

Push-Button Phones Ended a Unique Era

By John Rico

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A NOTICEABLE CHANGE - Back in 1876 when Alexander Graham Bell announced he had been successful in transmitting sound through wires, little did he dream that his discovery would skyrocket into one of the largest industries in the world. Furthermore, Bell would be astounded at the figures which show the giant American Telephone and Telegraph Company reported net earnings for the first nine months of 1979 at \$4.1 billions. That's something to talk about.

The first commercial telephone exchange in the USA was back in 1878, but surprising is the fact that a few years later, 1884, Vacaville had its first telephone, installed by Druggist Jim Miller in his Main Street store. He paid out of his own pocket the expense of running a line for the store, to connect with the Sunset Telephone Co. line which followed the main railroad from San Francisco to Sacramento. Miller made his connection at Elmira.

Vacaville residents were not enthused about his new method of spreading the word, so Miller offered potential subscribers a free six-month use of a phone and said: "Try it, you'll like it." That bit of salesmanship brought out requests from merchants, professional men and ranchers, for the phone service to the extent that Sunset Telephone installed a switchboard in the rear of Miller's drugstore.

It was not too many years back that telephone users relayed their call for a connection to an operator, who would reply with: "Number, please." As the number of subscribers increased, there was need for two prefixes, one called Main and the other Farm. If you wanted to contact Dr. A.P. Finan you would vigorously twirl the crank on the telephone box, wait for "Number, please," and ask for Main 1. Main 9 was allocated to The Reporter for nearly 50 years.

While it is admitted phone operators in the days of pre-mechanization did have access to the conversation which went over the telephone lines, it is equally true that they repeatedly went beyond the call of phone service, and were helpful in many other ways. For many years, all phone calls for fires in Vacaville and the surrounding areas, went to the telephone office, and the operators had access to the fire siren button. The first man to reach the firehouse after hearing the alarm, would contact the operator by phone and ask for the location of the blaze.

Here is the gist of a random call: "There's a house on fire out Browns Valley Road.

After you come to a barn on the corner, turn right and go down a lane until you come to a green house, then turn west, and start looking for the smoke.” That’s the way the operator had to report the call to the firemen.

When Miller installed the exchange in his store he allocated the first phone to Dr. J.S Cunningham, and the second one went to Leonard W. Buck. A 1913 index of telephones in Vacaville and surrounding areas showed about 300 in use, and the affluency of the families could be judged by reading the names of the subscribers. There were five phones to the Buck family, six each to the Robinson and Chandler families, while the Gates and Bassford groups had five each.

As use of telephones increased in rural areas, party lines presented problems hard to solve. Many times long-winded individuals would tie up the line for hours, and when told to “Get off” would come back with a four-lettered word. In later years it was necessary to enact into the California Penal Code Section 384 which made it a misdemeanor to tie up a party line when it was asked to be relinquished in an emergency consisting of fire, police or medical calls.

The new directories for Vacaville, Dixon, Fairfield and Suisun are in the process of being delivered. The initial total for the four communities and their surrounding areas is set at 55,913, with 18,456 going to Vacaville subscribers. In weight, there were about 18 tons of books distributed locally.

The size of the new directory, which sets a new record at 728 pages, not only represents the tremendous growth of upper Solano County, but the books have many pages of useful information which should be read by recipients. On page 143 is a perpetual calendar, which makes it much easier to plan your Christmas shopping to the year 2000. There are also several pages of survival information, along with tips on how to shut off your water main, and what to do when an earthquake strikes.

It is interesting to note the predominate surnames in the Vacaville listings. If your are seeking the number of a person with surname Smith, you would be wise to know his or her first name and address because there are only 105 Smiths listed.

The same problem holds true with Johnson, at 88 and then there are the Joneses with 75. In fact, there are 18 more Jones listings in the new book than there were in the previous directory.

Today as we have punch-button service at our finger-tips making it possible to place calls around the world, we should reflect back before the days of the telephone and how difficult it was to convey messages. Here’s a bit of local nostalgia about the news of Lincoln’s assassination:

J.R. Miller took the Alta California, a San Francisco newspaper, now the Examiner. Vacaville people were awaiting the printed word about the President's death and were waiting for the paper to arrive at Miller's house. As he was reading the story, a gust of wind swept it into the sky off toward the Blue Ridge Mountains. Men on horseback gave chase, but the paper was not to be found.

That's the way it was back in April 1865.

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