

WAY
BACK
WHEN



Phone Man Should Have Been Bank President

BY VERA MILLER

REMEMBER THE telephone that was installed in its throne within the arched door cavern of the commode in the front hallway? Above this patina-ed mahogany item were hung family heirloom pictures in their amber oval frames attached by some mysterious force to the ceiling woodwork.

Behind the stately ebony soldier forever in a right armed salute to the unknown caller were two empty sulphur match boxes. The kind you pull out to open. In one were the slugs and in the other box were the nickels.

TO CALL Pa at the store was a ceremony that enthralled the family. Ma would approach the front hallway shushing everyone as she went. The little spindly-legged seat was pulled out (just partly) and Ma would install herself upon it.

Ever since the day the phone was installed and Ma was carefully rehearsed for the four phone numbers which enabled her to maintain contact with the outside world, the family doctor, the butcher, Aunt Fagie and THE STORE, she still pulled the tattered scrap from under the telephone to carefully enunciate the number first to herself. The slug was deposited and signaled its downward arrival by a bell sound giving an 'all clear.'

REPEAT NUMBER

"NUMBER puh-lee-ahs" and Ma would draw herself up with dignity and clearly and distinctly repeat the number at least twice. There were no prefix numbers in those days, just four digits and the exchange. Sandwiched between were various jiggings of the receiver as Ma discussed with the operator, whom she was trying to reach, her relationship to the called party and the importance of the operator to make the proper connection.

After the series of buzzings to indicate the electronic compatibility between the caller and the phone company, Ma would invariably start the conversation with "Pa—Pa, you're all right? So long it took me to call I thought maybe you were sick. Pa, you're too busy I should talk? Maybe I should come to the store for a minute 'efshur'."

REMEMBER THE thin drawer in the commode? The city telephone book was the family dictionary, the direction finder, the primary reader to learn the alphabet and continuity of the numerical system and, of course, the 'extra' seat when a high chair was needed.

Sometimes this meant borrowing the neighbors telephone books for the desired elevation for the Friday night dinner.

Once a month the telephone man came. He was one of the family. Ma usually had a little 'nash' for him. The young boys learned to doff their hats like the 'telephone man' and the girls were cautioned not to bite their nails in his presence.

AND WHEN he opened the black box and started to work, more than ever Ma would be convinced that he was in the wrong job—he should be a bank president.

After the slugs were counted and the eldest given the job of making the monetary payment for them, they were returned to the match box. The big squared dollar bills (remember them?) were given to him in exchange for the nickels and the nickels returned to their sliding cave box. Of course, the telephone box also revealed such items as hair pins, thin pencil leads, and other miscellany.

LISTEN IN

THE RINGING of the telephone was a signal to "man the battle stations" as whomever was in the house hovered in the vicinity of the telephone to listen to the conversation. The older young people who received calls from a person of the opposite sex, resembled ostriches as they spoke on the telephone with their heads telescoped in the dark recess of the telephone cabinet.

And remember way back when all the telephones were black, and they were all the same size and the operator on the party line was the "Mrs. Anthony" between the four party-line users? And maybe you remember how you used to have a pre-arranged signal so that the bell would ring on one of the other party lines and you could talk until the operator made those—"I'm listening!" sounds.