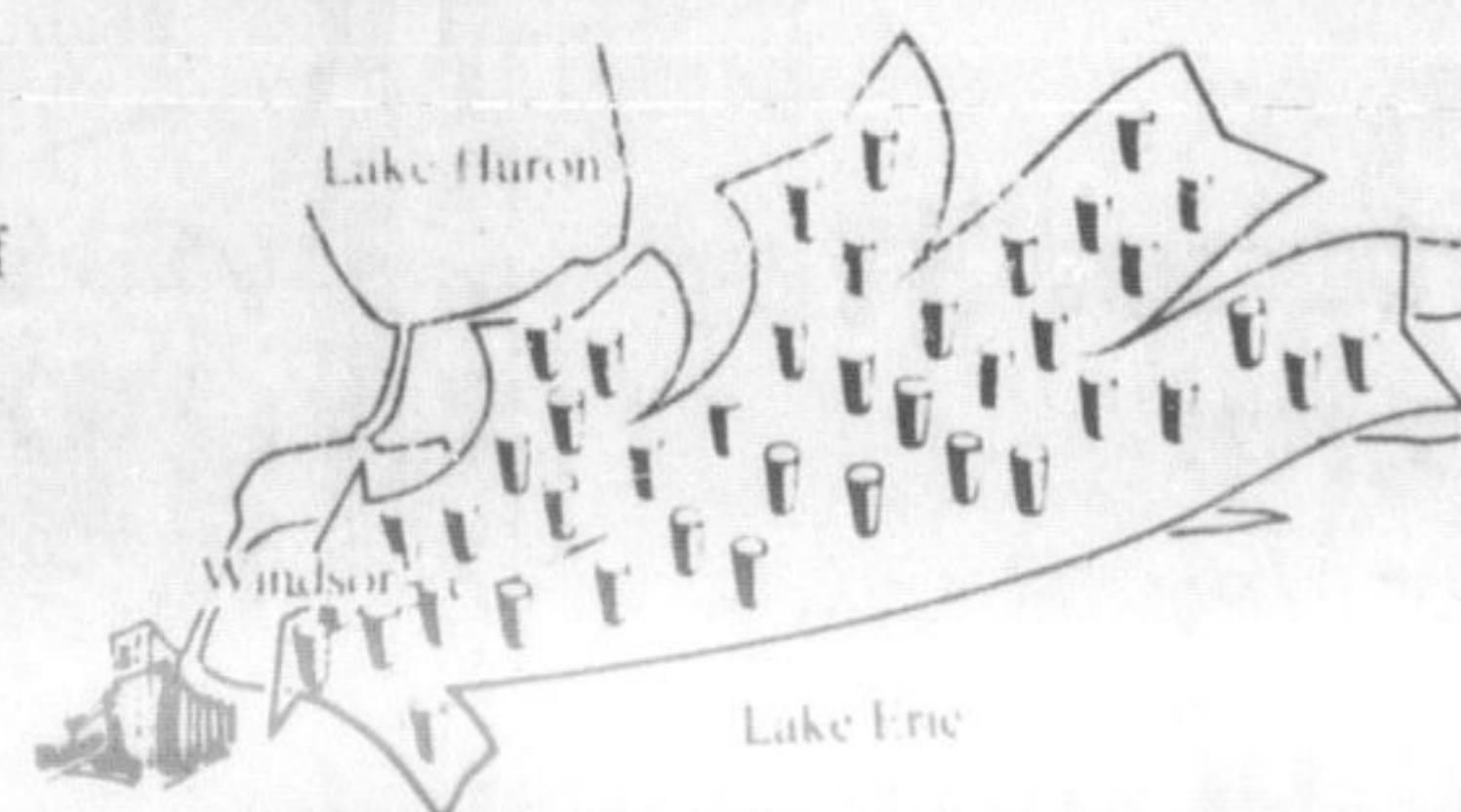
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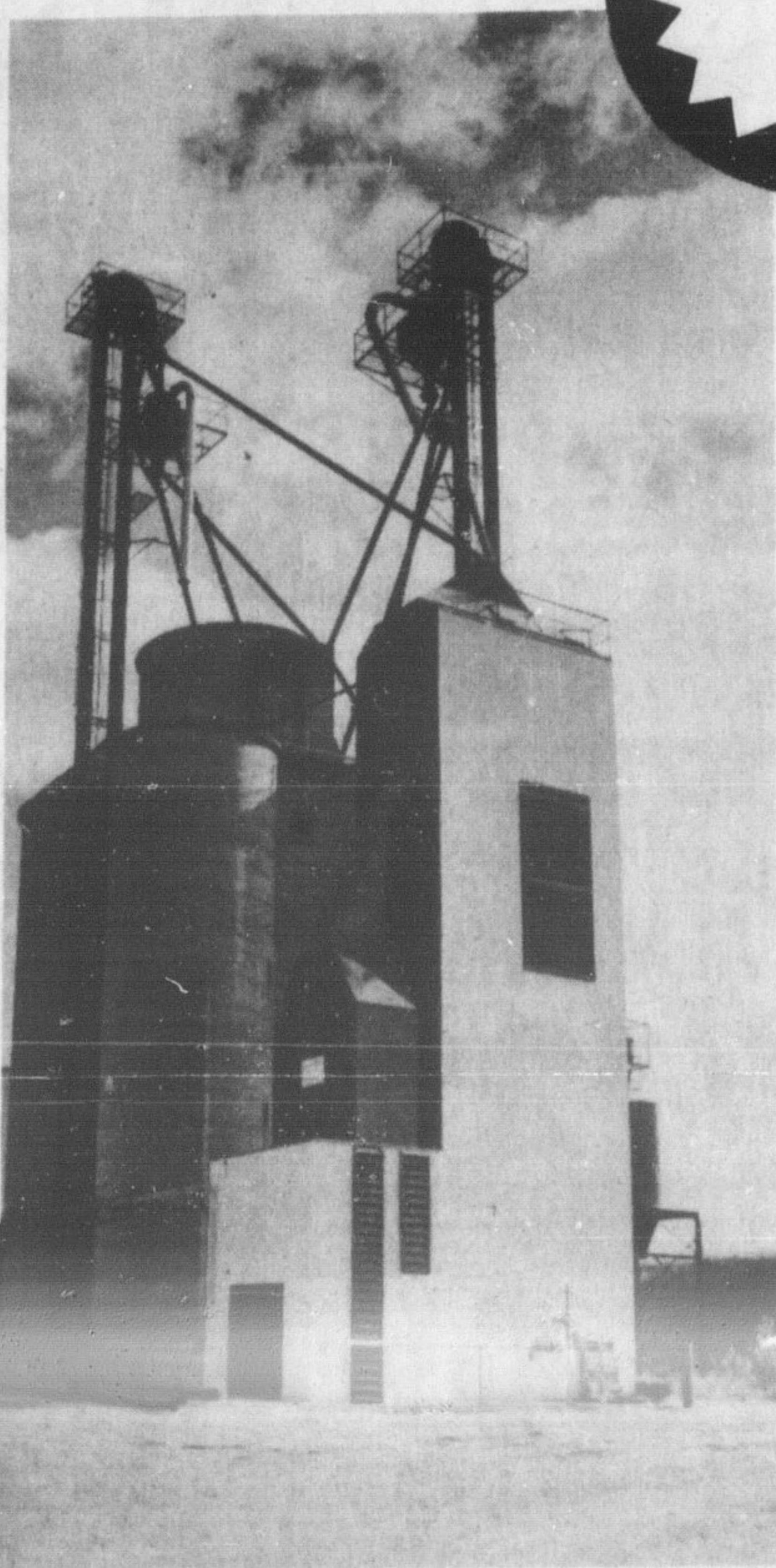
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