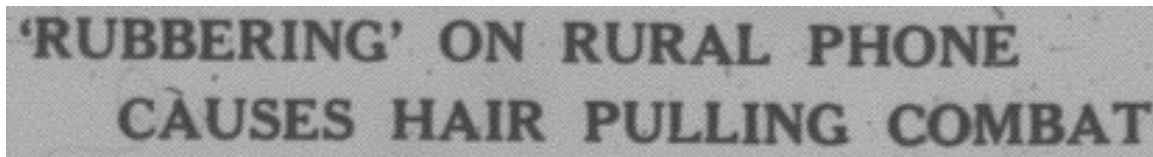


Telephone Use Is Not What It Used to Be

Most of the people who grew up in Green County in the 1950s and before can remember how different it was to use the telephone compared to what it is today. The old wooden phone, usually only one in the entire house, was mounted to a wall. Ours was in the corner of the dining room beside the door that entered into the living room. There was a mouthpiece on the front of the phone and an earpiece attached to the left side with a short cord. In addition, there was a crank on the right side.

Besides the way they looked, those phones were so much different to operate than current phones. Most of them were mounted high so that you had to stand to talk into the mouthpiece. If the phone rang you simply lifted the earpiece, put it to your ear, and spoke into the mouthpiece. But if you wanted to make a call, you would turn the crank to get the attention of an operator who would then say, "Number, please." You would tell her the number of the party to whom you wished to speak and she would connect you via the large switchboard. I believe our number then was 937-G.

The biggest difference was that there were party lines with several homes being able to use this single line for the phone connection. That would mean that anyone who would pick up their phone while you were talking could hear your conversation. The polite thing to do if you heard someone talking on the line when you picked up was to hang up and come back later, but sometimes people would listen to the conversations of other people on the party line.



This headline from 1923 is from an August article about a fight that broke out when a neighbor listened in on another's conversation on the neighborhood "party line."

Each home on the party line had a different ring pattern - two longs and a short, three shorts, etc. If you wanted to call one of the neighbors on the same party line, you were able to pick up the earpiece and crank their ring without the help of the operator. Of course any ringing of the phone was heard in all of the homes on the same line.

When someone on the party line listened to the conversations of others on their line, it was called "rubbering." An article in the Monroe Evening Times on July 30, 1903 reported on a lineman who had been looking for a problem on a farmers' line the previous week. When he walked into the house he discovered a lady sitting in a rocking chair, busily knitting with the telephone receiver tied to the back of her chair. She could hear all that was being said over the line. "She was provoked when censured, adding by way of defense, that she paid for what she got and was bound to get her money's worth."

Another article in the August 6, 1923 newspaper included the heading "Rubbering on Rural Phone Causes Hair Pulling Combat." The column went on to say that "rubbering resulted in the tying up of traffic on the west side of the square on the previous Saturday evening.

"Cars were stalled in the streets, so thick because the crowd that gathered about two women who were engaged in a fight. One had overheard a conversation of the other, it is said, and a vigorous show of resentment was in order when they met.

"Their first weapons were those of sharp speech. This developed into fist fighting and hair pulling, onlookers assert, and it was not until an officer of the law emerged from the crowd and became implicated in the combat that they were finally subdued."

I found two articles printed in the Times that gave some pointers for etiquette on the party lines. One was printed on September 30, 1908 and the other was printed the following year on June 3. One mentioned taking a pledge that was similar to the golden rule, which could also be applied to all forms of social media today. The pledge simply said, "I believe in the golden rule

and will try to be courteous and considerate over the telephone as if face to face.” It went on to say that the “central” [switchboard] would welcome it more than a box of bonbons.

The pledge was also printed on a blue and white disk and provided with a cord so that it was visible in the phone booths in Milwaukee. In fact, some of the merchants there started wearing them as badges on their coat lapels.

The 1908 article stated, “Any farmer or farmer’s wife can say all that needs to be said in three minutes, whether it is about buying a new horse, the baby’s teething, John’s cold, or a new dress pattern, or the prospects for weddings in the neighborhood. The rural telephone is a wonderful help to farmers, but like all other good things it may be, and in some cases is, very greatly abused, to the moral detriment of those who abuse it.”

I hope that those of you who grew up with the party line will share some of your memories with the younger generations to help them realize how much lives have changed in the last few decades.