

The passing of the old crank phone

By Sherry Stewart



In this modern age, at a time when man's individuality seems reduced to a series of digits, there has remained one last holdout, one final reminder of the simpler days gone

by. Now, that too is being put aside in the name of efficiency.

The following is offered in the manner of a eulogy, for on June 26, 1971, they are doing away with a beloved member of our household — the old crank phone.

For all you folks out there with modern phones, perhaps a quick explanation is in order. In appearance, today's crank phone bears little resemblance to that wonderful old-fashioned wooden box type that hung, until recently, in some kitchens hereabouts. The crank phone looks, in fact, like any other modern black plastic table or wall phone—except for one vital difference. Where other phones have a disk with finger holes for dialing, the crank phone has, obviously, just a crank.

Numbers are listed in the phonebook under "Toll Stations," and read Bridge Lake 3B, Roe Lake 4W, Sheridan Lake 1T, etc., etc. Each number has a corresponding ring, a combination of long and short rings, belonging to that person alone. In a world full of phonebooks listing people in such terms as 274-9654, or worse, 314-638-9039 ex 217, it has been no small pleasure to think of oneself as a nice simple 4U.

Now, to begin with, the secret of a successful crank is all in the wrist. Of course, the way you plant your feet

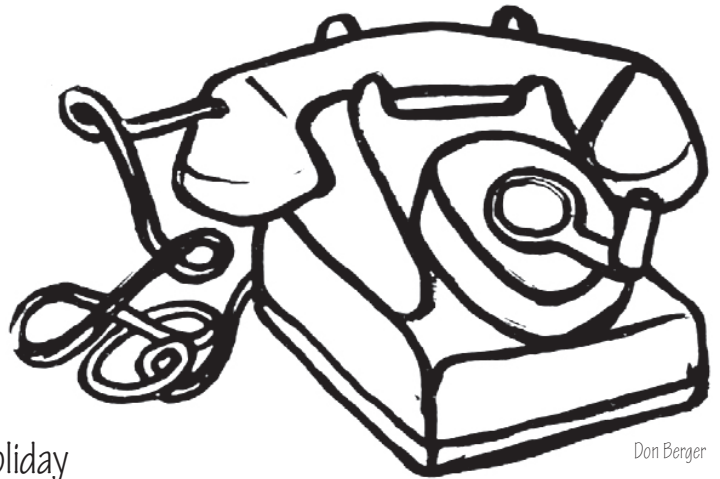
Dear Readers,
Along with my heartfelt wishes for a wonderful Christmas and Holiday Season, I thought I would

share this old article with you. I wrote it shortly after my family and I moved to Roe Lake in 1968, and it was reprinted in the Centennial Edition of the 100 Mile Free Press in August of 1971. Here it is with a few small changes. Consider it a second edition. —S.S.

on the floor and the way you hold the phone with your other hand makes a difference too. For a proper crank, one that rings loud and clear in all the 17 other homes on the line, you must give the handle a good, sharp twist; once around for a "short" and two or more times steadily around for a "long", if making a local call. With one long sustained crank you should (hopefully) create one long sustained ring and reach the outside world via the Williams Lake operator.

At the end of a conversation, you must always be sure to remember to "ring off" as in, "I'd better ring off now, Mabel." It just takes one short twist, in the hope that the operator will discontinue charging you (if a long distance call), and more important, as a means of announcing to the other 17 households that the line is now free.

Each crank phone owner quickly becomes accustomed to the sound of his individual ring, and soon finds it no longer necessary to pause in the middle of a dinner table conversation, or on the way out the door, to see if the jangle belongs to him. Like a mother attuned to her baby's cry, only



one's own combination of rings seems to register after a while. And, one's ear quickly learns the individual and unique ways the other 16 phone owners twist their wrists when calling. A quick sharp combination of longs and shorts tells you that Howard Malm is ringing Russell Ross. A slow, lethargic ring is a dead giveaway that a certain neighbour lady is making a call. You know all the numbers, so you know who is being called.

A phone is many things to many people, but in a small rural area, a multi-ring party line is more than just a system of communication. It is the very heartbeat of the community. It records every neighborhood nuance as surely as a seismograph, and a seasoned ear can easily tell what's going on in the area without picking up the receiver.

For instance, as a test, just listen and guess: It's 7:35 a.m. on a weekday morning, and systematically one number after another is being rung. Conversations last about 30 seconds. Then a ring-off. Then new numbers, one after another, after another. And only those households with school-age children are being called. You don't

even have to be out of bed to know what's up, but you had better be awake, because either the school bus is on the fritz, *or* the temperature has dipped below minus 20 degrees Celsius and the school bus will not be running today!

Try another: It's Sunday morning, say 11:15 a.m., and the usually noisy phone gives off only an eerie silence. Not one call! Even if you didn't go, you'd know that that was *some* cabaret at the Roe Lake Hall last night!

Here's one more: You move into the neighborhood in late fall. The phone rings normally through the winter and early spring. Then suddenly an alarming number of new rings are heard, almost continuously it seems, all day and even at 2 and 3 a.m. The horrible truth finally dawns—you have several very successful summer resorts on your party line. Hang on, it's only until hunting season is over!

Of course, it never rains but it pours in our part of the Cariboo and you can be pretty sure that if a fallen tree or an electrical storm knocks out your power, your phone is gone too, usually with one strangled jangle to announce the passing. And, of course, there was the time, instead of going dead, it just rang and rang and rang without ceasing. And there was no way to stop it! We ended up with not a pillow or blanket left on the bed because they were all piled high upon the poor dying, and still ringing, phone.

Yes, I'm sure you've heard those tales of the occasional homeowner who saw to it each morning that the receiver was slightly ajar so that no telltale "click" would give them away. Remember, it rings even when the receiver is off the hook. Told you it was special! One lady was renown for setting the receiver on the back of her wing chair each morning. That way she could sit and listen whenever a call was put through to someone on the party line.

And, of course, there's the one about the conversation that just happened to be about a certain third person. As the story goes, the talk became so inflammatory that our third person

couldn't contain themselves any longer and blew her cover by insisting loudly, "*I never said that!*"

Now, we must put it all behind us. "The future's bright," we are told. The telephone company is bringing in a modern system, and now everyone will have a dial phone and their own private line.

No longer when the winter wind howls and the whole world seems bleak and deserted will we be

comforted by the little black object on the desk jingling away, assuring us that there *are* others around us, and only a crank away. Now it will ring for us, and for us alone. What if nobody calls?!

To the holdouts—those who have remained steadfast in their determination to "only have a phone when the dial system comes in"—I can't help saying, you have no idea what you've missed.



THE B.C. TEL office for 100 Mile used to be located in what is now the Norman Gilbert Insurance office on the Cariboo Highway. Watching over her staff in above picture is former chief operator, Mrs. Frank Watson. B.C. Tel moved to their new home on Fourth Street in 1964.

Bridge Lake Library Hours

Wednesday 3:30–6 pm Thursday 3:30–7 pm
Saturday 1–5 pm
Preschool Storytime Thursdays 1–2 pm