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You should have been here this New Year's Day to witness my relief that the shiny black instrument strung with a white chord will not ring. On the wall by the deep freeze hangs my maternal grandfather's crank phone, also dead - disconnected.

These little dandies linked ranches way back. Rings on either phone meant bank, wool house, cowboys, or feed store.

Better believe that collect long-distance caused a pause on the crank number. The long distance charge to San Angelo 16 miles away cost 75 cents via that box. Grandfather's bill passed years without a long distance call. One of his sons talked long distance, but he never amounted to anything off on a ranch in Arizona.

Dual purpose for the crank phone was eavesdropping on the party line that reached deep in the ranching country. The longest bridge party ever planned on this earth occurred on the six-five line going through and by and around the old ranch. Floss and Aunt Bill hit the wire at 7:30 a.m. At 11:20, Floss' batteries died a merciful death.

Uncle Goat Whiskers' spasm might have grounded the line. Whiskers experienced dial phones up north in college. He never tried to accept our ranch system. Whiskers raised

so much hell about telephone communication, windmill failure, and generators for light plants, added to attacks on the U.S. Postal Service, the county tax office, and the school district that in retrospect, our small world would have been more peaceful if Whiskers had been put under house arrest.

You have to know how to crank one of those old boxes to express yourself ahead to the central switch board. You have to be taught how to listen in with out interruption. You have to be a good sport to share the time with other party members.

Every weekday morning, the dial instrument relays the ranch reports. Try this one: "Monte, did the carpenter tell you the roof wasn't leaking in the line camp kitchen, that it was honey dripping from the attic? Them bees can come in a pinhole under the eaves ..."

"Nah, he didn't take time to look in the attic. I bet it's full of honeycomb."

Seconds later on this end: "Good grief a mighty, old lady Mitchell, who on this earth ever heard of an attic full of honey except on a forsaken cow outfit? How on this gosh-a-mighty planet did they paint the ceiling with honey dripping through the sheetrock?"

Other party: "I don't know nothing about painting ceilings covered in honey, but that time up on the Concho when that old man smoked them bees out of the wash house, his old lady talked funny the rest of her life from swallowing all that smoke, so we shore don't want to use smoke."

Myself (a bit high-pitched): "Well, this is a nice homecoming. I hope if the ceiling falls in, the painters might like some honey, if they aren't disabled from being stuck to their stepladders while working under some honeycomb. Right now I am going out the door to set off a box of dynamite underneath the line camp house. Wait up if you see my pickup out there."

Next call was my son Ben. "Ben, I need to tell you to start voice practice before you call. Please holler at your neighbor across the street until he can hear you. Once he answers, run inside and talk to me in the same tone on the telephone. These new hearing aids are attuned to Raton, New Mexico, for above 3500 feet sea level."

Ben lives far way enough from the University to be able to hear. He either forgets to speak up or can't hear himself when we talk.

I keep reminding him to listen. Why? Months ago down in Austin the Heavenly Father told the Governor's wife that

He wanted her husband to be President. Out at Mertzon we were stunned. Some of us (me) felt unsure about him being fit to run for the office, until we heard he had collected \$17 million to campaign for President. You see that kind of talent pop out, you know you are onto a gifted person.

Grandfather's last 1950 telephone book survived along with the telephone. He hung the book on a cotton string from a feed sack. Several times, he told us the phone cost a dollar and half a month rent, but the company furnished the two dry cell batteries.

The line camp is 12 miles from Mertzon. The house sits in a peaceful valley. Like all the shortgrass country, the place is on the wild honey bee flyway. But the ceiling was not full of honey. Looks like now I'll end up as spastic as Uncle Goat Whiskers.