

# **I Know...I Was There 'Yoo-Hoo' Gives Way to Cell-YOO-Lar**

**Whether we shout, write or push a button,  
we ALL need to communicate.**

**Well, as they say, those were simpler times with  
different values and a different tempo to life.**

By Clancy Strock, Contributing Editor

On the farm, when the noonday meal was ready, most farm wives vigorously rang the dinner bell.

We didn't have a dinner bell. But we had Mom, the original Great Communicator. She simply stood on the back porch steps, took a deep breath and began to "Yoo-hoo, yoo-hoo!"

We could hear her to the ends of the farm...and halfway to town.

Today, it seems like everyone I see walking or driving or scuba diving is gabbing on the cell phone, not yoo-hooing. As my son reminds me, communicating with each other sure has changed a lot in my lifetime.

Remember telephone party lines? Probably not if you're under 60. But 50 years ago, only the privileged had a private phone line. The rest of us were on a hookup that included four, six or even more families. Our number was 914, ring 3. That meant when our crank-type phone gave out three quick rings, the call was for us.

A popular amusement was listening in on your neighbors' phone conversations. If they were just ordering chicken feed, you could hear receivers being hung up...click, click, click. Nothing juicy

today, for cryin' out loud.

In those days, the entire phone network was tied together by a central switchboard. Your local operator knew pretty much everything and everybody. If you asked to be put through to the mayor's office, the operator might say, "He's not there right now, but can I ring him at Walt's Cafe?"

The party line did serve one important community need. In a dire emergency, you spun the crank for several seconds. When you figured everyone on your line had picked up their phone, you yelled, "The barn's on fire!" or whatever.

Within minutes, neighbors were at your door.

In the big cities, it wasn't unusual for an entire apartment house to be phoneless. Instead, a tolerant grocer or drugstore owner downstairs would take calls, then yell up the stairwell that Mrs. Delaney was wanted on the phone.

Naturally, we didn't frivolously use long distance to keep up with friends and relatives; it cost too much. We mostly communicated by mail.

You wrote to Aunt Julia in Kankakee and, several days later, back came her answer in the mailbox.

For quick notes, all we needed was a penny postcard. Yup. Just 1¢!

Strange as it seems, the mail moved pretty much as fast then as it does now. Of course, there were only half as many people in the United States. But when Charles Lindbergh began to fly mail for the post office, we thought things would speed up a lot. We thought wrong.

A dreaded messenger was the Western Union lad in brown, pedaling up to the front walk. Telegrams mostly meant that

someone had died or a shirttail relative needed to borrow money for an emergency.

The only possible good news might be a birth announcement.

When humorist Robert Benchley went to report on things in Europe, he telegraphed his editor at The New Yorker, “ARRIVED VENICE...STREETS FULL OF WATER. PLEASE ADVISE.” (You wrote tersely because telegrams were priced by the word.)

Every town had its local newspaper, which carried the major news of the area, even including stuff about 25th wedding anniversaries and what cattle fetched at the weekly sales barn auction.

Small-town hotspots for gossip were sewing circles, the coffee shop and the post office. Family gatherings were great places for gossip, too.

Jerry Clower, a country comedian, said that after dinner, the men in his family would gather under a shady tree to “pool their ignorance.” That hasn’t changed much, except that gossip now circulates on the Internet, where everyone can share it.

The medium that turned America into one big community was radio. It served everyone’s needs, starting with the morning prayer when stations signed on. One Chicago station featured Everett Mitchell, who greeted listeners with, “It’s a beee-yoo-tiful day in Chicago,” even in lousy weather.

Mid-morning was when soap operas, such as The Guiding Light, took over, interrupted by news at noon. Dad would eat sitting by the radio, eager to hear the day’s prices for corn and cattle.

Afternoons featured the soaps again, although Arthur Godfrey drew huge audiences for his stories, guests, singers and folksy commentary.

Around 4:30 p.m., it was time for kids' programming, 15-minute mini dramas with the inevitable cliffhanger ending to assure a ready audience for the next day.

Come 6 o'clock, the network news would be delivered by H.V. Kaltenborn, Gabriel Heatter and others gifted with authoritative voices. The voice of World War II was Ed Murrow ("This—is London..."), while Walter Winchell was the choice if you wanted gossip about politicians and crooks.

Family entertainment was as good as its name. We all laughed together at Fibber McGee or Amos and Andy or Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy or the feud between Fred Allen and Jack Benny.

We tapped our feet to the music of Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians and shivered through suspense dramas such as *The Shadow* and *I Love a Mystery*. And there was "brain candy" in the form of panel shows like *Information, Please* and quiz shows like *Dr. I.Q.* ("I have a lady in the balcony, doctor").

Those also were the days when political conventions were full of suspense. Whom would they pick for President? What kind of deals were being made in the "smoke-filled rooms"?

Then, on election night, neighbors got together to listen to returns. The Dewey-Truman election was not settled until dawn, but we stuck it out.

When we want to talk or shop today, we want to do it right now!

In my son's family, everyone has his or her own cell phone and personal computer. They chat with friends in Brazil, buy stuff over the Internet, often do as much office work at home as they do at their company desks, swap the latest jokes from coast to coast and

quickly check which hotel in San Diego has the best rates.

A daughter-in-law flying home to Minneapolis from Tokyo once ordered groceries from the middle of the Pacific!

My family is perplexed as to why Grampa is still stuck in the age of “snail mail” and has no cell phone in his pocket.

I try to explain that among the privileges of old age is being able to enjoy a little privacy and never be in a hurry, just like in those good old days.

I know...I was there.