

Gone are the days of Sarah helping Andy Griffith ring up Helen, but this is a special story of one's remembrance of a faded institution . . .

## Hello, Central, Where's the Fire?

BY MARY C. BARTON RICE

**W**ould you like to be walked in time to catch that bus? Or informed of the whereabouts of your lost dog? Or reminded that it was time for the baby's medicine?

You would not have to hire a combination secretary — nurse — sleuth, nor would you have to room in a super-efficient hotel. Not if you were living forty or more years ago, in a small town, and had a telephone!

When I look back with nostalgia on those days, it is often with a question as to just what constitutes progress. Today (thanks to our up-dated technology) we have Alaska, and even Timbuktu, at our fingertips; but who is going to tell us about old Mrs. Beeler's accident, or let us know who has an extra ticket to the concert, or give us a full report on the fire downtown?

In the small town of Walhalla, South Carolina, where I used to live, "Central" would not only tell you where the fire was, and all she knew about it; but if she heard anything else of interest concerning it, she would call you back and tell you that too! For in the small towns of those days "Central" was not just another impersonal voice, she was an interested neighbor and helpful citizen, and gave the sort of personal service that would be impossible to obtain today.

Even the billing for the phone was done in a tactful and often almost apologetic way. Our bill was never mailed to us, unless by special request. At the end of each month there would be a gentle nudge over

the telephone with a — "tell your Dad to drop by the office, please, on his way to town."

When my sister was about eight or nine she was once left to mind our father's store when he was called out on some sudden and unexpected business. She was all alone in the store when the phone rang. She lifted the receiver and heard the words "Hold the line for Greenville," then a series of clicks and buzzes.

Having had no experience with long distance calls; and thinking maybe someone was playing a joke on her, she hung up. When the phone rang again almost immediately she lifted the receiver, and let it drop again. This procedure was used each time the phone rang and my sister was thoroughly enjoying the foiling of her would-be tormentor, when the ringing stopped.

Believing she had won the game she returned to her book.

All of a sudden the door was opened by "Central" practically breathing fire and brimstone in her fury, and screaming, "When I ring the phone, answer it!"

"Central" had thought that the culprit was the young boy whom my father sometimes employed as a clerk, so she had left her switchboard unattended and had walked four blocks to give him a tongue-lashing and to see that he answered what she knew was an important call.

Of course, when she saw who was "manning" the store and heard the explanation, all was forgiven; but the experience marked my sister for life. She always had a phobia about

phones!

Telephone directories were rarely used in small towns for one seldom called by number. I remember that on my first visit back to the home town (after having moved to a city) I made a local call by number only to have the operator ask me whose number it was! You simply told "Central" to whom you wished to speak, and if the person was anywhere in town he was relentlessly tracked to his lair.

Once when our lights went out, as they often did during a storm, I called for the town's electrician.

"He is not home," said "Central," "he is out fixing the lights across town." "But," she added, "he knows the lights are out on your side. Mrs. Oehmig called him before he left. I can have him call you later if you like."

I never ceased to be amazed when I called for a taxi. The town had only two taxis. When not in use they were parked somewhere on Main Street, and the drivers were usually to be found at the barber shop or nearby filling station. Sometimes, however, when business was slack they wandered far afield; then, indeed, did it take a seasonal sleuth to locate them. "Central," though, was equal to the task!

Hours before you actually needed the taxi you called "Central" and explained your wants. She tried the favorite haunts first, but if that proved fruitless she told you to hang up, and that she would call you back when she was successful in locating one of the drivers. Sometimes it took

quite a while, but at last you heard her triumphant ring and knew the quarry had been bagged.

My cousin adds another tidbit to my collection of telephone anecdotes with this story.

She was visiting (years ago) in a small town in the lower part of South Carolina where the telephones were those ancient golden-oak wall boxes of huge proportions that must be cranked and shouted into so that he who sleeps may hear.

One morning she heard her hostess calling Jack, a friend who lived across town. But "Central" informed her that Jack had gone to Charleston for the day.

Late that night the phone rang shrilly; and when her hostess, groggy with sleep, stumbled to answer, the following conversation took place.

CENTRAL: I have called Jack for you. He is back from Charleston.

HOSTESS: But, Miss Mattie, it wasn't anything especially important. I just wanted to ask him to play tennis with us this morning.

CENTRAL: Well, I thought you wanted to talk to him, and I've already told him so you'll have to talk to him now. He's waiting.

So with Miss Mattie as referee there followed a brisk fifteen minutes of explanations and apologies!

Even more formidable than Miss Mattie, was the "Central" who managed the affairs of a town in which a friend of mine lived.

The town was too small for a Western Union, so my friend phoned a telegram to Western Union in a larger town nearby. The telegram was to her brother, and was about their mother's need for an immediate operation. Hoping to preserve a modicum of privacy she referred to their mother by the code name of Delia.

A few minutes after my friend had phoned in the telegram, the phone rang and "Central" said, "Miss Sally, I thought I better call you because there was one thing I didn't understand about that telegram."

Thinking perhaps she hadn't expressed herself clearly enough Sally asked, "What was not clear?"

"The thing that's not clear," said "Central," "is — **who** is Delia?"

No reminiscences about telephones would be complete without mentioning the old rural party lines where each subscriber had his own "ring," and anybody on the line could and often *did* listen in on the conversations.

Listening became a favorite pastime of the bored, the curious, and lonely; and these party lines came to be known as the newspapers of the sticks. They were more like the forerunners of soap operas on today's radio and television, for some people made daily calls at certain times, and these calls were soon spotted by the listeners, who looked forward each day to the latest installment.

My aunt near Orangeburg was on a party line. She had a farm overseer who had a room in her house. Every night after supper he would call his girl friend whose "ring" was one long and two short. Soon they became aware, from certain background noises, that others were enjoying these conversations too.

Sam, the overseer, would say, "Is somebody pumping water at your house, Louise?"

And Louise would answer, "No, is a baby crying at yours?"

In this way Sam and Louise would try to embarrass the listeners, hoping they would hang up, but the listeners kept on listening. Then Sam and Louise tried to make their listeners uncomfortable by making up, out of whole cloth, outlandish morsels of harmless gossip concerning the listeners. They would thus be put on the spot (it was hoped) because they could neither refute nor refer to the gossip in any way without revealing that they had been doing some unethical listening.

"Central" was usually "hands off" these rural lines, for subscribers could ring each other without her help; but sometimes when her aid was sought for long distance and the message was important but made indistinct by many receivers being lifted, she would chime in insistant tones, "Mrs. Jones, get off the line, please." Or,

"Mrs. Smith, may we have the line for long distance, please?"

But the most unique service provided by "Central" in those by-gone days was revealed by a young swain who lived in a neighboring town, and he swore it was true.

He said he saved himself much time and embarrassment, when he wanted a last-minute date, by simply asking "Central" what girls in town were still undated for the evening. He then chose one from those available and the whole business was transacted with the greatest of ease for all concerned!

Yes, we have certainly lost something with our dials and tapes and computers. For nothing, but *nothing*, will ever replace the personal service and ever-ready concern of the gentle-voiced "Central" of long ago.

## To Sandlapper Welcome Back

*We hail you back with joyous  
song,  
For friend, you've been gone too  
long;  
Our welcome to you now is gay,  
And says we've missed you while  
away.  
From the mountains to the shore,  
You brought our state to our door,  
Alive to see on every page —  
History, hobbies, sports and  
stage.  
Thousands longed for your return,  
And for your bright pages yearn.*

*JBY Jr.  
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