

The Indiana Jones of

Installers

Ron Barker can still see the bull. It was charging straight across a pasture toward his installation van. Barker lost no time hitting the gas pedal. "I was driving as fast as I could, trying to get away. He just caved the side of my door in."

Enraged mammals, as well as snakes and 'gators, mountain climbing and security checks, are all in a day's work for Barker. He wouldn't have it any other way.

"Every job's different. It's always an adventure," said Barker, who has installed switching systems for 35 years.

Installer. It's hardly up there in the annals of the great adventure jobs. But, for Barker and hundreds of employees like him who helped AT&T wire the United States and, increasingly, the world, the job has provided variety, challenge and, yes, excitement.

Like Barker, many signed on to Western Electric as teenagers fresh from high school and followed the job — the technology, the geography and the corporate twists and turns — to a satisfying lifelong career. Professional, modest, confident, can-do — installers created and inherited AT&T's Spirit of Service legacy. They are a special breed.

In many ways, Ron Barker's story is their story. Barker was 17 when he hired on to Western Electric in Cincinnati, Ohio. It was 1961, a time of Hula Hoops, beehive hairdos and plain black rotary dial phones. The '60s hot new switching technology was "crossbar," which was replacing "step-by-step" switching. Researchers were developing the cellular technology Barker would install three decades later.

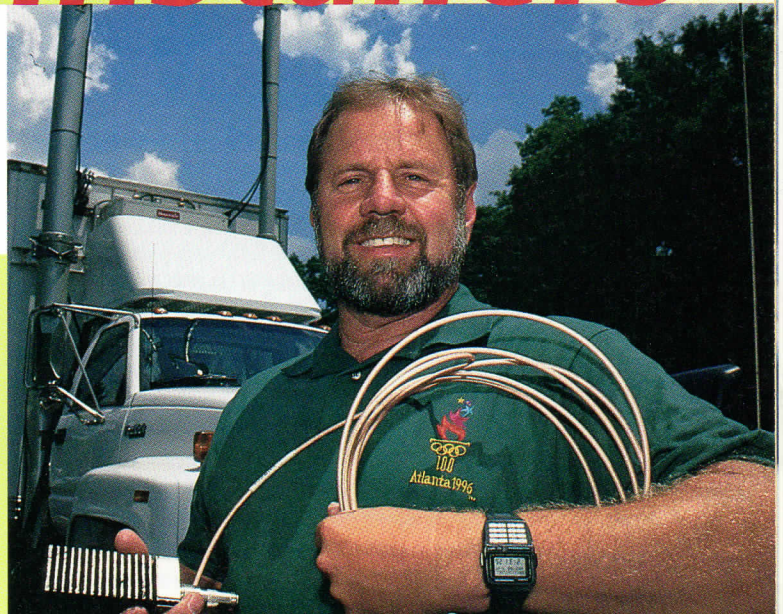
The first day on the job, Barker learned the color code that identified all the wires in a cable. Today, that code remains the same. But lots of other things have gotten shorter, smaller or just plain different.

These days, installers enjoy much more freedom and do a lot more of their own engineering, he said. Installing a small switch, a job that once took weeks, now can be knocked out in a few days, so installers move around the country more. Parts are much smaller, eliminating the time-consuming and monotonous job of wirewrapping connections. "We used to have as many as 200,000 wirewrapped connections on a job. Now, if we have a dozen, that's a lot," Barker said. Perhaps the biggest change took place in the '80s with the switch from analog to digital technology.

Barker has constantly upgraded his skills. In 1976, he transferred from Cincinnati to Florida, where he gave an installer's viewpoint to Bell Labs people who were developing a splicing technique for fiber-optic cable. In the early '80s, when faster, higher-capacity fiber-optic cable began to replace copper wire, he was among the first to learn the new technology.

For the past six years, Barker has worked in Atlanta, installing the infrastructure that allows callers to use cellular, or wireless, phones. With the excitement preceding the 1996 Olympic games, Atlanta was hopping, Barker said.

BellSouth Mobility (BMI), a subsidiary of BellSouth, is Lucent's — and Barker's — customer. Anticipating 12 million visitors in July, BMI has understandably focused



BLACK STAR

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on increasing its wireless capacity. The activity boosted Lucent's normal number of Georgia installers from 265 to 400. The Network Systems' team has installed as many as 300 cell sites, Barker said.

"That's our job. We install AUTOPLEX 1000 cell sites all over," said Barker. Cell sites capture radio waves from a cellular caller's phone as the caller moves about. Then they route the call to the local telephone office that completes it. "We put it all together," Barker said. "We install circuit packs in cabinets, run cable between them, make connections. When we're done we power it up and hook it into a laptop to make sure everything works together. One day we might be working downtown on top of an office building and the next day we might be on top of a mountain."

As the Olympics drew closer, Barker's job got even more interesting. He and his crew underwent intense scrutiny to gain access to Olympic venues, such as Georgia Tech, where the athletes were being housed. Their mission was to install four cell sites. "We were 'sanitized' by the U.S. Army," he said. "We took everything out of our vehicle. It was X-rayed. They went over our bodies with a wand to make sure we weren't armed."

As Barker said, the job's an adventure. **o**—Cathy Fee