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# Nostalgia

By Inez Schneider Whitney

An antique telephone of polished oak occupies a prominent place on a wall in our family room. There it reigns with its crank on the right and the receiver hanging on the left. If I happen to gaze upon this relic of the past my thoughts are carried back to my childhood when this telephone occupied a prominent place on the living room wall of our farm home near Custer.

This pioneer Oklahoma town came into existence in 1902 when the Frisco railroad came through. A few years later Joe Storm brought the community the convenience of telephone service when he supervised the stringing of the lines introducing the hand-cranked magneto instruments.

The settlers were amazed. The telephone was a new invention. It was only twenty-six years earlier, March 10, 1876, on the rented top floor of a Boston boarding house when Alexander Graham Bell, working with his assistant, Thomas A. Watson, first succeeded in speaking words over a telephone. He was getting ready to test a new transmitter. Watson waited for the message in another room. Suddenly Bell spilled some acid from a battery on his clothes. He cried out, "Mr. Watson, come here! I want you!" Watson rushed into the room shouting, "Mr. Bell, I heard every word you said! Distinctly!" Bell had invented the first successful telephone.

Joe Storm soon had the switchboard working and his wife, Emma, was the "Hello-Central!" girl. This service first operated from a wooden building on the east side of Main, then in rooms over the First National Bank.

There were several lines with eight to ten families on a line. Each family had its own signal in shorts and longs. One turn of the crank sounding a quick "Ding" was called a short. Several continuous turns sounding a "Ding-g-g-g-g-g!" was called a long. Each family was assigned a ring. Ours was two shorts. If we heard "Ding! Ding!" someone in our family rushed to take down the receiver and say "Hello!"

In retrospect I remember climbing on a chair so I could reach the crank, and calling my friend, Jessie Agan. Her ring was a short and a long, "Ding!



Ding-g-g-g-g!"

When wishing to call someone on another line you rang one long. Then you'd hear Emma say "Hello-Central." You'd tell her the party you wanted and she'd connect you.

Occasionally there would be a series of shorts, a dozen or more. This was a signal for all to listen. Everybody would rush to take down their receivers. It could be good news or it might not be. Perhaps a load of seed corn had been shipped in and was for sale at the depot in Custer. There might be a birth, a death, or maybe a carnival was coming to town.

Often people ran to listen when they heard a neighbor's ring. What could the neighbor be up to now? No one ever told news on the party line that he didn't want broadcast throughout the community.

After Papa died, Mama rented the farm and moved to Custer. Since they had bought the phone she took it with her. Once when visiting her I saw it in a closet.

"Mama, if you don't want this phone we had on the farm I'd like to have it," I said.

"Take it," she replied. "It's just in the way."

After I reached home I took it to an antique dealer who refinished it. How I value this memento of my childhood. I only hope someone in my family will treasure it as I do. ■

*INEZ SCHNEIDER WHITNEY is a native Western Oklahoman who has retired from teaching in Virginia and now lives and writes in Arlington.*