

People fuss all the time because they can't reach me at the ranch on the telephone. My sons must stay home on Saturday night to lay guilt trips to spring on Sunday afternoon, like this favorite: "Tried to call you 10 times yesterday, Dad, but guess you had already left for the Santa Fe Junction or the Wagon Yard Inn." Or another great one-liner: "Sure needed your advice last night, Dad, about the big trial next week, but gave up at midnight and caught Uncle Walter at home working in his office."

Over and over, I remind them that seven of the 20 miles of above-ground line going to Mertzon belongs to the ranch. The telephone company does an excellent job of maintaining the 14-mile stretch. Hands down, we have the best telephone man to ever climb a splintered creosote pole or tack a piece of tin over a woodpecker hole, but company rules forbid working on private lines. In particular, a private line so out of date and rusty that Angelo operators have to have a translator to understand the old-fashioned way the words transmit over the wires, and need special headsets to drown out the static.

Enough electricity off a storm to light a flashlight knocks it cockeyed for days on end. I never know when it rings if it's sun spots interfering, or the wind vibrating the line so much that the bells jingle. The busiest hours of service are from 10 p.m. to midnight. The biggest volume of

business occurs during fall and spring works and deer season. Mealtimes are very popular, as well. Also, the hot water heater coming on and bath water running triggers a big series of incoming calls. As was reported once before, I threw a good portable phone in the trash before I realized the shaving and bath soap from my ears had impacted in the receiver and clogged off the sound.

Some connections work whether the telephone is on or not. The office of Statistics for the Agriculture Department makes the Canadian mounted Police's dedication to duty seem like the mounties are working on a commission. Every 15 days, or so it seems, a lady calls and wants to check on how many solidmouth ewes bed down on the ranch every October and whether there's any billy kids under six months of age being trained for lead goats, or broke to pulling a cart.

I try to be patient, but one night the call came right after I had just hung up from telling the Visa Gold Card lady and the Sear's Maintenance Agreement salesman that the Noelke's had left town four years ago to avoid credit collectors. Short of breath and short of temper, I gave the poll taker Sears' and Visa's 800 numbers. I suggested if she needed a late-hour correspondent to call those two pests.

To further enlarge her understanding of the case, I explained the reason I live in a remote place is for privacy. "If and when I want to entertain the world's passersby and talk to drummers and poll takers," I told her, "I will reoccupy my house in town. Until then," I asked,

"please make a note on the ledger: Mr. Noelke likes to take an uninterrupted nap from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. and after lunch from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m."

The whole country is going mad over cellular and on-line electronic communication. Goat Whiskers the Younger and his friend, Aunt Annie, delight in keeping score on how many times my phone goes out a month. Their place meters so many modern forms of communication, the house cat wears a paging device to take calls from the barn and the hired help develop cauliflower ears from wearing earphones.

When I am on the line, all I reach is recorded messages apologizing for being gone, and promising to return my call. As borderline as my service is, I blurt out whatever's on my mind and sign off with the telephone repair service's number. I've thought of running a neat little classified ad giving the Texas Department of Agriculture's statistics service as a mail drop or calling point. The office seems to stay open all hours of the night. Perhaps the Department and Visa Gold and Sears could work out a conference system and handle my account during business hours. Were they to try, they would receive a much kinder reception ...