

IN MY OPINION**Caroline Porter**

Don't touch that dial

These days I seem to get into a lot of conversations that make me feel like I was born in the 1800s. The latest subject was telephones, and facial expressions tell it all. They think I'm ancient. Of course, I leave myself wide open for hysterics when I comment that I can remember when our lovely, clunky black telephone was exchanged for our first dial phone.

Prior to that time we just picked up the receiver and our friendly, local operator asked us what number we wanted and she rang it. It was all very simple and that operator had to know every juicy tidbit that happened in Kewanee. She knew who talked to whom and probably why.

When I am totally demented, I will follow the medical norm and remember our four-digit telephone number. It was only one digit off the number of the local funeral home and the owner's daughter was one of my best friends. There were times when someone would call the funeral home and say, "Is Caroline there?" and in his most serious and creepy voice my friend's father would answer, "Not yet!"

Anyway, dial phones were really just too snazzy. I know of no one who had more than one phone, one was luxury enough. My first full-time job was as a service representative at Illinois Bell Telephone Company in downtown Chicago. Colored phones were just emerging — remember the Princess phone? And people were being encouraged to get an extension phone, "for safety reasons," we were told.

Actually, the only bone I have broken is when I leapt out of bed in the middle of the night in the early 1960's, didn't turn on the light on my way through the apartment and tripped over a vacuum cleaner. I broke my toe and bruised my legs up to the knees. Now see, if we had had a bedside phone that wouldn't have happened. Of course, it would have helped if I had put away the vacuum cleaner or turned on the lights.

While I was working at Illinois Bell, we went from long distant operators to direct dialing, with area codes, and a bigger mess you never saw. When customers complained about a long distance charge, we were told to tell them the computers couldn't possibly make a mistake. We used to go to a drawer and pull out the card the operator had actually filled out, telling us that George had called Uncle Jim in Tallahassee that day, and the customer would say, "Oh, yes, now I remember!" Those days were gone. All we had was punch cards with no translatable information and they no doubt introduced us to the infamous hanging chads.

In 1958 we were told to refer to ourselves as "Miss" because people still didn't like the idea of married women working and taking up all those men's jobs. I think by 1962 I worked up to a whopping salary of \$3,000 a year and that's after several merit raises of something like a quarter a day, or a paycheck, or something. Many, many years later I enjoyed seeing a class action suit filed on behalf of women employees of AT&T because we made about half of what the



men made doing the same job and with the same background. Apparently that lasted a long time.

I've told the story about my mother visiting me in Rockford and asking to use our phone for a long distance call. She went upstairs for privacy and came down in just a few minutes looking disgusted. When I asked her what was the matter, she muttered, "I was trying to call long distance and I dialed the zip code."

Well, you see, both innovations arrived about the same time, and yes, it was

confusing and complicated.

I don't really mind talking about the old days. It's just worth it to see the stunned looks on some faces. If they are lucky, some day these young whipper-snappers in their forties and fifties will have some good and ancient memories of their own.

Caroline Porter is a freelance writer who can be reached at cporter@galesburg.net. Other columns are online at www.thezephyr.com.