

## Small town thinks big - Rockland, ID

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By Emily Jones - Journal Writer Long-time Rockland residents Melvin Morris, left, and Gerry Nelson pause to reminisce outside the Rockland Cafe. Journal photos by Bill Schaefer Leonard May still has the telephone switchboard that sat in the corner of his family's home when he was a child.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the switchboard sat next to the bedroom of May's parents. It was connected to an alarm that awakened his mother if a call needed to be connected.

The switchboard was also the place where May spent a lot of his childhood, connecting calls for Rockland residents.

"That was real punishment for a kid who would rather be fishing," May says.

Now, May owns and manages Direct Communications Rockland, one of 17 independent telephone companies in Idaho. He bought the business, then-known as May Telephone Company, from his father in 1974. Since that time, his business has expanded from 300 subscribers to 4,000 in Oregon and Idaho.

Expansion is a necessary part of survival, May says.

"You don't see any 20-cow dairies making it," he says. "You have to expand to survive."

Also housed in the Direct Communications office is a call center providing technical support for companies in Washington, California, Arizona and Nevada. And there's an Internet business, Direct Internet, a subsidiary of Direct Communications Star West. It provides high-speed Internet to 2,500 subscribers in places that larger companies pass over, such as Soda Springs, Pingree, Aberdeen and Montpelier.

Internet access is important to people in rural areas, in part because it gives them a connection to shopping opportunities they might not find in smaller communities, says Direct Internet Manager Jeremy Smith.

"The beauty is you can buy anything over the Internet," he says. A collection of phones and other communications equipment lines a wall at Direct Communications' headquarters in Rockland.

Direct Communications could be located anywhere in the West, but May prefers to live in Rockland, where he was born and raised. So do his employees.

Assistant Manager Garrin Bott says he likes living in Rockland because it's a good place to raise a family. With the exception of the occasional tool or gas theft, there is very little crime, and people are friendly.

"Rural communities have aspects you don't get in Pocatello," he says.

May has traveled the world, and says he would never live anywhere else. Direct Communications owner Leonard May, left, recalls the history of the Rockland-based phone service with assistant manager Garrin Bott. The company is Rockland's largest employer outside of the school district. Journal photo by Bill Schaefer

"The best part about those other places is seeing them in my rear-view mirror as I go home," he says.

Direct Communications Rockland and Direct Internet are two of the biggest employers in Rockland, and May enjoys being a part of the community. He and others at the telephone company go to schools and teach phone etiquette to students, along with a lesson on how phones work.

Bott and Smith are both volunteer EMTs. Participating in the community is something everyone in Rockland does, Bott says.

"If you're not an EMT, you're a firefighter or you're on the school board, or you're on the City Council," he says.

#### Rockland Statistics

- County: Power.
- Population: 316.
- History: Rockland was settled in 1879. It's named for nearby Rock Creek.

#### City Officials

- Mayor: Dan Ralphs.
- City Council members: Bill Dean, Lori Robinson, Eddy Hansen, Rowen Barker.
- Maintenance: Mike Mathews, John Payne.
- Fire Chief: David Robinson.
- City Clerk: Denise Ralphs.

#### School

- Rockland School.

Many of Rockland's 316 residents wear more than one hat to keep town running

In small communities like Rockland, most people wear many hats.

Postmaster Mike Mathews is the city's maintenance man and assistant fire chief. Rockland High School principal and teacher Dan Ralphs is the mayor who coaches basketball.

"We do it all in a small school, in a small town," Ralphs said.

Ralphs was recently elected to his third term as mayor of the community where he was born and raised.

It's a community he is quite proud of.

"We're kind of like a large family," he said. "It's a great place."

Ralphs enjoys the outdoor opportunities the area provides, and he is especially proud of the school.

The Rockland system has less than 200 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. In 1995, the school moved into a new building, and is one of the most technologically advanced small schools around, Ralphs said.

About 90 percent of Rockland students go to college, he said.

"There's quite a commitment to education in Rockland," Ralphs said.

One of the biggest issues the city faces is keeping well-educated students in the area.

While he doesn't want the city to boom, Ralphs would like to see some growth and economic development.

"There's not a lot of economic activity going on," he said. "We have kids graduate and leave because we don't have anything to keep them here."

Many people, however, do come back. Ralphs is one of them. He returned to Rockland 30 years ago after finishing school.

"When I left, I said I'd never come back. Never say never," he said.

The Journal asked Rockland area residents what the biggest issue is in their community. Here's what they said:

Larry Fillmore - "I don't know of any major issues right now. There's a lack of water and that's going to hurt the farmers ... We also need the state to let schools make local decisions instead of the state making the decisions."

Mike Mathews - "One of our bigger issues right now is the fire department. We're trying to build a new fire district building, and we're working on getting funding."

Lynne Taysom - "I think we have a really good school. We're really progressive."

Community Sketch appears every other Monday in the Idaho State Journal. It's a profile of southeastern Idaho communities.

<http://www.journalnet.com/articles/2003/12/01/news/local/news01.txt>