

Oh, Ma Bell

*By Dennis Payton Knight*

There was a time by the Nineteen-Fifties when most households had a telephone. It was the Western Electric Model 500. It came in black, white or beige. It was sleek, modern, indestructible, and the conversations were crisp and clear. You couldn't own it for yourself; instead, your monthly phone bill from Ma Bell included a sum for equipment rental.

You might call it a digital phone, but the only digits involved were the Arabic numbers zero through nine, and your index finger, which you would use to rotate the dial. After you drew the wheel clockwise to where it hit a stop, you would retract your finger and let the dial roll itself back at its own pace, sending coded electronic pulses to the central switching office. When you finished dialing, usually only four digits in those days, you would hear the other phone ring, and then, if anybody was home, your call would be efficiently connected. If not, you would try again later.

My sister was a telephone operator in Laramie during the fifties. I believe her job was to manipulate jacks on a switchboard with the goal of conjuring connections of townfolk to such faraway places as Denver, Davenport, and Dubuque.

Today, you no longer need to involve an operator or even spin a dial. Instead you verbally direct your oh-so-smart mobile phone to call your cousin Matilda in Baltimore or the pizza joint on Havana Street. Speak clearly, though, or you might get connected to Matilda's Spaghetti Emporium in Paducah.

Back then, a telephone did not fit in your pocket. It wasn't a car phone, and it did not follow you into churches, stores, or meetings of the Writers Group. It did not have a mute button, but you could leave it off the hook when you didn't want to be bothered. There was no answering machine acting as your surrogate.

Often your house would be on a party line, shared by two, three, maybe four families. Sometimes you would lift the handset to hear strangers embroiled in conversation. They soon knew you there, though, because you were breathing, and your little brother was screaming in the background. They would icily suspend the dialog until you put the phone down. No apology was necessary; you just hung up, pretending you had heard nothing and you were never there.

Nowadays people conduct cell phone conversations in public, loudly and unabashedly, while shopping in markets, riding on buses, browsing in libraries. The rest of us pretend to hear nothing and act as if we're not even there.

Finally, the old telephone had only one ring tone in its repertoire. There were no bird calls, no cat calls, no whistles, no tympani. Just a traditional, mechanical ringing. It was loud enough to wake the dead, of course, but pleasantly, because maybe it was Grandma calling.

That, my friends and fellow authors, was the then and now. Oh, one reminder: please silence your cell phones.