

Texting, e-mail, social media, cell phones—the ways people keep in contact these days are almost too numerous to mention. There is probably less personal communication now than ever before—or at least since the time humans acquired the power of language. But, devices for keeping in touch with other individuals have grown both in number and kind during recent years.

That makes it hard to understand, sometimes, that those of us in the older generations recall a far different situation. Here in the sparsely settled rural area of our state, we can remember as far back as the party line, old wooden telephones on the wall with cranks to ring the numbers.

When I was a young child, we had such telephone service. Our number was 41F4, and if someone from outside our party line, even a local person, wished to talk to us, she would first crank the phone once—one ring—to contact “Central.” This was the office in the village that was responsible for directing all the local calls. The telephone operator—a term that is now probably extinct—answered the ring with “Central.” It was a simple procedure to give the number one wished—as our “41F4.” Central would plug in the call to the correct number, and our telephone would ring—four rings.

If, however, one wished to talk to someone on the same party line, it was a simple task to just crank out the number oneself. The neighbor’s ring might be “one long and two short” or some other combination. Most homemakers knew by heart the numbers of their neighbors.

Then, there was the “line ring.” If there were a disaster or emergency of some kind, Central would ring one long ring that would come to every house in the area. Then, she would give the information required. When much of the village burned—it happened at least twice during the early years—Central alerted the countryside that help was needed to fight fire. And, sometimes, the line ring was used for less fearful happenings. My dad recounted that Central kept the country people apprised of the results of the World Series games. The information came in at the railroad depot via telegraph and then was sent out to baseball fans via Central.

“Rubbering” was the term used for listening in on others’ conversations on the party line. We heard stories of a few ladies who had trouble getting their work done because of the interesting news that was disseminated via the party line. As everyone heard all the rings, there were often people talking to each other on the telephone, and it probably was tempting to pick up the receiver and listen. Most people did not go as far as one woman, though, who, if the stories are correct, also added a comment now and then. My aunts said that my grandmother and her sister conducted their conversations in Swedish, knowing that there were no other Swedish speakers on the party line, or at least, none that were prone to “rubbering.”

Later on, dial phones came to the countryside, though we still had the party line for some years. And a decade or two beyond the introduction of the black, generic phones most people had, “dialing” became a term for just punching in a series of numbers on a keypad. One of our neighbors had her old rotary dial phone in a storage area, and when her granddaughters were

helping her clean out the items she did not want to keep, they came upon the old phone.

“What is this?” one of them asked.

“It’s a telephone,” she answered.

“But, how does it work?”

“You see the numbers in the holes,” she explained.

The girls tried poking their fingers in the holes, but nothing happened. Their grandmother had to explain the procedure of actually turning the dial. Times had changed.

And changes are happening at a seemingly accelerating pace. Cursive writing is difficult for some children to decipher and totally impossible for them to duplicate. Many people can no longer read a road map. GPS programs have convinced them that it is no longer necessary. And face to face conversation has become uncomfortable and very hard for many young people.

Does it matter? Maybe not. But, maybe it does. The results are not yet clear. In the meantime, I like maps; I enjoy sending handwritten letters; and, I like talking in person to family and friends.