

The telephone party line was a fixture in the America of a century ago, but it was not the only method of communication. There were—and are—other ways to contact one’s fellow human beings.

Dinner bells played a big role in family life in the decades before the advent of the tractor. Old-timers said that they could tell which bell was ringing its field workers home by its tone as well as its direction. The big cast iron bells were used for more than just calling the home folks to noon dinner. If someone came looking for the farmer, the lady of the family would ring the bell. If family trouble took place—a child injuring herself, for instance—the mother would summon her menfolks home from the fields with the dinner bell. Such incidents would mean a prolonged ringing, not the usual call for dinner.

The closest neighbors to our home place were relatives, and all of them were adept “hollerers.” These loud tones did not usually indicate anger, just long-distance conversation. My father and his three brothers would often yell back and forth to each other, passing information across a quarter of a mile. They had no trouble understanding each other, and it was easier and quicker to shout than to walk to the next farm.

One of my uncles proved himself to be the best of all of them in the hollering department. He, like the rest of the family, occasionally used fire as an agricultural tool. He had a nice little grass fire going one spring day. He wanted to get rid of some dry grass and weeds along the fence row in his sheep pasture. The new grass was just starting, and he thought there was enough green to keep his blaze under control. But, he had not reckoned on the wind changing direction. In a short time, his fire was too big for him to control. He couldn’t leave to get help; he had to fight fire. So, he reached deep within himself and yelled. A half-mile across the hills, his wife was going out to feed her hens. She looked north and saw a lot of smoke. Then, she heard her husband calling for help. She headed up the road toward the sheep pasture on a dead run. My father, another quarter of a mile away, also saw the smoke and he, too, heard a faint call. He loaded the car with firefighting gear, including a couple of USFS backpack water sprayers. He picked up his brother’s wife on the road, and they rushed to the rescue. A little water, a few shovels, and some judicious backfiring, and the crisis was over. My uncle was not even hoarse.

After horses gave way to tractors, it was harder to get the food message out to the fields. The men could not hear the dinner bell over the noise of the engines. Then, the dish towel came into its own as a communications device. When a woman had the meal ready, she went outside to some vantage point from which she could be seen by the workers in the fields. Then, she lifted a white flour-sack dish towel and waved it back and forth over her head. When the tractor was going in the right direction, the driver could see that bright, light towel from a very long distance. He knew, then, that dinner was ready.

The smart phone has made these methods obsolete on most farms, but, here on our homestead, we don’t like to be quite so controlled and connected by technological devices. If hand work—such as fence building—is taking place in far off fields, our dinner bell still is a very effective means of communication.

And, that dish towel still works, too.