

## Hello and Goodbye

When I first used a telephone in 1936 at age four I found it heavy and awkward to hold. As it was a few inches longer than the distance from my ear to my mouth I held it in both hands and moved it from ear to mouth as required.

I recall my Mother, twenty years later, laughing as she demonstrated my technique.

At that age my few friends hadn't started using the phone yet. However, if someone outside of our home called Woodburn 7612 and I was within two rooms of the only phone we owned (actually rented), I would run at full tilt to get to it before my Mom so I could pick it up and say "Friedlander's Residence" with great majesty.

Those senior members of the club will recall that, in the mid nineteen-thirties, there were no dials. If one of my Mother's friends wished to call our home they would pick up their phone and wait five to ten seconds for a pleasant woman to say "Operator". The caller would then say Woodburn 7612 and in another five to ten seconds she would hear a ringing followed by, if she were lucky, my announcement that she'd reached the right party.

I would then hear "Billy, may I please speak to your Mom." They knew she would be home if I answered as we had no sitters. I, in turn, learned the voices of the frequent callers and would tell my Mother who was on the line when I handed her the phone.

Even more fun was placing calls after the dial appeared on phones in the forties. The early models moved too slowly for me and when I put my finger in the hole for an eight, nine or zero I would speed up the dial on its path back to the starting position. Though the phones were designed to operate at a high spin rate I, nevertheless, found that I got a wrong number every five or six tries.

That turned into a jolly game as I tried to persuade the woman on the other end of the line to tell me about her love life (I hung up on men). The women, soon realizing that I was a young boy, often would talk to me – though never about sex. Instead they would try to find out my name and where I went to school, hoping, I suppose, to contact my Mother and rat on

me. Every now and then one would lecture me on the annoyance I was causing and attempt to teach me proper phone etiquette. Inevitably I was caught and forbidden to touch the phone for either incoming or outgoing calls.

After those early game days I didn't think much about telephones, their history or how they connected with each other until I was asked, in 1986, to join the Board of Cincinnati Bell. On the ground floor of the company's headquarters was a room devoted to the Pioneers, a hundred year old volunteer organization of current and former telephone company employees.

The pioneers reminded me that the oldest phones in use in my childhood had a crank on the side which, when spun energetically, rang every phone on the system. Each user had a distinctive ring consisting of a series of intermixed long and short cranks. I recall that, at the Triangle X ranch in Jackson, Wyoming which I first visited as a seven year old in 1940, their phone ring was two longs and a short.

If they wanted to talk to their neighbor, or even a ranch ten miles down the road, all they needed to know was their ring sequence. I would guess that there were fifty or so phones on their little network and next to each phone was a sheet with their name and a series of dots and dashes for their ring sequence. When you cranked one of these it rang on everyone's phone and, if your phone rang with another's sequence you knew the phone would be 'busy' for a while. If you waited ten minutes and picked up the phone to crank a new call and they were still talking it was not considered rude to mention that they had been talking for ten minutes. That almost always got them off.

To call outside of the system one called the operator with a very long crank. Then you'd verbally place the call with her and she'd call back when you were connected, usually in three or four minutes. To call home I'd ask for Cincinnati, Woodburn 7612 (note no area code). I'd also tell her that I was calling "station to station" meaning I'd speak to anyone who answered or "person to person" to a named person at that number. The latter, while more expensive per minute, avoided any charge if the party I was calling wasn't home.

However, the best feature for kids with no money and parents who wanted a weekly report was the "collect call." Without this clever invention no student would ever have called home. Some rarely spoke to their

parents. Just the call – which the parents would then refuse – was all they needed to know that all was well.

I had a college roommate, Wray Zelt, who was very tight with his funds. He also wasn't too careful about being on time for appointments and dated a girl at Smith, twenty-five minutes away, who didn't like waiting for him in the dorm's common room downstairs. He would, therefore, signal her when he was departing by placing a collect person-to-person call to *the phone in her dorm's hall*. Whoever picked up the call knew to refuse it and pass the word to his date to be dressed and downstairs in twenty-five minutes. A clever no cost telephone messaging system!

Now, sixty years later, Wray would have pulled a cell phone out of his pocket as he started the drive over hearing her voice on his car's sound system. Every student now owns a cell phone and the companies are witnessing their 'land lines' disappear at an accelerating rate while cell phone usage grows even faster. If the Literary Club member's average age were thirty rather than sixty-five **every** member would have a phone in his pocket instead of the fifty percent my informal straw poll came up with recently. And my four grandchildren in their twenties each has his own apartment... and none have a wired phone or are ever likely to. The phone they each carry is not only their **verbal** communicator but also their calendar, contact list and Internet access device which enables them to read their email on the phone.

And those phones will improve at the same pace the old copper wire gadgets I grew up with did and will soon have screens that will expand to watch first rate movies with sound over high grade ear buds.

The newer cell phones now accept voice commands. I press a button on mine and say 'Dial home'. A few seconds later I'm talking to my wife.

Now, of course, little of this progress would have been possible without computers for they now control all the switching that, twenty years ago, was mechanical. The Cincinnati Bell Center on West Seventh St. that fills a complete block once had ten floors filled with switches noisily putting a caller together with his target. Now it's done with four floors of computers and no noise. And an increasing number of calls are on cell phones which require no wire so someday – not soon – but someday we will see copper wire coming down; that is if the copper thieves don't steal it all first.

And, computer speeds are increasing following closely the growth rate posited by Gordon Moore of Intel Corp. in 1965. He predicted that processing speeds and memory capacity would double every two years and, in fact they have somewhat exceeded this rate doubling every eighteen months.

As the modern world's telephone systems are completely dominated by computers it is clear that the cost per megabit of sending data over phone lines is coming down in concert with Moore's Law. And with this comes a reduction in the cost of calling long distances. Now a call to Moscow costs 1.9 cents per minute on one of the many discount phone services available. Twenty years ago this call cost a bit over a dollar a minute! Parents no longer have reason to complain about their children's phone bills.

And perhaps, in the next decade, the day will come when tiny phones will be implanted near your ear canal and an even smaller speaker near your throat. When a call comes in you'll hear a click and the caller will be identified by name. You will say 'hello' to start to answer and start a conversation or a code word to drop the call if you don't want to talk. The phone will then take your caller's message.

If you're walking down a crowded street when this happens you will get lots of stares at first. Consider yourself a pioneer for, if you weren't getting them, you'd know that most of them already had inserts themselves and you're not the pioneer with the latest in "internally Wearable Phones". IWPs for short.

I hope that when you come to the Literary Club with IWPs you'll be polite enough to give each of yours the command – 'don't bother me' which will quiet the phone and route all incoming calls to your voice mail until you instruct it to come back and give you messages – after you've congratulated the speaker, had your beer and met with the other club members, a tradition I hope changes much more slowly than the phone in your ear.