

Party Lines Changed The Way Gossip Got Around

By: Howie Peet, Jr.
Alexander Graham Bell is the recognized inventor of the telephone. A rather ironic note is that Bell worked in Boston as a teacher of the deaf. But his avocation was with sound and an attempt to develop a telegraph device he called the harmonic telegraph that with a small amount of electricity could send several telegraph sounds over one wire.

On March 10, 1876 Bell was in one room of a house experimenting with a transmitter while his assistant Tom Watson was waiting for the test message in another room. Accidentally Bell spilled some battery acid on himself and he called out, “Mr. Watson, come here, I want you.”

To the surprise of both of them Watson came running into the room shouting, “Mr. Bell, I heard every word you said - distinctly!” And so, at that instant one of the most widely used instruments ever to be used by mankind was invented.

Urban sites with their large population were the first areas to be introduced to this new device. But it was rural America that desperately needed better communication. Comparatively long distances between towns, ranches, and farms cried out for this life-saving way of instant communication. Because of this need it wasn’t long before the rural roadsides became lined with wires stretched over utility poles bringing heretofore outposts ever closer.

In 1921 the Wolverton Telephone Company made a request for permission to install telephone poles in outlying areas near Wolverton. These were to be placed along some of the roadsides leading to rural residences. By 1946 the company was taken over by David and Millard Johnson. Upon David’s death in 1956 Darrell Johnson joined Millard in ownership of the company.

The company’s power system was built around a magneto generator that could only generate enough electricity to carry up to 18 phones on one line. Once a line was filled with 18 parties another line with its own system would begin. This group of 18 phones hence became a party line. Being a member of

this party had its advantages and its disadvantages.

In the beginning the telephones used on a party line were of the crank variety. This meant that a small crank on the right side of the wooden telephone box could be turned to make a ring. For instance my folks’ ring was one long and one short. When we heard that ring one of us answered the phone. This was a wonderful convenience to be able to talk to whoever cranked out the ring indicating they wished to talk to us. However, the big disadvantage was that the ring was also heard on every phone hooked up to that party line. Therefore, anybody on that line could simply pick up his or her phone and listen in on the conversation.

Nevertheless, this “party” talk that totally eliminated privacy could also be an advantage such as when an emergency arose and help was needed, or when someone wished to make a public announcement. Historically the “party” line became the forerunner of the conference call.

One of the stories involving the party line took place in the ‘20s during prohibition. The party line we were on was unofficially known as the Deerhorn line as it encompassed most of Deerhorn Township. Because the area was less than 150 miles from the Canadian border it was known as a natural exchange



Marcella Nicklay was one of the many operators managing phone calls.

area for rumrunners.

According to the folklore of Deerhorn a general ring was ground out on the party line one afternoon. A general ring was usually a series of long rings calling out to all on the line to pick up the phone and listen for a public announcement. Because a general ring usually meant some kind of an emergency everyone within hearing distance picked up his or her phone. But on this particular day it was an announcement of interest. The voice blurted out that an airplane was circling the area at the north end of the township. The plane appeared to be looking for a place to land.

As airplanes were scarce in this era and especially in this area this opportunity to actually see one was irresistible. In no time at all cars overflowing with mom, pop, and all the kids came tearing out of the farmyards to head north. Sure enough, the airplane was circling over a flat piece of prairie land. It appeared to be preparing to land near a big black automobile parked there. But before the plane could make the landing the big automobile was encircled by farmer’s cars with waving kids and many eyes glued on this spectacle.

The plane touched down and just as soon was back in the air. The big car sped off into the distance. This time the party line had thwarted the rumrunner’s mission, and in its place had provided marvelous entertainment that still lives on in the folklore of Deerhorn.

During the Dirty Thirties when Deerhorn was parched by the drought, fire became a danger. This was especially true in the area to the east of Wilkin County Road 3. This road was a main road commonly known as the old King’s Trail because it had once been the trail of Red River ox carts painstakingly creaking their way north carrying supplies from Minneapolis to the Hudson Bay Territory (Rupert’s Land) owned by England and returning south laden with furs.

Although a great deal of Deerhorn land was under cultivation by the thirties there were large areas of virgin prairie to the east of the KT. Wild prairie grass sprang up in the spring and by midsummer covered

the ground. By fall this grass would often have grown to a height in excess of three feet before it died leaving only the dry stems. Without rain or cultivation this area became a powder keg awaiting the least bit of provocation to become a raging inferno known as a Prairie Fire that could easily rush ahead burning everything in its path including farm buildings.

This danger was even heightened during the era leading up to the Dust Bowl. However, the party line and its general ring helped stop many of these fires before they got a full start. Hearing the alarm via the general ring residents would rush to the fiery area with blankets and sheets soaked in water to slow down or stop the budding fire.

The need for this party line alarm was also made evident when a Canadian Clipper winter wind would suddenly swoop out of the north oft times bringing snow and blizzard conditions. A general ring would call out a conference call so all could decide whether to close school for the day or keep the kids in school until the storm blew over. Of course, this had to be done early on before the telephone line was blown down.

By the forties the Wolverton Telephone Company had become much more proficient in keeping their lines in repair. But the rings were still being heard in every household on the line every time someone wished to make a call. The magneto generated system worked fine as long as not too many were listening in on a call.

Once in awhile a long distance call would come in to a member of the party line. When this happened it put a much larger drain on that magneto than normal and members of the party line were torn between eavesdropping on the conversation or being a good neighbor and hanging up so as to take some of the drain off the system.

My Dad had a friend, Buck Pierce, who was a stockbroker in Fargo. Occasionally Dad liked to play the commodities market and of course, he would buy and sell through Buck. However, Dad wasn’t keen on having all his neighbors know what he was doing, but sometimes the noon markets would come over the radio indicating a buy or sell was needed right away. This posed a problem - should Dad do nothing or use the party line to call Buck? Privacy was not part of the party line.

But again, the general ring was a wonderful way to invite the neighbors over for a party. Two or three times a summer Reverend Ramsey of the Evangelical Free Church in Wolverton would call. Reverend Ramsey was an amateur astronomer and although Dad was not a member of Ramsey’s church they were good friends and shared several common interests. When a night was just right and the stars were in place for a special viewing the Reverend would call Dad. Dad would crank out a general ring and neighbors who were interested would come to our place to look through Reverend Ramsey’s telescope and listen to him talk about what they were looking at. Another plus for the party line.

By 1953 the Wolverton Telephone Company was still wrestling with the party line. Jackie had come to California to visit friends. I was in the Navy aboard the U.S.S. E.G. Small, a destroyer waiting to be sent

back to Korea. I had asked Jackie to marry me, she agreed and we thought it prudent to call our folks and let them in on the good news.

We called my folks first. It took a minute or two before Dad answered and during that minute I heard several clicks as neighbors picked up their phones to listen in on the news. The party line was open and in good working order. Our conversation was to become a standard family joke in later years. The conversation went like this:

“Hello. Dad.”
“Hi. Where are you calling from?”

“I’m here in Long Beach and Jackie is with me. We have something to tell you. Is Mother there?”

“Yes, she’s here. What is it?”
“Jackie and I are getting married tomorrow.”

“You are! Well good...”

There was a long pause before Dad said in a half whisper as if he were trying to make a stage aside or buy some time as he tried to come up with some kind of code to speak to me privately. Finally he said, “Is she?”

I replied, “No” and that finished our coded conversation. From there we had to take turns talking to each other and Jackie and I listened to the congratulations as my folks were meeting her for the first time over the telephone.

I shipped out for Korea, Mother came out to wish me bon voyage and meet her new daughter-in-law and use the train ride back to the Midwest as a means of getting to know her. Whenever my folks and Jackie got together during the next nine months the word pregnancy or any linked reference was never brought into the conversation. However, at the end of that period they had become lifelong friends and when I returned the family joke was well in place. Whenever, we wanted a chuckle all we had to do was have one of us say, “Is she?” It only proved that developing a family joke was yet another hidden talent of



the party line.

In the late 1950’s Jackie and I were living in St. Paul with our two kiddies, Terry and Pam. After leaving the music business I had gone back to college. Upon finishing we needed to decide where to go. I had promised to stay out of the music business and had taken a job as an insurance investigator. But raising the kids in the city did not appeal to us so we moved back to a farm home in Deerhorn.

Late one night I was having difficulty with a bruised muscle in my left shoulder. I had tried everything Jackie and I could think of to relieve the pain so I could sleep. We had run out of ideas and I said, “I’m going to call the folks and see if they have any more thoughts.”

Jackie looked at me and said, “You know it’s 1:00 a.m., if you call now you’ll not only wake the folks you’ll wake everyone on the party line.”

“Oh, I know how to get around that. We have a code. All I have to do is give the telephone crank one little pull. That will make just one little ding and the folks will know it’s me calling them.”

That said, I gave the crank a slight pull. There was a tiny ding and Dad answered. His advice was to use a product called Heet. He had some

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