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On the Waterfront

Bay Rat Social Media: Rotary Phones and Party Lines

By David Frew
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Editor's note: Following is an On the Waterfront Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. It was first published in October 2021.

Rotary phones with five-digit numbers were our primary social tools.

Long before Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, we had lots of "modern" communication tools. In place of Twitter ("X"), we used "secret notes." Usually sent during school sessions, our tweets were written on carefully ripped pieces of lined-tablet paper. They were usually broadcast to one or two lucky receivers, but if someone launched a particularly interesting tweet-like note it could make the rounds and be shared by many people. And like modern tweets, our small notes sometimes reverberated for days as they were passed back and forth between classmates. There could be terrible consequences if the teacher intercepted one.

Instagram happened once per year when the highly anticipated envelope filled with annual school pictures arrived. The picture package always included one or two large shots, a few mediums, and a sheet of small images. We generally took our packages home to our families, who used scissors to neatly cut the sheet of small images into several individual and tradable photos. The process of passing these small images to friends was almost exactly like a modern Instagram with the distinct advantage that pictures were not "programmed" to disappear later.

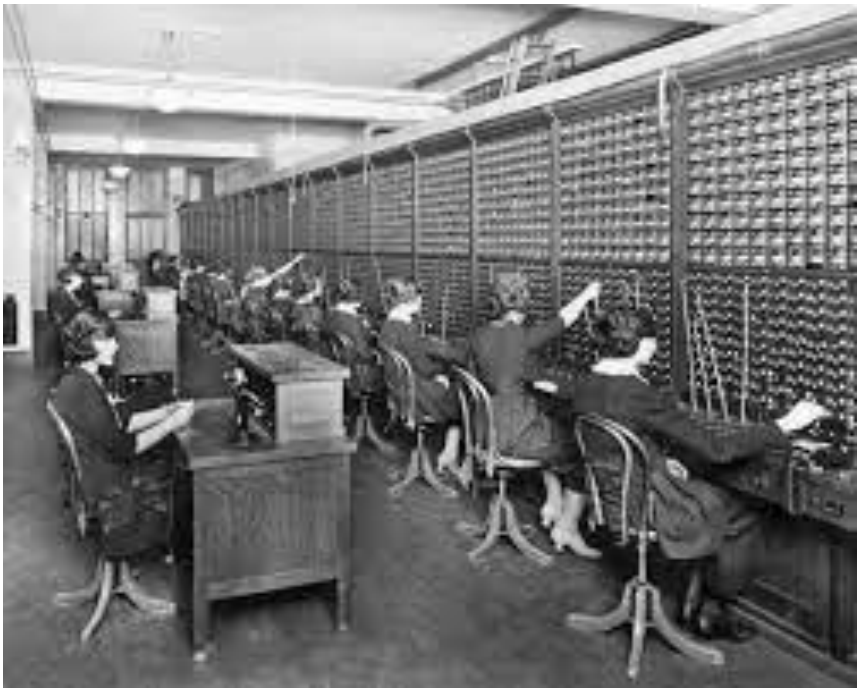
Facebook machines lived in living rooms and dining rooms. They were black and each had a round dial with 10-finger hole number and letter designations. In place of an email address, we had a phone number: usually only five digits. One important right-of-passage for youngsters was the ability to memorize the phone number. When a kid had finally mastered that numeric designation, it was safe for them to become independent since the phone number could be given to an adult when help was needed. The family telephone was a sacred and critical means of being connected with the entire world and a technology that connected people, just like Facebook.

Parents often described the telephone systems of earlier eras, explaining our good fortune in having relatively modern technology. A generation earlier, when a person picked up the telephone receiver to make a call, there was a delay after which an operator asked what number they wanted to be connected to. Once the caller provided a number, the operator moved wires around on a giant switchboard and then, thanks to the magic of overhead telephone lines running through neighborhoods on poles, there was clicking and grinding, followed by a ringing sound. Then, finally … someone answered, "Hello." We had it much easier. There was no operator or switchboard or long delay while calls were processed through electrical and mechanical relays. We could simply pick up the family phone (usually just one per household) and wait for a dial tone.

Sometimes, however, the wait was punctuated by an audible conversation instead of a dial tone. The infamous party line! Like most of my friends, the family phone at our house was part of a party-line system. Private telephone lines were the exclusive domain of wealthy people in those days. In our case, five families shared one telephone line. That meant that if one of the other four parties was talking, their conversation would be audible on the phone. It was a perfect opportunity for eavesdropping but picking up the phone caused a loud click to reverberate through the line. That meant that anyone who was in the midst of a conversation would know that someone had broken in and tried to use the party line. The polite thing to do when someone was already using the line was to hang up immediately. In fact, failure to do so would alert the persons who were talking that someone was listening in. Adults were particularly offended when kids tried to break in and even more irritated when they monopolized the line. It was not uncommon for "grumpy" party-line users to complain to parents about bad telephone manners.

Being high tech and into neighborhood intrigue, my friends knew the secret for stealth listening. If the speaking end of the phone was unscrewed and removed before picking the phone up, those who were already chatting on the party-line would not hear the telltale click. A Bay Rat detective could listen without being detected. This allowed us to gather intelligence on neighborhood matters, including husbands who were drinking too much, children who were getting into trouble, teens who were dating each other, and much more. An important part of eavesdropping ethics was sharing any intelligence that had been gathered with the other kids. And all of this was regularly taking place on the single-family phone that was usually located in a central part of everyone's home.

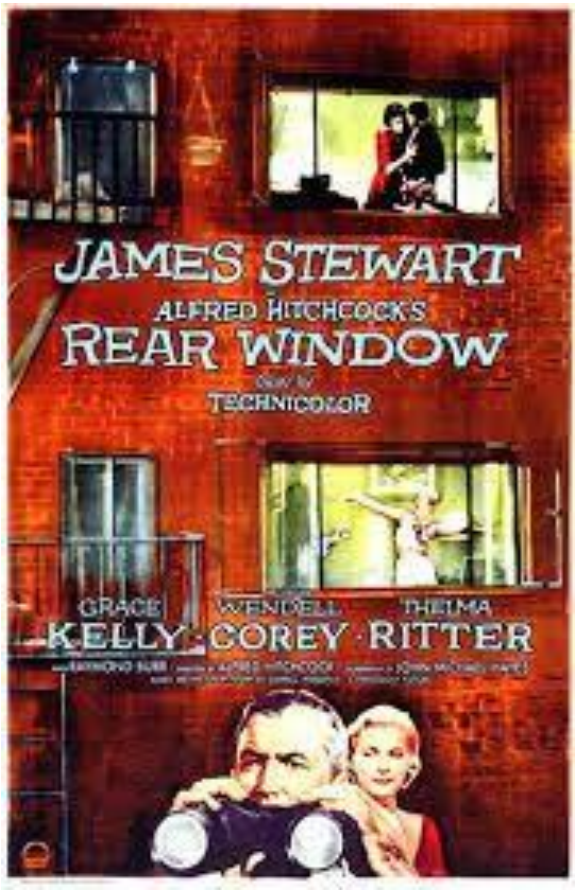
Actress Lily Tomlin: "Is this the person to whom I am connected?" The phone company operator was the person who connected early phone users with numbers that they were trying to reach. Erie's phone company employed dozens at peak times



A bank of telephone operators at work

The opportunity to spy on neighbors using a party line may have led to a fascination with both the sound and visual voyeurism that modern social scientists are currently connecting with Facebook. One of the first major film productions to explore this issue may have been the 1954 movie, "Rear Window,"

produced by suspense guru Alfred Hitchcock. In that movie, Jimmy Stewart is rehabilitating from a broken leg and spending time staring out the widows of his Greenwich Village, New York apartment. He begins to become fascinated by several neighbors when he suddenly thinks that he has accidentally witnessed a mysterious neighbor (Raymond Burr) killing a woman. The remainder of the movie involves his clumsy attempts to solve the mystery and alert authorities. The film, which was a huge box office success, was nominated for but did not win an Oscar.



A 1954 "Rear Window" film poster

Jimmy Stewart and Grace Kelly next to the windows of his Manhattan apartment

A more contemporary film treatment of voyeurism appeared 20 years later in 1974. In the Oscar winning movie, “The Conversation,” Gene Hackman plays the role of a high-tech detective for hire, whose specialty is spying on people, using directional microphones to overhear and record what they are saying. Eventually, he takes a job in which he is drawn into a frightening web of intrigue. A deciphered soundtrack sends him into a dysfunctional frenzy of paranoia as he struggles to “do the right thing” with information that he wishes he had not overheard. The film’s director (who also wrote the story), Francis Ford Coppola, suggests that the film’s message is a warning about the impact of technology on society. Coppola wrote the script long before he achieved fame for directing the first two Godfather films. He produced “The Conversation” between Godfather I and Godfather II. Coppola credits Alfred Hitchcock and “Rear Window” for some of the inspiration in his original story, along with the film “Blow Up.” He also notes that the two Godfather films, generally considered to be his masterpieces, provided the notoriety and support that he needed to make “The Conversation,” which is his favorite movie. Interestingly, “The Conversation” was not a box office success and has been generally regarded as a quirky film, more European in style than American. Though largely ignored at first, it has become a favorite among film buffs.

A poster depicts the Oscar-winning movie, "The Conversation," which won several other prestigious awards.

Gene Hackman in the now-classic 1974 Francis Ford Coppola film

Coppola and others have noted that in “The Conversation” as well as “Rear Window,” persons who begin as in-control voyeur-predators eventually become paranoid and disillusioned prey. Hackman, in particular, begins his paid espionage exercise as a recognized expert sound gatherer, but is eventually trapped inside of his own traditional Roman Catholic sensitivities when he begins to realize that what he is doing is morally wrong. Toward the end of the movie is in a confessional trying to explain his travails to a priest. By the time he comes to the realization that he is doing something terribly wrong, however, it is too late for him to extract himself. Unlike the relatively happy, cinematic ending for Jimmy Stewart in “Rear Window,” “The Conversation’s” Gene Hackman eventually becomes a pathetic, broken man.

Facebook analogies? Social scientists who have studied the relatively new Facebook phenomena warn that many of the people who descend into the rabbit hole of this social media universe may face the same dangers. They begin with the naïve presumption that there is no price to be paid for participation in an artificial world where they and others can project unrealistic images of themselves and their lives while making almost any comment. Observers of the process warn that Facebook is such a new and powerful force that science simply cannot keep up with its impact. Born in 2004 and becoming a public entity in 2012, this revolutionary social force has been operating at full strength for less than a decade. In that relatively brief time, it has attracted an astonishing three billion users worldwide. And an amazing proportion (66 percent) use Facebook on a daily basis. Most begin as interested observers, low-level voyeurs who use the social tools to explore, and to meet and connect with people. Sadly, however, an increasing number descend into a strange virtual universe, which encourages anonymity and shallow interactions rather than actual human contact. Like Gene Hackman’s character in “The Conversation,” they risk being consumed.

Life was simpler during the 1950s. We may have been lucky to have been limited to an antiquated black instrument with a rotary dial that connected us to a much smaller world. Perhaps those were “the good old days.”

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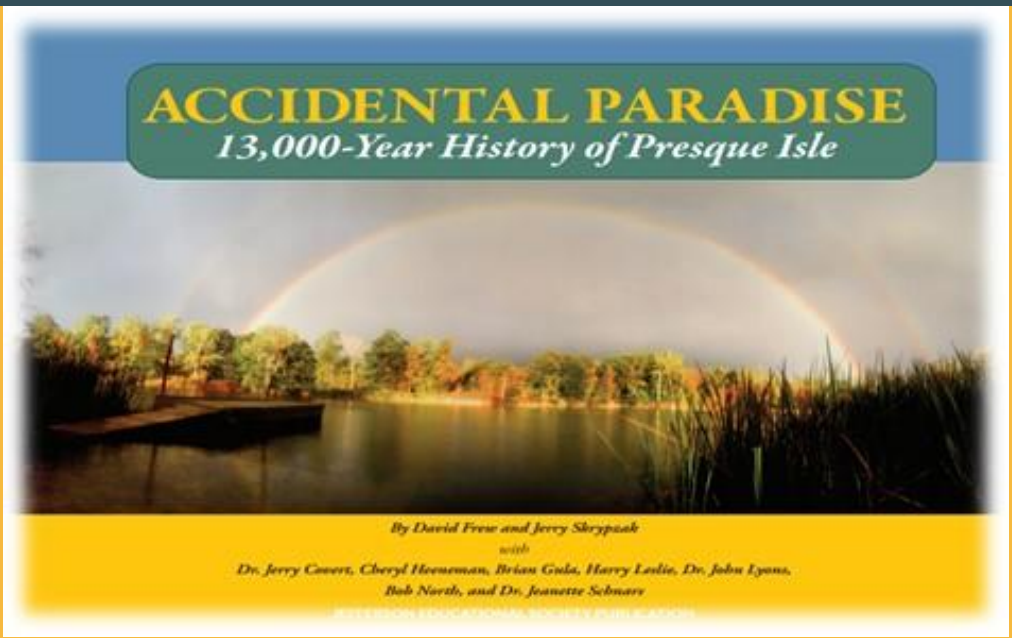
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The beautiful book on Presque Isle published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – "**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**" – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center's gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

The book, priced at **$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at **301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505** will also handle sales ***daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.***

For more information, send an email to **aperino@TRECF.org**.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.

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