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Airwaves around the ranch house lie dormant from disuse. The only lift the sound needs is a little boost to send off the early morning phone calls to order feed or call the windmill man. The radio phone is too weak to come on-line. June bugs hang in the window screens to give a motorized effect to the ranch stillness, but that's only in the summer. Long winter nights can be mighty quiet, especially after the winds die at night.

As I keep reporting, television failed out here. The local channels came in clear. The programs were what flunked. For a little while in 1982, I tried watching Bob and Janet in the middle of the day, or maybe it was Paul and Janice. On the black and white set over at the bunkhouse, they were locked in verbal combat one moment and wrapped in a passionate embrace the next. The ambivalence of their behavior was hard to follow sitting in a sheetrock room floored with unpainted pine boards, seated in a cane bottom chair among old boots and hackamores and such left behind by one-time cowboys.

Perhaps the setting caused television to fail at the ranch. News reports sure didn't fit the ranch scene. The Houston pollution index or San Angelo lake levels mean little to a guy sitting out in the yard watching the moon rise in a breathless clear sky, drinking coffee made from straight untreated well water, so perfect the bubbles burst in unison. Traffic and parking problems in the state capital

are irrelevant to a man who drives a hundred miles to the Midland/Odessa airport on an early morning through two stop lights to spend minutes choosing a parking place to wait in a line of 10 people for a boarding pass.

However, the first equipment to transmit and receive sound, a crank telephone hooked to a single line going to a central office in Mertzon, worked fine for the ranch community. But lonesome ranch ladies on the party lines took a lot from the airwaves planning bridge parties and exchanging recipes. Cellular phones and two-way ranch radios still pick up static from the sound being depleted by the long telephone calls made in those days. My mobile pops every time I pass under where the old 4477 line used to hang.

Mother and my stepfather also owned a Philco dry cell radio for further contact to the outside world. Depression age families were avid listeners of radio programs. "Fibber McGee and Molly" and "the Fred Allen Show," to name a few, were rarely skipped. Much sadness reigned over dead batteries or weather interference. Radio programs were popular enough in those days that *The Saturday Evening Post* covered the writing and directing of "The Adventures Of The Lone Ranger."

Three weeks ago from this writing, the actor who played the Lone Ranger died. I just knew him by his stage name. Among his accomplishments listed were producing the sound effects for the Lone Ranger programs. He perfected making

his horse Silver sound like he was racing to take the outlaw gang, trailed at full speed by his sidekick Tonto on a second horse. His pistol fired faster than Roy Rogers'. A scary show called Inner Sanctum beat him on creaky door hinges, but he was a master at slamming jailhouse doors shut, or reproducing a cabin door being knocked down.

In those times, we had a sound engineer on the ranch's party line. Cowboy named "Buttermilk" Hankin worked for a neighbor, Glen Crawford. The boss lived in town. He called "Buttermilk" every morning at 4:30 to be sure he was up ready to start earning the 30 dollars a month he was paying him. First question was always the same: "Buttermilk, you got your boots on? Stomp yore feet."

"Buttermilk" (that's all the first name we ever knew) kept a pair of bull nose pliers on the top of the telephone. He knew the perfect timing to hit the box twice to prove he had both boots on. Best part of the act, however, was closing the pliers to imitate Mrs. Hankin opening the oven door to check to see if her biscuits were done. He was so good, he varied the sounds by scraping the pliers against the mouthpiece to simulate moving a stove lid. (This information came third-hand from Mrs. Hankin to Mother to myself.)

"Buttermilk" would never have been caught if he'd only remembered to smoke up the lamp globes and use more kerosene. His boss began to notice also how fat his saddle horses were and how late the milk pen calf stayed in the

pen. Too bad ol' Buttermilk never made the big time with his
bull nose pliers. Maybe the real reason television doesn't
go over out here is there's too much other stuff to tell ...