



# *Across the Fence*

By Howard Sherpe

## **Can You Hear Me Now?**

Do you remember the party line? If you do, welcome to the club that is getting smaller all the time. Times have certainly changed since those days when we took the receiver off the hook and listened to hear if anyone was talking. If not, we cranked the handle to get someone on our line or to get the operator.

Everyone on the party line had a different ring. Our number was three long rings. I remember Thompsons' was three short, Oscar and Julia Hanson, my grandparents, were two short and a long. Maynard and Jeannette Hanson, my uncle and aunt, were one long and two short. At one time, LaMont and Hazel Hanson, another uncle and aunt, were also on our line, but I don't remember their ring.

There were at least ten families on our party line. As you can see from my grandparents and aunts and uncles all being on the same line, our families didn't stray very far from each other back then. Plus, my other grandmother, Inga Sherpe, lived with us.

Anyone who's had a party line knows that it was standard procedure to "rubberneck," listen in on conversations of other people on the line. Now, don't try to tell me you never did that!

For those of you not familiar with party lines, any time someone on the line was called, it also rang on your phone. Three long rings and we knew it was for us and answered. Two short and a long and we knew someone was calling Grandma Hanson. If you wanted to find out who had called her, you carefully lifted the receiver, trying not to make any noise, and listened to the conversation. You think federal wire-tapping is bad? We were eavesdropping on conversations long before the government realized it was a great way

to know everyone's business. It was hard to have any private conversations or keep secrets!

People think conference calling is a great modern technology. Wrong! We had conference calling on the party line. Not just three-way conference calls, but sometimes four and five-way, depending on who was listening in. I remember my mother talking to Jeannette, and Ma would say, "Ma, are you there?" Then her mother, Julia, who had been rubbernecking, would say, "Yah, I'm here," and join in the conversation. Soon you could tell Ma was also talking to Hazel and you knew she had joined in too. There you have it, a four-way conference call. Modern technology had nothing on us back on the farm party line.

Caller ID... we had a reverse version of that. We knew who was being called on our line, but not who was doing the calling.

When you wanted to call someone beyond your party line, you cranked one long ring and the operator in Westby answered. You told her who you were trying to call and she rang the number and connected you.

In my experience, women did most of the talking on phones. The only time my father used the phone was to call Tri-State Breeders and tell them he had a fresh Jersey cow and designate which bull he wanted. His conversations were always short and to the point, with no wasted words!

I know we still had the crank wall phone and party line when I was in high school in the early 60's. I remember because I dreaded calling or receiving a call from a girl. You couldn't take the phone into another room for some privacy. It was fastened to the wall and the mouthpiece was part of the phone. I knew other people in our house and on the party line would be

listening to every word. Luckily, I didn't have much to worry about because girls didn't call me and I seldom called them!

My parents and grandmother didn't have to worry about us kids hearing things they didn't want us to know. They just switched to speaking Norwegian. I found it interesting that they often spoke Norwegian when talking to someone on the phone, and then switched back to English around us. Especially Grandma Inga, who would switch back and forth during any conversation, but when talking on the phone with Anna Ostrem, her sister-in-law, it was all Norwegian.

I think you'd be hard pressed to find a party line in the country today. Looking back, it seems like things were simpler then. I know things seem more complicated in my life. Now we have a private line, a business line, and a cell phone. We don't want to miss any calls! Then we add caller ID and answering machines so we don't have to answer or can be selective in which calls we take. Our grandparents would think we're crazy!

Things have changed for young people too. They no longer have to stand by a wall phone, speaking into it. Now they all seem to have a cell phone growing out of one ear! Walking, sitting, eating, driving... some people are constantly on the phone. I wouldn't want to pay their monthly bills.

As I mentioned last week, I think I was born in the wrong century. I was once at a funeral where two people took cell phone calls during the service! At least with a party line, that would never have happened. Phone companies provide great services and technology; it's just that some people need to be educated in when to use them and when to turn them off! Can those people hear me now?