

FEBRUARY 17, 1972

Whatever you do, don't ever be nice to the telephone company. Run your life however the government wants you to. Keep snakes for pets or ride wild horses for a hobby. But beware of how you treat the telephone company.

My education started during the Christmas holidays. Telephone service on the ranch party line fell into a state of disruption that would surpass a landslide for disorder. Growling and popping on the line was so loud that the insulators were shaken from the poles. Incoming calls had to be completed on the backs of Christmas cards through the mail. Within the period, I hollered "hello" so many times that the Mexicans camped by the windmill started closing up their tent to shut out the echoes.

In the course of the breakdown, I chose a new technique to use on the telephone people. The whole neighborhood was running them down something terrible, so I decided that a kind, understanding approach would get the line back in order.

Each day, I called the repair clerk. The French court, at the height of its courtesan stage, couldn't have reached the courteous exchange I used on the repair clerk.

Opening salutations took as long as 60 seconds. The clerk didn't respond to the warmth, yet I could tell after 10 days that the old charm was wearing through the line.

The calls became part of the routine of going to work. (I was using the coffee house telephone.) The other subscribers were losing their telephone habit. Ladies who normally logged five straight hours on the wire were reaching the bottom of ironing baskets that hadn't been emptied in months. Soap operas grew more popular, and news of clearance sales were relayed by face-to-face encounters.

After about 20 trips, the repairmen got the line back into service. To signal the end, I called the repair clerk and thanked her graciously for restoring communications.

Then came the telephone bill. On the third line of the second page of the long distance billing was a 90-cent toll charge between my kid's number and my personal residence phone. A distance, I might add, of 44 feet and six inches.

Immediately, I fell in the trap. I took typewriter to finger and dashed off a scathing note, informing the telephone company that if I wanted to talk to anyone in my house, I'd give more than 90 cents plus tax to get their attention. In fact, on busy days, I'd give \$9 just to capture the attention of one of my seven sons long enough to get him to haul out the trash. But as I told the telephone people, I didn't want outsiders cashing in on the deal.

Living with an Indian wife should have taught me that this was a subtle trick by the phone company to force me to admit that I'd actually made a toll call between the two numbers. Just last week, she kicked all the cover off my side of the bed so I'd understand to let her tomcat in out of the cold. That should have prepared me for any third line message the telephone company had to offer, but it sure didn't.

Anyhow, I had to call the business office this morning to apologize for writing the letter. I didn't want the telephone people going around pouting and mad.

I'm not going to try to explain to you or anyone else how to make a long distance call from one part of your house to the other part. All I suggest is to stay on guard and do unto others as much as you can without getting in jail. The next time I contact the

telephone company they are going to be the ones who are nice. Making a man lose his temper is sure a tricky way to run a communication service.