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Memorandum

To: Trialists

Fr: Curtis Meinert

Re: The rise of the telephone

Have you heard of the Literary Digest? Odds are you haven't.

The magazine folded shortly after the 1936 presidential election. It predicted Alfred Landon by a landslide over Franklin Roosevelt. They were wrong, by a whole bunch!

The Digest poll was one of the first attempts at polling by telephone. The problem was that many more republicans had phones than democrats back then.

I grew up with a phone affixed to our kitchen wall like the one pictured below.



We had a party line; one “long” ring and two “short” ones; Ville 72. If you wanted someone on our line you just rang them up. My father, in his later years, was the household rubberer.

If you wanted someone on another line you rang up “central” by pressing the button on the left and giving the crank on the right a quick turn.

We knew it was “long distance” when we were “shushed” and our mother talked louder.

You knew if a thunderstorm was coming. The phone started crackling. Sometimes barely and sometimes with a bang as loud as a shotgun if the storm was close.

You never went near the phone when electrical storms were brewing!

Once the phone started crackling we knew we would be heading for the cellar.

I hated the cellar. It was dark and dank. You knew there were mice that called it home down there.

Even in the daytime it was dark because the only window was covered to keep light from stimulating potatoes to sprout. At night it was pitch black if we got herded before my mother had a chance to fetch a flashlight.

We got the all clear when the wind stopped and no longer heard rain hitting the house.

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In my life I have gone from a hand crank wall phone to one carried in my pocket, and from one long and two short rings to no ring at all. From Ville 72 to 10 digits and that annoying reminder on land lines if you forget to dial the one in front of the 10 digit number you are calling.

I ask you? If the phone company is so smart to know when you must first dial a one, why don't they just do it, and save us the aggravation of the message?

Our first phone after we married was a Western Electric dial phone with that iconic ring and built like a brick outhouse. We were on the Franklin exchange; six characters. Two letters and four numbers.

In the early 1990s area codes were added. Then, even if just calling across the street, you needed ten digits.

"Pennsylvania Six-Five Thousand" (recorded by Glenn Miller in 1940) still got you to the Pennsylvania Hotel in NYC (if preceded by 212) until it closed because of the COVID pandemic.

I proudly boasted, in a posting of 20 April 2021, about getting rid of my land line to reduce my dinosaur ness.

BIG MISTAKE!

A few weeks ago I got it back, even our old number. Now most of the calls I receive are computer generated from people wanting to buy my house.

I have always regarded Alexander Graham-Bell's invention a mixed blessing. Invaluable for communications to be sure, but an obnoxious interrupter.

BTW: Betty Collison, my assistant for years at Hopkins, came to be called Watson after Alexander Graham-Bell's Watson. His first telephone transmission was "Mr. Watson, come here. I want to see you".

Remember pay phones? Try to find one. Done in by cell phones.

Cell phones are great, but not for technologically challenged old farts. (PS: Don't bother me with "face time" calls. I haven't figured out how to hang them up.)

The thing I hate about phones is how they own you. If it rings everything stops. When my wife was alive she was the phone mistress. If it rang, she answered! My admonishment "let it ring" fell on deaf ears. No matter what it interrupted, when it rang everything stopped, because it "might be important" (it never was).

The rise of the telephone**27 June 2022**

My entire life I tried to instill the notion in my three daughters that they cannot do two things at the same time, but then comes cell phone built into cars. Now I have a daughter who cannot drive unless she is talking on the phone.

Lord, help me!