

	<h1>BULLETIN</h1>			
	<p><u>PRESIDENT</u> Loren Moore POB 1181 Roseville, CA 95678 877-752-6247</p>	<p><u>TREASURER</u> Jack Benbrook 1328 E. Rosser St. Prescott AZ 86301 928-772-3763</p>	<p><u>MEM SECRETARY</u> Janet Johnk 6 Truman Dr Novato, CA 94947 415-897-6724</p>	
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How Many People Remember Old Phone Numbers?

by Harry Warner

[James Willard, MD, sent in this old newspaper article from Hagerstown, MD, Aug. 7, 1974, and we both thought it would be of interest to Phone Number collectors]

“Quick, now: what were the letters that came after party line telephone numbers in Hagerstown, before the dial system went into effect? That question came up the other day. Before you could say number, please, there was a lot of philosophizing about how completely most people have forgotten such basic facts about the old telephone number system which they used daily for years.

It’s been less than two decades since Hagerstown switched from operators to dials for local calls. But already, most people, even those who are old enough to have had decades of experience with non-dial telephones, can’t remember that J, M, R, and W were the letters which followed numbers of party line users.

A sociologist might say that dial telephones help to eradicate class distinctions, because the average person can’t determine nowadays from an individual’s number whether he has a private or party line. On the other hand, a cynic might point to the lost insight into character that one could be gained by those letters after numbers. A wealthy person who had a letter after his number might have gained that wealth by pinching pennies, for instance.

Not much evidence remains nowadays of the old telephone numbers, which before the changeover was made in late 1956 never went above four figures. Efforts were made when dial numbers were assigned to keep a similarity between the old and new for heavily used telephones, but technical reasons have caused many of these dial numbers to be changed since then. Here and there you can find a reminder, like the Washington County Free Library’s current number, 739-3250, based on its old switchboard-era number, 325. The prison which was called the Reformatory for Males early in 1956 had 2800 as its number, and under its current name, Maryland Correctional Institute, its number is 797-2800.

Another effect of the changeover was the annihilation of prestige which some people attached to low

phone numbers in the old days. For instance, the home phone numbers of industrialist John C. Pangborn was 22, his brother, Thomas Pangborn, had number 27, and R. Paul Smith, who had been Potomac Edison president, had 30 as his telephone number. Johnny-come-latelies in Hagerstown couldn't always gain this mark of distinction. Richard S. Boutelle, who had been head man at Fairchild for barely a decade before 1956, had 3420 as his telephone number.

Even rarer were the instances of symbolism in the old short numbers. The state armory demonstrated patriotism by having 1776 for its telephone number.

There doesn't seem to have been any rhyme or reason for assignment of the lowest numbers in the old days. The jail had 1 as its telephone number while city police were forced to settle for 160. Appropriately, three local attorneys shared 3 as their office telephone number. Delphey's license and motorcycle business had 5, the Extension Service was 6, and the county tax collector was 8.

The last Hagerstown telephone directory with the old numbers contained 140 pages, not counting yellow pages. Today, dial numbers occupy just about the same number of pages, but the size of those pages has nearly doubled because of the vast increase in the number of telephones.

Nobody remembered all these facts, incidentally. They were dug out of the telephone directory collection in the Western Maryland Room of the Washington County Free Library. The library's collections goes all the way back to 1907 directory which is as different from the last switchboard number directory of 1956 as the latter is different from the current volume.

In 1907, for instance, the telephone company felt compelled to print on the directory's front cover the request "Since no operator can correctly memorize the 1,500 numbers contained in this directory, it is

necessary in order to secure quick service that you call by number, not by name." Inside, there was a note asking telephone subscribers not to permit anyone else to use their phones. The explanation given was that "outsiders" could prevent important messages from getting through, but you can't help suspecting that the company hoped to increase business that way.

The 44-page 1907 directory shows that hardly anyone had a private line, not even most doctors or attorneys. Number 3, for instance, was a party line shared by a physician, a livery stable operator, and the proprietor of a saloon.

[Ed note: I inserted the pics]

