

Three digits were sufficient for early Vernonia telephone system

By Robb Wilson

Have you made a telephone call in the past few days and it didn't go through? All you got was a buzz or a tone? Remember, we have now entered a new age and need to dial TEN digits!

What we have taken for granted in this age is not so new. In 1875, Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone and made the first call to Mr. Watson in an adjoining room. People laughed out loud when it was predicted that telephones would be commonplace and every home would have one, and that lines and poles would be erected everywhere to provide this service.

In a few short years, tele-

phones had become commonplace in cities and large towns. Small towns like Vernonia got telephones at the turn of the 20th century. I cannot recall whether it was 1899 or 1901 when the first system was installed in town. It was called the "Swede-Line" and was put in by the Malmsten family, recent immigrants from the old country.

The Malmsten family consisted of about five households and was very instrumental in the early development of our town, including the telephone, sewer, water and street improvements and helping get electricity in the early 1920's.

There were about eight homes that were connected to the "Swede-line" with all the

users being of Swedish heritage. Then, with this group closely connected through wires, others wanted it, too. The Swede-line soon grew into a network, with others who lived out in the country installing their own phone systems and having four or five neighbors connected.

The last member of the Malmsten family living here was Louise Malmsten Thomas, who provided me with this information in 1991. Louise remembered cranking the handle for ringing. As the town grew and others wanted phones, too, her father built a little building with a switchboard in it. She was the operator there for

many years. When the mill came in 1924, the population exploded and the phone service needed to grow considerably. A bigger switchboard was hoped for. Her father had sold out to a telephone company who built the system here. The system was still run through a switchboard. Sylvia, the operator, asked for the name of the party being called, or their three-digit phone number, and connected the call. This system continued through the late 1940s, when dial phones came into use. At first, you still had to dial "0" and have the operator connect the call.

Sometime in the early 1950s, direct dialing without operator assistance became available. Technology replaced

another job! Late in the 1950s, four numbers were needed to place a call, and we had been given a prefix - HAZEL NINE (Ha9). At this point, the prefix was not needed to make a call. Four-digit dialing worked through the 1960s. Around 1972, we were given word that we had to update and use a five digit system, so the "nine" became the commonplace prefix. That didn't last long, though, as GTE soon built a new phone office here in town and "the most modern technology to date" was available and installed!

The little brick building at the east end of the bridge that once served as the phone office (the operator lived in an apartment in the back) was demolished and a new building was erected. With this, came seven digit dialing and our Ha9 was converted to 429.

Now, being a part of the metro dialing area and a grown-up small town, we need to use all ten numbers. So don't forget, or you will get an earful of buzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

Not all telephone communications require wires or fiber optics anymore, as we once did. A cell phone tower was recently completed up on the hill near the cemetery, and that technology has brought us into a new century and new era of discovery and eavesdropping.

Let's see what happens in the next few years.

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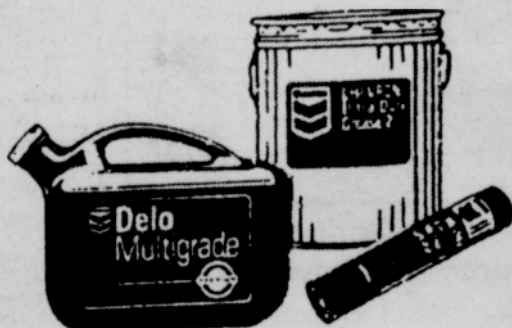
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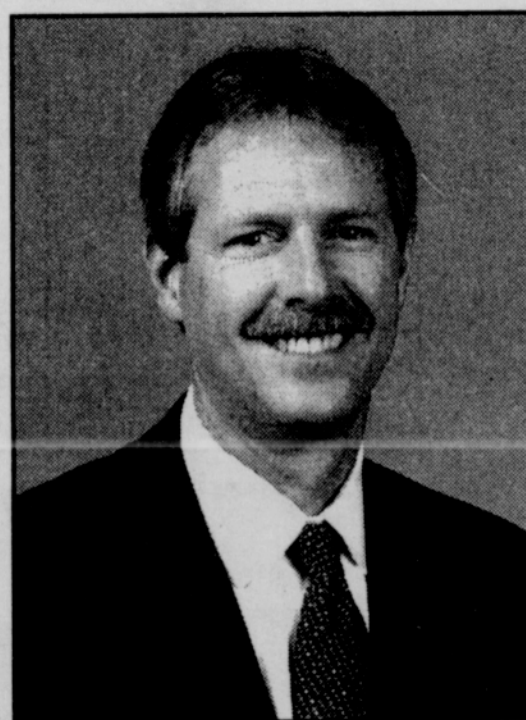
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Currently we are working with other agencies to site an ethanol facility for Cascade Grain at Port Westward; that will also provide family wage jobs. But more is needed!

To keep our communities healthy, we must also be able to respond to the needs of our small, locally owned businesses, to help them stay creative and productive. They are the backbone of our communities.

We need improved telecommunications, more affordable housing and better educational opportunities.

I appreciate your confidence in me and I will continue working long and hard for all of the people of Columbia County

Re-elect Tony Hyde
Columbia County Commissioner