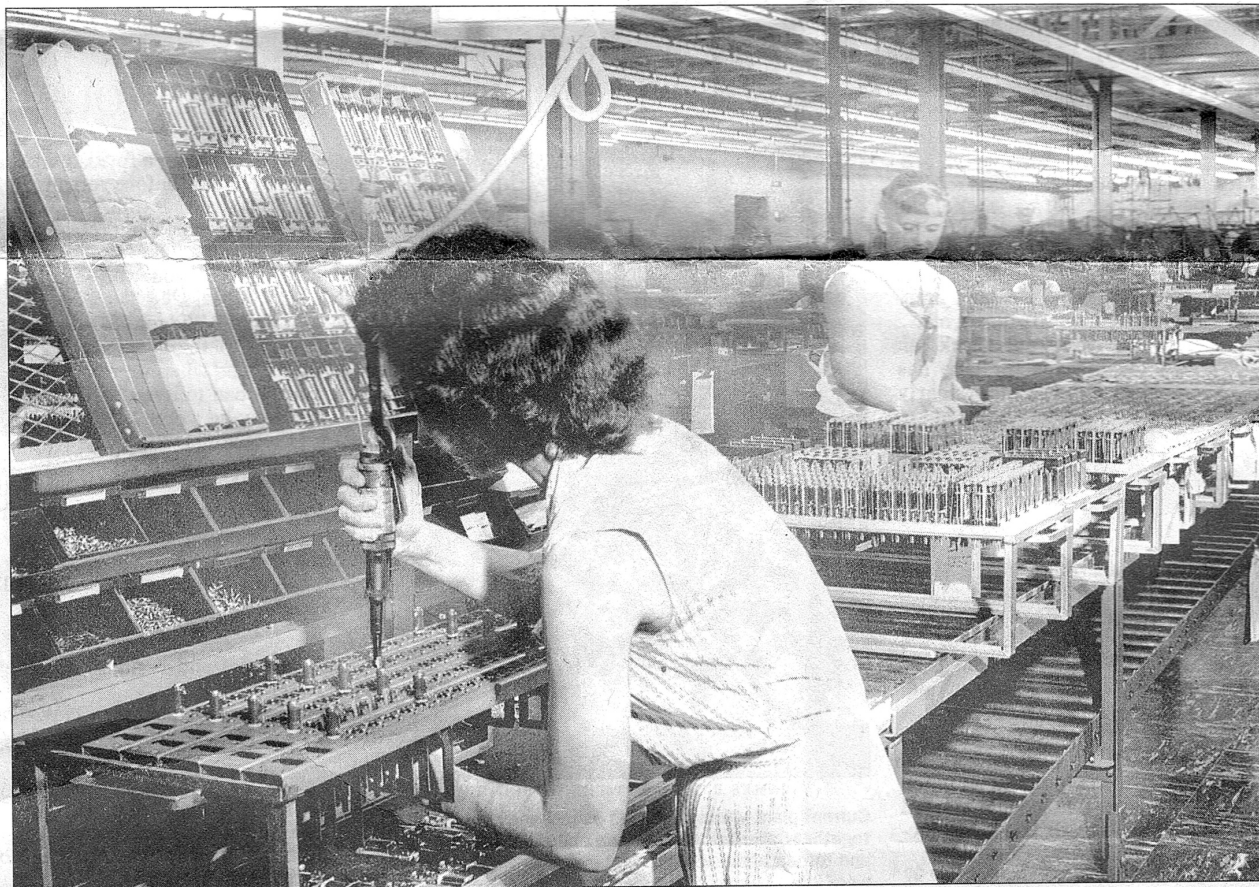


TELEPHONE PLANT CLOSING

# Nearing the final bell



THE WORLD-HERALD

Patricia Nowak, left, and Mary Jo Sterba work at the Western Electric plant in October 1958. The plant's workforce, which peaked at 7,700 in 1970, has declined to about 200. But even those jobs will be gone when the plant, now called Connectivity Solutions, closes in July.

## Millard and the Western Electric factory grew up together

BY ERIN GOLDEN | WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Most of them saw it coming years ago. Some worried when the company changed hands and changed names, again and again. Others watched as the plant's well-manicured front lawn became big stores and parking lots and wondered: What's next? Those who kept their jobs shook their heads as people they'd worked alongside for decades were let go.

They knew a place that makes equipment for land line telephones didn't have much of a chance in a cell-phone world.

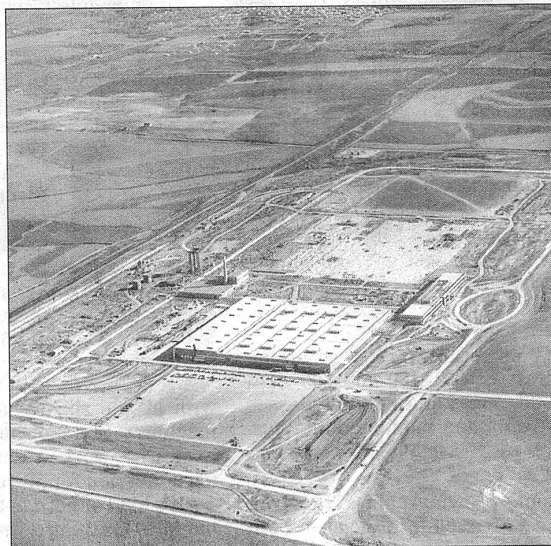
Still, when they got the bad news last spring — the plant was closing and the jobs were being sent away — the workers didn't want to believe it.

After all, this was the place that turned a sleepy town on the outskirts of Omaha into a thriving suburban community, almost overnight. At its height, in the early 1970s, some 7,700 people worked at the Millard facility, then owned by Western Electric.

But after a final year of layoffs and cutbacks, the reality is hard to avoid.

As the plant now called Connectivity Solutions prepares to shut down manufacturing operations in July,

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The Western Electric plant in March 1958, months before beginning production. Farms surrounding the plant soon gave way to homes and businesses as the workforce grew.

# Closing: Workers saw end coming, but it's still tough

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there are about 200 people still working. Most of the space goes unused. A few weeks ago, workers shut down the noisy injection molding machines that had given the factory a hum of activity, even as the orders and number of workers dropped off.



Clark

Now, said Paul Clark, an electrical inspector who has worked at the plant for nearly 30 years, it's impossible not to notice the empty space.

"Once they shut those down, the quiet kind of sunk in," he said.

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Ask anybody who was around in the 1950s and '60s about why Millard grew, and they'll give you the same answer: Western Electric.

Aerial photos from the late 1950s show the plant near 120th and L Streets surrounded by open space. A few farmhouses and barns dot the landscape.

When the plant was going up, Gene Saab was in his early 20s, working for Western Electric in downtown Omaha. He remembers so much stuff being shipped there that people started addressing packages to WECO: Western Electric County.

A World-Herald article from March 1956, when Western Electric announced plans for a new plant, called the announcement the "largest prize of (Omaha's) post-war industrial drive." Its projected employment of 3,000 to 4,000 workers was to be the area's largest ever, with the exception of the Martin Bomber Plant during World War II.

When the new plant started churning out telephone cable and equipment, Millard bloomed.

"It resulted in about a 20-times increase in the population of Millard, almost instantaneously," said Marty Shukert, a former Omaha planning director. "Really, overnight, it transformed Millard from a rural village to a city that was big enough that Omaha needed to rush and annex it."

Some workers commuted from towns like Gretna and Fremont. But many built homes in new Millard neighborhoods, where they lived next door to other Western Electric workers.

They sent their children to Millard schools, which in 1958 was really just one school: 150 students, K-12. "We were strictly a rural dot in the road," said Don Stroh, who was Millard's superintendent from 1955 to 1989.

Then, at some points, the district was adding students at the rate of 600, 700 and 800 each year, passing bond issues and holding classes in houses, storefronts and modular buildings. By the time Stroh retired in 1989, Millard had more than 16,000 students.

There were some growing pains, but Stroh said the people who moved to Millard — both the Western Electric employees and the families who came later — were willing to help.

"The people who came in wanted good schools, they understood the situation and they were very cooperative," he said. "It was a good community."

Millard was annexed by Omaha in 1971.

Over the years, the growth overtook the facility that had sparked it. Today, it's hard to spot the plant unless you're looking for it — a SuperTarget and a Sam's Club block the view.

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Inside the union hall Saturday, it was almost too loud to hear a conversation.

There were burgers and baked beans, beer in plastic cups and a sheet cake with "End of an



JAMES R. BURNETT/THE WORLD-HERALD

Current plant workers as well as retirees got together Saturday to reminisce about old times and to talk about what the future may hold. There were lots of old photos to browse through, too.

Era, Local 1974 and 1614," written in frosting.

It was a final farewell for the union workers still employed by Connectivity Solutions, 122 of them in production, 27 in trade jobs and 30 more in administrative roles. And it was a chance for retirees who once worked for Western Electric or any of the names that followed it — AT&T, Lucent, Avaya — to catch up with old friends.

A few people browsed through union newsletters dating to the 1960s, carefully organized in folders. Some marveled over old photos spilled out across tables lining the wall.

Vicki Luther, 65, picked up snapshots of friends she made in her 34 years at the plant.



Luther

She started with Western Electric in 1966, when she was a 19-year-old waitress looking for something new. A friend said she could help her get a job, and she took one in the wiring division, starting at \$1.85 per hour plus benefits.

It was a good place to work, she said. She made friends with people she'd chat with over the hum of machines. She met her husband, a cable foreman who worked across from her. They've been married for 32 years.

"It's kind of hard to think about the years you put into this thing ... and it's all dying now," she said.



Koenig

Dan Koenig, 60, put in 41 years at the plant. For several of those years, his wife also worked for Western Electric. Both went through periods of working 12-hour shifts, alternating to make sure one or the other would be home to be with the kids.

Koenig is proud that his hard work allowed him to put four kids through college.

"If you worked, you got respect," he said. "And if you didn't, they got rid of you."

Eldon Moser, 63, went to work for Western Electric when he got out of the Navy in 1969.

He started out driving a forklift and later held jobs in maintenance before retiring in 2006.

"When I retired, I didn't really miss the work, but I did miss the people," he said. "These are people you work with for 30, 35 years."

Myron "Bud" Widger, 81, has to pause to think about what year it was when he retired. But he can tell you exactly how long he worked for Western Electric: 32 years, 11 months and four days.



Moser

After more than two decades away, the sting of the closure is less severe. But he worries for the people who won't get to plan the kind of retirement he's had.

"I'm sad for the people that are still on the job," he said.

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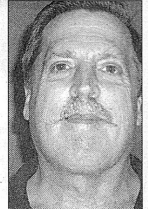
They saw the end coming, but they didn't make plans.

Some of them didn't know how. They took these jobs when they were 19, 20, 21 years old. They've never known anything else.

Roy Cook, 57, started working for Western Electric in 1977. His dad, Eugene, worked there, too. So did their neighbors.

His last day of work was April 1. More than two months later, he's still not sure what to do. "At my age, I'm not sure I can find a job."

When he clocks out from his last shift in July, Paul Clark, 51, will be three months short of 30 years at the plant. That's three months short of getting a full pension.



Cook

He's thought about going to school — some of the laid-off employees will be eligible for some federal grant money. But a more specific plan for the future?

"Everyone asks that," he said, shrugging. "I don't know."

Union president Dan Buelt, 55, is a 31-year employee. He echoed sentiments that the end has been a long time coming. He says the beginning of the end was the mid-'80s, with the split of the AT&T system. That meant more competition, more cuts and the kind of management changes that shake up longtime employees.

"We are the very last of the old Western Electric manufacturing facilities," he said. "And as all of them closed around us, it was always gnawing in the back of our minds that it was going to close."

In early 2010, the bad news came from the parent company, CommScope, based in Hickory, N.C. It was a financial decision, company officials said. Closing the plant would cost \$45 million to \$53 million but then save \$18 million to \$22 million per year.

Buelt said company officials have said the end date will be sometime between July 1 and July 15. For now, the remaining employees are working, building cabinets that hold electrical equipment for communications systems. They just got a big order from areas hit hard by flooding, Buelt said.

As each day passes, everyone is handling the closure a bit differently. Some are sad. A few are angry. Most know that it's just business.

"All in all, I think we know it's no one's fault," Buelt said. "Overall, the vast majority of people have understood that this was a decision that no one at the Omaha facility took lightly or wanted to see happen. It just did."

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