

Statistics released in April revealed that one out of five U.S. citizens owns a cell phone. Around Mertz on the ratio runs higher on a Monday morning. Rare is the motorist who passes on my walks without a cell phone pressed to the ear, roaring to work or to school drop-offs in huge SUVs and diesel jobs, looming over my path, casting raw steel in flashing shadows.

Numbers fail to show who the talkers connect to on the cells. Are they by chance linked to a lost relative? Say, with an old aunt long lost from the family circle? Imagination frames visions of torrid flirting and serious romances going on in surreptitious liaisons in a whispering exchange.

The connections can't all feature chattering gossip or love affairs on these mobile phone booths. Unofficial PTA meetings called on the parking lot while waiting for school to let out cover the scene too thoroughly to have much left to preview over the airways. Other than minute spring outbreaks years apart, the old town has never been one to harbor illicit affairs.

Along with roadways, grocery store aisles also inspire the urge to communicate. Weekend crowds loosen the tongue and give the dialing fingers an itch to go into action. In

the big chain on the west side of Angelo, the section selling sweets and jelly rolls stays blocked by old sisters' carts paralleled with the right arm cocked to hold the phone against the ear, extended far enough to complete holding her position.

Lightweight models, customers for watercresses and fresh endives, tend to talk as much, yet move in a sporadic pattern — park less. But to be unto the busy and the weary who make the wrong turn onto the confectionary section or try to race through the vegetable section in aisles too crowded to turn around or back out. The shortest conversation may run half an hour.

The telephone habit peaked before in history on rural party lines on a much smaller scale. In the 09 Divide neighborhood, 10 telephones used 25 miles of single galvanized line, strung precariously on white enamel insulators, nailed or wired to poles or posts to reach the central office in Mertzon.

Code to contact a subscriber came in rings and short rings. For example, "three longs and one short," reached the ranch house. Down at a cowboy's camp on the same outfit might be three long rings.

Two cylindrical dry cell batteries powered the marvelous system. Falcons grounded the line by dropping

parts of their prey on the wire. High winds and lightning storms affected service, but not to the extent that inclement weather later on interrupted more sophisticated power units.

My dear mother embraced privacy to a degree that would make today's confidentiality laws seem as significant as an inscription in invisible ink on a sheet of a third grader's notebook paper. Every ring for all 10 drops, including her ring, sounded on her kitchen phone.

She refrained from eavesdropping in all cases except one. Over east of the ranch lived an old couple who must have raised two of the most vigorously attuned daughters of the times. No, wait. Spirited? Playful? Oh, I know the best description in shortgrass language – wild and outlawed.

At least once a month, the grandmother received a frantic call stating one or the other daughter's case, "Well, Grandma, Momma's run off again," inciting Grandma's standard reply, "Well, I'll be dawg." Mother couldn't resist the treat of such rich one-liners.

Whether the ratio of cell phone use is five to one may or may not be correct. Two to one sounds right. In May, coming home from Lake Buchanan, we noticed that while stopped at a traffic light close to a church or a schoolyard, the bars showing reception on the cell dropped.

On the third occasion, my pal drove, freeing me to move the phone in different directions inside the car. Pointed toward the school, the signal waned. Pointed in an opposite direction, the phone showed full strength. Same response occurred toward a church.

Before the next town, the memory returned of the spring when Mrs. Bert Mayse and Mrs. Glen Crawford talked so long on the old phone system that the sound waves lost the power to transmit. (Are dead to this day.) From there it became easy to link the parked cars, the time of day and the time of the month to a spellbinder of a graduation speaker overloading the airwaves or a morning hit by a preacher wound up on a topic long enough that the words laid in line would reach the Holy Land.

Until the changeover from analog to digital, the bag cell phone worked best at the ranch. Away from dead spots, the new dinky phones work one out of five tries in the pasture. Would have been something to behold had Mrs. Mayse and Mrs. Crawford had a cell.