

I used the telephone a few days ago for one of those calls where I ended up waiting and waiting, trying not to listen to music I didn't like that was playing the entire time. I couldn't make the call another time, so I had to wait. I decided to use the time for a good "think." And what better to think about than telephones.

I realize that, for most people, the cell phone has become an appendage that is absolutely essential. It must be in the hand or pocket at all times. But, it wasn't always this way, and I realized that, although I think about myself as a relatively young, vibrant person, the truth may be something distinctly "other" than that. But, I still astonished myself when I began to think back to telephone use over the decades.

Though I have lived most of the time in the same location, the household here has had a number of different phone numbers. The first number I remember would not even be recognized as a phone number today. But, if anyone wanted to call us on the phone, the number was 41F-4. It was many years before dial phones, also a concept quite foreign to many people these days. That system resulted in a new number, TA-9-3328. TA represented Talbot, the Tustin exchange. Later, that designated word was eliminated, and the numbers representing those letters on the phone dial produced 829-3328. Another wrinkle in the long saga of phone numbers resulted in the addition of the three digit area code.

As varied as the phone numbers were, the telephones themselves were equally diverse. That first telephone, the one that connected this farm with the world until the mid 1950s, had a varnished oak case and hung on the wall. The receiver (for those who know only cell phones, that is the device one held to the ear to hear the other end of the call) hung on the side of the phone, and the mouthpiece into which one spoke was in the middle of the phone case. The telephone was battery powered.

We were on a party line, another concept that has disappeared. We heard the rings of everybody on the line, and in the early years, that might be over a dozen households. We answered only when we heard our own ring, four equal chimes. Another family might answer to one long ring and two short, or a long and a short. One ring—and all rings were produced by turning the handle on the right side of the telephone case—contacted "Central."

"Central" was located in the telephone office in the village. A telephone operator, usually a woman, sat at a switchboard to connect callers with the party they requested if it was a number that was not on their own line. It typically went like this:

"Rinnng."

"Central," she answered.

"3929 please," might be the request.

Central then hooked up the two numbers and the phone rang at the other end.

Central also had the ability to call everybody on all local lines at once via one long ring, referred to as the "line ring." When the village was on fire during the early years, the line ring alerted the countryside and asked for people to

come and help. And, sometimes, the line ring was used for happier instances, such as when the operator reported the scores of World Series games she had received via the telegraph at the railroad depot.

One aspect of the old party line was probably mourned by some of the patrons. A practice called “rubbering” was common. Since everyone who picked up their phone could hear whatever conversation might be taking place, some people deliberately listened in on the conversations of others. The story was that my grandmother and her sister talked only Swedish when they visited on the phone because one lady in the neighborhood—not of Swedish descent—rubbered constantly but could not speak Swedish.

I experienced only the last years of the old party line system, and for most of my growing up years, the stationary dial phone, usually a heavy, basic black model, was the rule in most households. Portable phones, push button phones to replace the dial, large cell phones that gave way time and again to smaller and smaller pocket models, then the Smart phone with computer capabilities that once again grew larger and larger to—well, who knows what will be the next major change.

But those old wall phones, well polished as a piece of fine furniture, are still more interesting than those that followed them. And, after all, isn't all of it—from those first aids to oral communication to the present, only different manifestations of one old man's assessment? When asked why he had no phone, he answered: “Why would I want something that would allow anyone all over the world to make a bell ring in my house?” A valid question.