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In 1896, three brothers started stringing telephone wires to link up the Shortgrass Country with San Angelo. Scattered about to this day are scraps of rusted wires tied to stained white insulators to recall those times.

Many a ranch wife was able to stave off her loneliness, clasping a receiver to her ear and talking through the black mouthpiece of a wall-type, battery-operated telephone. Also, plenty of husbands spent long rides trailing down the deficiencies in such a primitive service.

Nowadays the above ground and buried lines are being replaced in selected rural areas by telephones working off an aerial that hits a repeater on a tall tower. Every subscriber is going to have private service. A blow, needless to say, that'll wipe out some of the most finely tuned ears of the most perfected eavesdroppers and the quickest rooted tongues, outside the news programs of national TV and radio.

The telephone company refused my request for the new service. I didn't put up much argument because I'd already been alerted that ranchers were going to be responsible for tying in their houses from the telephone company's aerial pole. Allowing any of us in on an engineering project past a rubber inner tube wrap tied with baling wire is about like hooking the locomotive of the Sunshine Special to a iron wheeled wagon.

It wasn't long until my case was made. One of my friends and her cowboy lacked three feet having enough pipe to conduit their line to the company's pole. So "save a trip to town, they cut off the pipe handle of an old garden rake to complete the tie-in.

Telephone corporations have huge treasuries to pay for research and progress, yet they seem to have never learned to leave the ranch trade alone.

No guessing what will be used to replace the rake handle. More than likely, it'll be something the telephone crew threw down and failed to pick up.