

Small-town bank offers free Internet access

On-line offer is designed to promote computer-banking services in Apollo, Pa.

- Customers get to hook into the Internet from home for an hour a day.
- More than 900 people have signed up for the service.

By CATHERINE DRESSLER
Associated Press

APOLLO, Pa. — The drug store still has a soda fountain, and the barber shop still has a pole. Around here, most folks still rely on the post office to send messages to faraway friends.

Still, "e-mail" and "Internet" and "World Wide Web" are creeping into the local vocabulary, partly thanks to an unusual source — a bank promotion.

Apollo Trust Co. is offering free access to the Internet, the global computer network, to customers around Apollo, a depressed, former steel town of 2,300 in a valley about 35 miles east of Pittsburgh.

"The people in rural communities like ours are really being left off the information superhighway," said bank vice president Ray Muth. "The kids are the ones hurt the most."

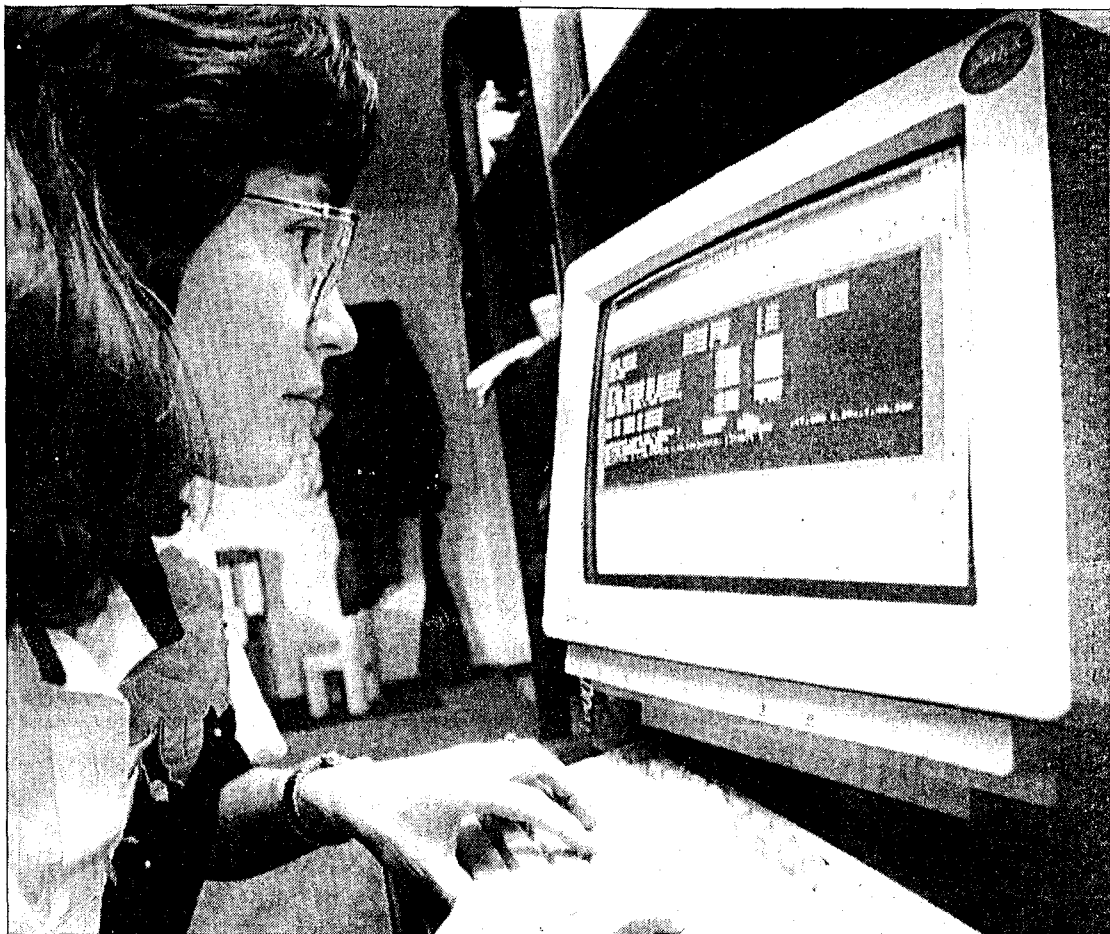
Last winter, the 124-year-old bank became the only Internet provider in Armstrong County. Bank customers get to hook into the Internet from home free for an hour a day.

Before Apollo went on-line, residents of the rural area had to sign up with commercial providers and pay a monthly fee and costly phone charges.

"It's my window to the world," said Shelagh Morandini, who signed up for the bank's Internet services when they were first offered last winter. She sends letters to her parents in Canada.

More than 900 people — about 550 of them among the bank's 8,000 customers — have signed up for the service. Noncustomers have to pay \$30 to use the service through the end of the year. But the bank gave the library, churches and two high schools Internet access, no strings attached.

The free Internet service is partly



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Shelagh Morandini looks over her Apollo Trust Co. bank statement recently via an Internet connection provided

by the bank. 'It's my window to the world,' said Morandini, who also sends e-mail to her parents in Canada.

designed to entice customers to try banking by personal computer.

Apollo customers can check interest rates and apply for loans on-line. They can check balances, transfer money between accounts, review bank statements and read Apollo's annual report.

Pete Pinto, a high school teacher, opened a checking account so he could get the Internet benefits. He has used the service to check his balance and to see whether checks have

cleared.

"It's quick," he said. "There's not much to it."

Muth estimates only about 100 people are banking at home, but he is confident that figure will grow as customers become more comfortable with the idea.

Banks save money when customers use personal computers instead of tellers. But so far banks have been unsuccessful in their efforts to get customers to change habits.

Muth said banks might have more luck if they offer incentives such as free Internet service.

Seamus McMahon, a banking expert at First Manhattan Consulting Corp., agreed. He said banks must simplify on-line services and market them better.

"When you want to merchandise something, you have to understand that in the early days you are going to have to give it away until people get hooked," he said.