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Good-bye, Central

Levela Erdman
In The Reader's Digest

I like progress as well as the next one. But when I go back to the little town where I grew up, I can hardly wait for a chance to turn the crank on our old phone and say, "Hello Central!" I know sure as anything that before she rings the number I ask for she'll welcome me home, inquire about my health and ask how long I mean to stay. Within a few hours the whole town will know of my visit.

But the day is coming when I'll pick up the receiver and hear only an impudent, impersonal buzz. The dial system will have come to my town as inevitably as it has invaded other villages and crossroads. I won't like it a bit. For I grew up under the benign autocracy of a small-town Central who held within her busy hands the multiple lines of all our destinies. With her passing, I feel that something precious and irreplaceable will have disappeared.

There was, for instance, the night the Borden farmhouse caught fire. Sam Borden had gone to town with a load of cattle and Sarah was alone with the children. Afterward, when the women asked, "Oh Sarah, whatever did you do when you found the house was burning?" She told them, "First I called Central, and then I started praying."

Nobody thought the answer sacrilegious. That was the usual order in which rural people handled their emergencies. God was undoubtedly the centre of the universe but Central was just what her name implied — the focal point of the community.

Then there was the day a woman's desperate voice came in over long distance from a town 100 miles away.

"Listen, Central," the woman

said. "I have to get my husband quick. I'm going to have a baby." "Who is your husband?" "His name is Boyd Jones. He just started working up there." "Do you know where?" "No — but I know the man he works for has a Dodge truck." So did half a dozen other men in the community. That didn't help.

"And he lives next door to a man who owns a mean German police dog, and no fence around his house."

"Oh—"

And with that scrap of information, Central got Boyd Jones on the line in less than five minutes. He had home to town to work for Milton Carney, who had a Dodge truck and lived next door to a German police dog that everybody thought ought to be fenced in.

Sometimes Central didn't even have that much to go on. The night the Borden house caught fire, Sarah had screamed, "Help! My house is on fire!" into Central's ears and then, panicky, hung up without giving her name. But Central knew where the fire was. "Sarah Borden," she explained, "is the only woman on the 600 line who lives."

In our town Central was considered an animated encyclopedia. We kept her busy answering questions: "Central, what's burning? I see a fire in the west." "How long do you cook apple jelly?" "How is Grampa William this morning?"

Since our town was too small for a daily newspaper or a broadcasting station, many of their duties fell on Central. She advertised — by ringing eight longs and then making general announcements — specials on groceries, current picture shows and the Missionary Society's ice cream social. She was a clearinghouse for details of funeral arrangements.

And well do I recall a service Central offered the younger crowd. Along about five o'clock Saturday afternoon one could see boys slipping into Central's office, looking self-conscious. More often than not they came out whistling. Central had told them which girls did not have dates for the evening. The boys didn't like to call a girl and be refused, and we girls were pleased with a system which practically assured us a date.

It used to be almost commonplace to read about a heroic Central who stayed at her post during a severe electrical storm or a forest fire or a flood, saving lives and property with calm disregard for her own safety. While our town never had such a disaster, our Central did her part in saving lives. Like when little Tim Houston got sick. Tim came down with convulsions on a January night when a blizzard was blowing ninety to nothing. He timed it nicely—midnight, with Doc out on a baby case. "Central," Mrs. Houston screamed into the phone, "get Doc! Tim's dying. Convulsion . . ."

Central always knew where Doc was, of course. Tonight he was at the Stevens'. The baby had arrived safe enough, and Doc was just leaving. Central gave him the message and went back to her bed, there in the office. Then she remembered those two places on the road to the Houstons' where snow often drifted up to the top of a car. Doc could get stuck bad either place. So she got up again and called the Carmodys and the Hiltons and the Carters — the farmers living nearest to the trouble spot. When Doc came to the snowdrifts he found, to his surprise, men and tractors waiting to give him aid. He made it to Houstons' in time.

Central's office was on Main St. housed in a building with a plate-glass front. Sitting on her high stool at the switchboard, she had a look-in on most of the comings and goings of all of us, a sort of goldfish bowl in reverse life. Often she had only to raise her eyes to know the whereabouts of a particular citizen.

"Hello, Central. Do you see my boy, Frankie Hardin, anywhere? If you do, tell him to get some sugar."

"Hello, Central, is Bill around? Tell him Cousin Mammie Bledsoe just drove in from California."

When Uncle Sam and Aunt Lil were celebrating their Golden Wedding anniversary, their son came in from Florida, but the daughter-in-law had to stay at home. Then she decided to telephone long distance, so she could be a part of the occasion. The call came through when the family was downtown, so Central dispatched some boys to round them up. Soon she had all four people on the line; Aunt Lil in the office's one pay both, Uncle Sam at her own place at the switchboard, the son on the home phone and the daughter-in-law in Florida. For five minutes all telephone service in our little community was held up.

No one ever complained about this temporary suspension of service. And if they had, Central would have hushed it by saying that, in her opinion, 50 years of happy married life should very well rate five minutes of silent tribute to the community.

We must say goodbye to all this when the dial system comes. And

Cheltenham Farm Club Has Evening of Euchre

Mr. and Mrs. Gordon Campbell opened their home to the members of the Cheltenham Farmers Club for the first meeting of the fall and winter season on October 13. Part of the evening was spent playing progressive euchre and high lady and gentleman were Mrs. Alex McLeod and Mr. David McDonald. Second prizewinners were Mrs. George Gowland and Mr. Stafford McCulloch, and the carrying prizes went to Mrs. Herbert Taylor and Mr. Tommy Davidson.

While the men held a business meeting, the ladies had a program which opened with the singing of a harvest hymn, "Bringing in the Sheaves. The creed was recited by Mrs. Stafford McCulloch. In answer to roll call each lady mentioned something to be Thankful For at the Thanksgiving Season. Mrs. Meredith McKim chose an interesting subject "The First Car That Travelled from Coast to Coast" with illustration and comparison to modern day motor car models. Mrs. W. H. Wilkinson gave two readings "Portrait and Personality" and "Joy of Finding Out". Mrs. George Hutchinson recited a poem "Smiling The Rock". The secretary read thank-you notes from shut in members and spoke of items of business. The singing of Juanita closed the program.

The hostess was assisted at the lunch hour by Mrs. Norman Hutchinson, Mrs. Cheavins Judge, Mrs. George Gowland and Mrs. Stafford McCulloch. Mr. and Mrs. David McDonald will give their home for the November 10th meeting, when a speaker will be guest of honour.

—This year's Remembrance Day anniversary will be held on the Sunday closest to the date, Sunday, November 8th, with a public service at the Cenotaph at 3 p.m.

no matter how efficient and convenient a dial phone may be, it can never tell us whether tonight's frost will be hard enough to kill the tomatoes or what time the Lion's minstrel show starts. Nor can it explain that old Mrs. Tompkins is pretty sick and people better not call the house.

Central knows all these things. She knows them because she is the central heart and mind of the community. And man has not yet been smart enough to make a gadget that will take the place of the heart and mind. That is why I shall say with great reluctance, Goodbye, Central!

NOTICE TO CREDITORS

IN THE ESTATE OF Thomas Anderson, Gentleman, Deceased.

All persons having claims against the estate of Thomas Anderson, late of the Township of Esquesing, Gentleman, who died on or about the 25th day of August, 1953, are hereby notified to send particulars of same to the undersigned on or before the 7th day of November, A.D., 1953, after which date the estate will be distributed with regard only to the claims of which the undersigned shall then have notice, and the undersigned will not be liable to any person of whose claim they shall not then have notice.

Dated at Georgetown, this 8th day of October, A.D., 1953.

Ruth Alberta Thompson, Gertrude Florence Anderson, and Thomas Clarence Anderson, by their Solicitors, Dale & Bennett, Georgetown, Ontario.

10-21

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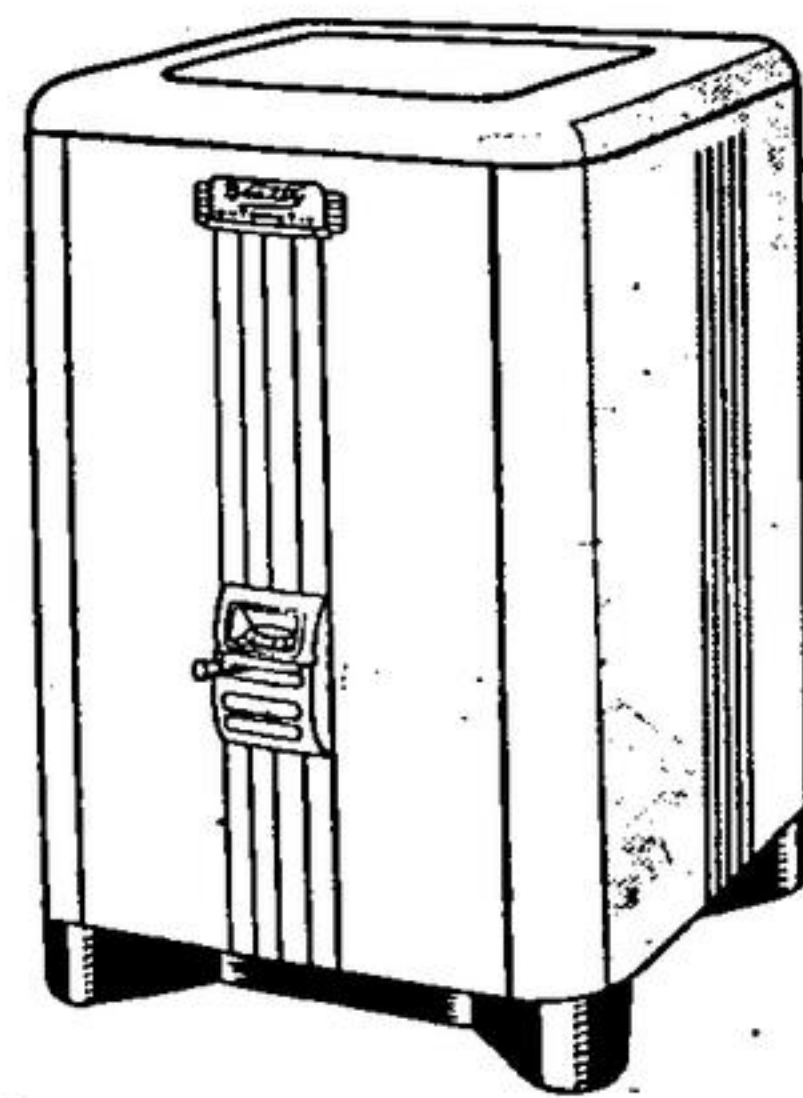
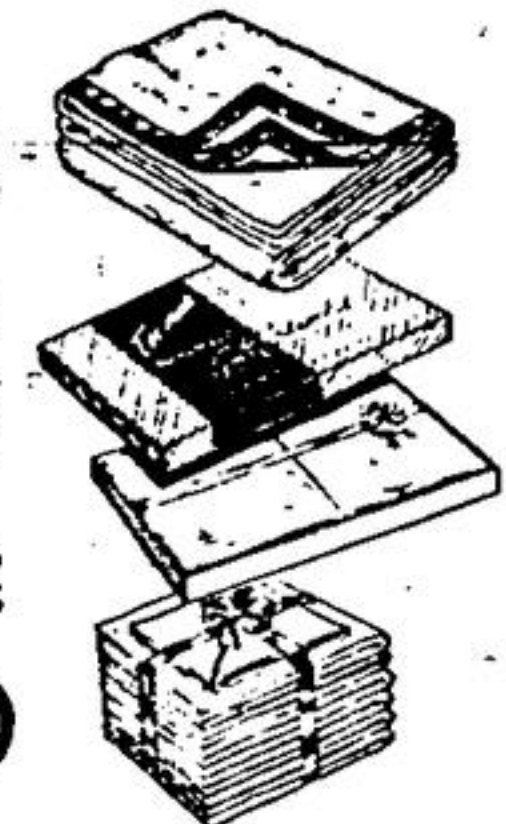
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