

Number Please

By Marilyn Reeves

When I was growing up in Salida we didn't have cell phones, princess phones, push-button phones or phones with rotary dials. But we did have phones. You picked up the receiver and the operator said, "Number, please?" And you gave her the number you wished to call and she rang it for you.

Funny, nowadays I can't remember what I ate for breakfast half the time, but I can remember some of those old phone numbers. Most of them were three digits, like our home phone, which was 648. Dad's store was 295. But my best friend Julie's number was 4. Just 4.

One day when I was about seven, I met a new friend by the name of Linda Robb and we decided to set up a play date. So I told her I'd give her a call. When the operator said, "Number, please?" I told her I needed information for the Robb family. She retorted, "Smart aleck!" and hung up. When I told Mom she laughed because she knew the operator thought I was playing games. So she contacted the operator, explained that there was a new family in town by the name of Robb (R-o-b-b) and could she please have that number. Then the operator put me through to my friend.

Living in a small town back then, everyone knew everyone else's business. We all suspected that the operator would listen in to our conversations and pass along juicy bits of gossip to the next caller. And woe to those who had party lines! I was visiting a friend's house one time and the phone rang twice, then paused, then rang twice again, but my friend didn't answer the phone. When I asked her why, she said, "Oh that's for the other party. Our line has three rings." There wasn't a whole lot of privacy on those party lines.

When I moved to Denver in the early 60's the numbers were all seven digits, with 2-letter prefixes. But code words were assigned to the letters, so rather than saying "AC2" you'd ask the operator for AComa 2-4576 for instance. Or SKyline 6-9591, which was my in-laws' number. Eventually the letter prefixes were replaced with numerals and the operator was replaced with rotary phones. So I would dial my in-laws at 756-9591.

I had barely gotten that number memorized when they added the Area Code 303, which made it a 10-digit number I would have to dial ... and try to remember. Of course in those days there were no answering machines or voice mail, so you just had to keep trying until the person you were calling finally answered. Worse, when you were expecting a phone call from that "certain someone" you were stuck at home, sitting by the phone hoping he'd call.

Things have certainly changed since a live operator asked, "Number, please?" Now I have a cordless phone that I can move from room to room, as well as Voice Mail. I have yet to purchase a cell phone, however. But then I rarely make phone calls anymore, anyway. Now all I have to do is try to remember where I put that new gal's e-mail address.