

THE 'SHOCK' OF OWNING A TELEPHONE

Second Thoughts

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As we were riding along, Interstate 95 in the New England states last August, Glyn, our son-in-law, dialed the access number and placed a call to Andy, our grandson in Mobile, AL.

We chatted with Andy and with Missy, our granddaughter, through a microphone within the reach of four voices. Wow! A lot has happened in communications since Alexander Graham Bell made the first phone call.

Andy and Missy hold no awe for telephones, computers, VCR's, microwave ovens, man-made satellites, space missions, moon walks, fax machines, television, air conditioning or motion pictures.

I do. I still marvel at electric light switches, adding machines and typewriters. You see, we had none of the above when I was a boy. There were a few automobiles in the community; in fact, Granddaddy owned a 1924 Dodge which he drove for awhile then parked it in the garage until after I was well into adulthood. But there were no other power devices.

There were no telephones in the community when my family returned in 1927 to live in Rock Springs Valley. But there had been. Wires were still stretched and a few glass brackets had withstood the assault of dozens of boys throwing hundreds of rocks.

One day, Dad and some of the other men in the community decided to use the existing lines and establish a four-party system that would serve us, my grandparents, Peewee's folks and Portfolio's folks. To make a call, you lifted the receiver to make sure the line was clear, replace the receiver and crank one or two long rings or one long and one short or one long and two shorts, depending on which home you were calling.

Initially, it was a great novelty for us kids, but over the long haul, the adult females made most use of the system. Mama loved it. She would call and talk with Granny, who lived a quarter of a mile down the road, albeit everybody visited during the day. But it was handy for Mama to call Granny and ask her to bring two cups of sugar when she came.

I am sure Dad and the other men never considered maintenance when they built the system. One day, following an electric and wind storm, Mama tried to use the phone but found it dead. Dad and I found a tree had fallen over the line just beyond Portfolio's house. We asked Portfolio if he wanted to help us repair the break, but he graciously declined. Had to help his Dad clean a stable, he said, "He has to finish his book," I thought.

Well, we got the wire spliced and I was standing in the wet grass holding it, when somebody tried to make a call. You've never had a real charge if you've never held a telephone line in your hands while standing in the wet grass with somebody turning the generator crank.

I let out a shriek, and Dad, halfway up a pole, asked calmly: What's the matter, son?"

"Somebody's turning a crank and shocking the hel- the heck – out of me," I screamed.

"Well, dang it, drop the wire." Dad said.

"I can't." I screamed. "I can't let go."

Dad, considered my plight while I jumped up and down and shrieked. Then the charge stopped, and I dropped the wire. Dad surveyed the scene, found I was not permanently harmed, and to make matters worse, started laughing.

"If you think getting electrocuted is funny, you hold the wire and I'll climb the pole," I told him.

Dad thought his was reasonable, so I climbed the pole with a rope to pull the wire to the bracket. Just as I was getting ready to splice the line, Dad let out a howl.

"See what I mean?" I said in glee. Dad had lost his sense of humor.

"I tell you what, let's go find out who's turning the crank and wring somebody's neck," he said.

"I know who's cranking it; it's Portfolio!" I said.

I was right. When we found Portfolio, he was standing in his hallway in full view, cranking away. I think he knew what was happening down the line and did it on purpose. I wanted to tie the line around his neck, stand him in the pond and ring his number until he screamed for mercy, but Dad solved the problem more diplomatically.

As time went on, keeping the system in repair was more trouble than the service was worth, so we let it fall into disrepair.

One day Portfolio was at my house during a rain storm. Dad and Mama had gone to visit a sick friend. The situation was ripe for mischief.

"Got any baling wire?" Portfolio asked.

"Of course, we got baling wire, why?"

“Just get me about 35 feet of it, and I’ll show you,” he said.

Portfolio attached the wire to the telephone then tossed the loose end into the road. When somebody came along walking, as most people did in those days, Portfolio would crank the phone and jump up and down in glee while some poor half-electrocuted victim wondered what was happening.

Well. One victim knew what was happening and reported the incident to Dad who came home in a bad humor. Let me say here that Dad had never heard there was a controversy over corporal punishment. It would not have matter anyway. Dad knew how to cure what ailed teenage sons.

And I lost my admiration of Alexander Graham Bell. I hoped that when he had the first call, he got an operator who said: “If you wish to make a call, please hang up and dial again. If you need assistance, please dial you operator” or “if you want to hold down costs, please look up the number in your directory.”

Can’t you just see old Alex standing there looking at the receiver?

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