

"Operator, get me three-one-eight W"

There weren't nearly as many phones around when I was growing up. Those that existed were listed. I don't remember one unlisted phone among friends, neighbors and family. Today more than half Pacifica phones are unlisted, and many of those listed are missing the addresses.

Of course, in the old days the local Sears manager would have been embarrassed to sell aluminum siding over the telephone. The word telemarketer hadn't been invented yet. If somebody from a local store did need to call, it was always "Mr. Azevedo". Today some 19 year old valley girl comes on the line at dinner time. "How are you, Paul?" she asks. I've discovered the quickest way to get her to voluntarily hang up is to ask her last name, ("Chandler" she tells me). I then address her as "Mrs. Chandler." Ms. Chandler loses her cool when thus formally addressed, and the receiver is slammed down with no word of apology. Odd, since addressing her in that manner is far more in keeping with etiquette than calling her by her first name, as she tries to do to me. False friendliness from strangers is annoying.

While I was growing up, phone lines were either two or four party, which meant that either one or three of your neighbors could be listening every time you picked up the phone. On the other hand, they were just as aware we might be listening in on them. It says a lot that at least one of those neighbors is still a good friend of my mother's, forty years later.

Today some Pacifica families have a main line, unlisted of course, a line for the children, a fax line, a dedicated modem line, a cellular phone and a pager line. Is it any wonder we're running out of area codes?

I wrote a column a few years ago, complaining it cost more to call Santa Cruz at 3:30 p.m. our time than to call Honolulu at 3:30 Hawaiian time. That isn't quite true any more. Now it's a lot more expensive to have a phone line, even if you never call, but long distance is dirt cheap. You can call Eureka for a nickel a minute, Europe for 50 cents or less a minute. Even Lafayette is no longer an arm and a leg.

On the other hand, in the heyday of the two party line, MCI wasn't calling every other day to switch you over, and AT&T on alternate days to switch you back. In the old days there was one phone company and it didn't have booths at the county fair offering you a prize for answering a simple question ("who is buried in Grant's Tomb?"), only to slam dunk you into switching long distance carriers unbeknownst.

One small phone company signs liberals up with a promise to contribute money to Greenpeace and pro-abortion groups. The bad news: their rates are substantially higher than competitors. The double whammy for me: I don't agree with some of the groups they give money. Even if I did, I would rather pick my own charities. It takes as much time these days to find the best phone deal as the best airplane ride. Maybe someday there will be phone agents as helpful as Pacifica's travel agents.