



## the reactor

by Paul Azevedo

When I was 16, my home phone was 3538J. The mail came regularly and promptly to my street address. (No ZIP, and no delay.) No one ever asked for my social security number except my boss. He asked for it once. I didn't drive, so I didn't have a driver's license. My bank account may have had a number, but it never intruded on my consciousness.

With my mind so uncluttered, I was able to crowd in my whole newspaper route, all 214 subscribers into my mind and recite it on request. I applied myself to this task, and I did a good job. So it seems like I was to be put to the test.

Phones went to two letters plus five digits. In this area we had ELMwood and FLanders, neither particularly memorable, but San Francisco had the beloved YUKon, and KLondike and the unforgettable ATwater and SKyline. Seven digits just don't have the same romance.

Then I went into the army. They gave me a number, two letters and eight digits, to be recited on demand. That's when things started to get bad. I think that the post office was jealous of the army and the phone company. They had all these numbers, and the post office just had these post office names, like Mule Shoe, Texas or Pescadero, California.

They did it in stages. First they divided up some

larger cities, and you sent letters to San Francisco 23, Calif.

Twenty years ago people were grouching because postage had leaped up to four cents. The post office agreed this was bad, and to keep down costs they came up with a "Zone Improvement Plan" for efficiency and costcutting. Providentially for their public relations, this abbreviated to ZIP. (It would not have been the same if they had called it "Speedy Letters Urgently Going.")

ZIP had 99,999 different potential codes to work with, which seemed sufficient at the time. With the help of ZIP, postage has only quintupled in cost, a major achievement. Who knows what letters might cost to mail, ZIPless?

But I cooperated with the post office, and learned their ZIPs, just as I cooperated with the phone company and learned their seven digit phone numbers.

I should have known, when the phone company added area codes, that the post office would have to be competitive. Sure enough, we have now been saddled with nine, count-em nine, digits in the ZIP system. This gives us 999,999,999 ZIP codes, or one for every four humans on the face of the earth. The Tribune has been assigned, not one but several ZIP codes. Our post office box is 94044-0033. You don't really need our name, or town, or state.

Meanwhile, I'll never be able to memorize a newspaper route again. My mind is so cluttered with phone numbers, ZIP codes, Social Security numbers, driver's license numbers, bank account numbers, credit card digits and so forth, that my mind is filling up.

They tell us that the nine digit ZIP code is not compulsory, but I am now conditioned to know that by 1984 (an appropriate year), there will be "incentives" to put nine numbers per letter, and if I don't I will get polite reminders that I am delaying the mail.