

Party Line

By Lee Anderson

In the 60's and 70's our methods of communication were quite different than they are today. Instant communication was unheard of unless you were talking to someone face to face. There was no texting, facebook or internet, in fact computers were something we only saw in movies. They were very large and filled the better part of a room with blinking lights and spinning discs. Smart phones were unheard of. The only flip phone we knew of was the communicator they used on the science fiction show Star Trek.

The only options we had to communicate were yelling for short distances, and writing letters for long distances. Yes, we did have phones, but not like the ones we are used to now. We had one phone. It was a rotary phone and was located on the wall near the back door. The phone had a cord from the handset to the base. While talking on the phone you could not walk around the house doing other things, you had to remain near the phone.

One day we got a cord around ten feet long, which was just long enough for us to go into the back porch and shut the door. We had to stand near the door while talking but having a little privacy was wonderful. The long cord did have its drawbacks though, after using it for a while, the cord usually ended up as a twisted knot dangling from the handset. To prevent this it had to be unwound frequently.

There was no call waiting. If you were talking to someone and someone else called, they got a busy signal and had to wait their turn. There were no answering machines. If someone called when there was no one home, the ringing phone would echo through the empty house until the caller got tired and hung up.

When someone was out running errands or on a date, they were usually on there own. If they needed to be contacted for any reason, it just wasn't possible unless you could call the home or business where they were. If something went wrong such as your car breaking down or a flat tire, you had to take care of it yourself unless you got help from a kind stranger. There was no calling home unless you had a dime and could find a pay phone.

The party line was another challenge. When we were young, Lehi was still a small town and did not have a lot of phone numbers. We were on a party line. A party line is where two or more customers share the same phone line. We shared our phone line with our neighbors, the Thompson's, across the street and someone that we didn't know. We had a specific ring pattern and they had another one.

There were a few problems with the party line system. The main problem was when you had to make a phone call sometimes when you picked up the receiver our neighbors were already on the line and we had to wait until they were done. Usually this wasn't too big of a deal but every now and then when we had an important phone call to make it was quite frustrating. Other times we would be trying to call home and would keep getting a busy signal because our neighbors were on the line. Other times we would get on the phone and we couldn't make a call because our neighbor's phone was off the hook.

Another problem was the lack of privacy. Many times when we would be in the middle of a conversation we would hear a click. That meant that someone had picked up the receiver and was listening. Most of the time it was someone just wanting to make a phone call and he or she would quickly hang up, but occasionally they would remain on the line listening. When this happened we would stop talking and tell them to hang up.

Back then our telephone belonged to the telephone company which at the time was Mountain Bell. Our rotary phone took a while to dial phone numbers. I did not like phone numbers with zeros or nines in them because it seemed to take forever to dial them, (about two to three seconds,). I know that seems very trivial, but at the time it was very frustrating. The most frustrating thing was when I would almost be done dialing and then make a mistake and have to start over. I truly hated that.

While I was a kid our phone number was 8-2463. Years later everyone who's number started with a two had the two changed to a nine and our phone number changed to 8-9463. As Lehi continued to grow they added a prefix and it became 768-9463. With our old rotary phone, changing and adding the numbers did not go over very well with me. I am glad that we were no longer using our rotary phone when they made us dial the area code of 801 for every number, which would have been tragic.