

The Old Telephones and Party Lines
by M.D. Smith, IV



OK, if you remember the old Rotary Dial telephones, hold up your hand. If not, you are going to have a hard time believing all this to follow.

Now my wife and I go back a number of years and we did grow up as kids in houses with "modern" phones. No, not the wooden type that hangs on the wall, and has a crank on the side to generate ringing current to get an operator on the line that you could give the number to for calling.

Our modern telephones had a round black metal dial with finger holes around the circle. Underneath each hole was a number from 1 to 9 and then 0 for the Operator, which had to handle all your long distance calls. Later phones had plastic dials and cases on them. Of course, you put your finger in the numbered hole you wanted to dial, and turned the whole thing clockwise until your finger hit the curved metal stop bar, and you let go. When you did that, the phone would click the line the same number of times as the number you wanted to dial. If you dialed a "4" and let go, you would hear "click, click, click, click" as it returned to resting position.

As a kid, hearing this and my father explaining to me how it worked, I learned you could also lift the receiver hand set off the hook, and then bump the button underneath 10 or more times, and the operator would come on the phone. Later for kicks I would try dialing a number by bumping the button the exact number of times I needed for each number with a pause between series. For our number which was 1431, that was not hard

to do. Then they added the word prefix like "JEfferson 4" to the number, because they thought it would be too hard for people to remember 534-1431. Can you imagine words now with area codes?

There was another issue about telephone lines. It took a pair of wires coming into every home in those days. These were in "trunk" lines with hundreds of pairs of wires in them. But sometimes the phone company ran out of pairs, so the solution was to put several homes on the same pair of wires but arrange for a different "ring" depending on what number was called. Two short rings and a pause was for one family, and the other might be two long rings or short long or some combination. Of course it rang in both or sometimes 4-5 homes on the "party line" and if you picked up your phone you could hear a conversation not meant for you. If someone picked up while you were talking, you could usually hear a "click", slight lowering of the volume, and usually some added background noise. Then you knew someone was listening.

I also found out if you unscrewed the mouth piece from the telephone, leaving only the ear part and let the button up with your finger slowly, it was almost unnoticeable by anyone else. So we, and others on party lines, would often "eavesdrop" on neighbors and sometime some pretty intimate phone conversations. I always reminded Judy not to say anything she didn't want the world to know, and sometimes I'd even say, "DID YOU GET ALL THAT, MARGE?" while I was talking to remind me and the caller on the other end that it was a party line. On a rare occasion after I'd say that, I hear a distinct "click" and

Marge would hang up. It was almost a game and about 9 months later, they ran some more wires up to Monte Sano Mountain and we had a private line and have had ever since. Maybe that's why I always liked "scanner" radio receivers to listen in on police calls and stuff. Today I am overloaded. The fun is not like it was with "Party Lines."

