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When a telephone was a luxury and everyone in the neighborhood used it

By Diether Haenicke
July 29, 2009

I was a child when our family got its first telephone. World War II had destroyed most of the communication systems, and to have a phone installed was a major event.

The German Post Office held the monopoly for telephone service. One had to go to their local branch to file an application for home phone service, and a reason had to be given for the need to be allocated a connection. Physicians, policemen and businesses were given a high priority; others were put on a long waiting list.

My father actually saw no need for a phone installation. His preference was to communicate by writing letters, and I was always available as backup. When messages had to be delivered in town or a little beyond, I pulled my bike out of the basement and peddled away, alerting the doctor or the plumber to make a house call, informing the grocer or the baker about my mother's shopping needs, or inviting family friends to some impromptu celebration.

But my mother wanted a phone. She had eight children, many of them scattered all over the country, and she wanted the comfort of knowing immediately if her help was needed by one of them. Although low on the priority pole, eventually the postal authorities generously granted us a phone. A truck pulled up in front of our house, several men drilled holes through walls, pulled wires through them, and finally produced a black rotary dial phone -- no fancy color options at that time -- and a decision was made to place it in the entrance hall where it could be easily accessed by everybody.

Of course, it was also a location that provided only a minimum of privacy. Conversations from the entrance hall could easily be heard from every other room in the house. I remember feeling extremely embarrassed as a teenager when using the phone to make

dates for dances or the movies as parents and siblings diverted their attention from their reading to my attempts of romantic phone conversation with the objects of my desire.

Also, the new phone brought additional chores for me. Neighbors without a phone began to give out our phone number as a possible way to contact them in emergencies. Grandmother had been kicked by a horse and was in the hospital. Uncle Willy had a stroke, please come immediately. Maria had a miscarriage; could her mother come and help? These and other such disastrous news poured out of our phone, and back it was to the old days: Diether would pull out his bike and spread news across town, mostly messages of despair and sudden disaster.

Of course, the recipients of such messages would then ask if they could use our phone to respond to their relatives or friends in need. This request was always granted, and so I had the double misfortune of being the messenger of bad news and also the one who listened to all the return calls made by our neighbors who had been visited by disasters.

Our entrance hall turned, at times, into a veritable chamber of woes and tears. People love to hear about the misfortune of others, and although peer pressure to reveal what personal unhappiness had befallen neighboring families was great and tempting, I learned at an early age to keep my mouth shut about other people's affairs. It served me well later in life.

For several years after the war, owning a telephone was considered almost a luxury. Every incoming call was considered important. When the phone rang, someone in the house rushed to answer it. We were not yet blessed with today's technological progress that allows telephone owners through features such as caller ID to only reply to a few calls that are convenient and welcome.

And making long-distance calls was expensive. A little egg timer shaped like an hour glass sat next to our phone with a three minute time span. One or two such units were considered sufficient, sometimes three, but only for major catastrophes.

Today, my cell phone company offers me 3,000 free minutes per month for one basic fee. That is 50 hours. Better yet, since everybody now has a phone, my bike messenger services are no longer needed.

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