

## The sounds of our lives

Thanks to the marvel of electronics, our ears are now exposed to a multitude of tones that regulate our daily lives. My Big Ben alarm clock bell used to wake me up. Now it's an electronic tone (or buzzer) that sends me out of bed like a SAC bomber crew running for their plane!

Old A.G. Bell's invention had a pretty distinctive ring on the customer's end while the switchboard operator's side had another (I know because I played at the feet of the Chief Operator for Evansville's Bell Telephone office. This was in the early fifties before the company went automated. The switching room below the two-story building on Madison Street was a magical place to a young boy. I was mesmerized, transfixed and wanted more.

Sitting upstairs on high swivel chairs, the telephone operators would answer, "Number please, thank you," as they plugged a cord into a hole in the mammoth panel, bearing the number of the customer. In larger cities, exchanges had word identifiers. When I lived in Milwaukee, our number was Humboldt 35592 (my mother drummed it into my pea brain in case I got lost). Those were the days when a young fellow could walk a mile or two to school alone without fear of being kidnapped.

An auto horn had a fuller, richer sound than the irritating higher pitched ones of most cars today, and each model could be easily identified even if you couldn't see the car: one for Caddies, one for Packards and another for Studebakers.

At home, our Hoover 'talked' to us, commanding our full attention as the huge bag filled with air and the giant metal body clacked over floorboards in between throw rugs. Mixmasters of old didn't sound like they would careen off the kitchen counter like the fancy ones of today with their high-speed motors that whine at high rpms like race cars at Le Mans. In our parlor, our grandfather clock chime sounded like an operatic baritone doing his scales, unlike the stealth digital clocks of today.

There were special washday sounds, too, of rugs being beaten or of sheets being squeezed through the ringer of our *modern* Kelvinator washer. Our Singer sewing machine's treadle made a special sound that shared space with other sounds from the pre-electronic world. On coal delivery day, I remember the noise of that sooty black fuel sliding down the chute, clunking to its resting place in the coal bin next to our furnace in the basement.

Tones or sounds alert us when something is ready like coffee makers or microwaves, but back then coffee percolated and the brew could be heard and seen through a glass top on the pot. One sound that I will never forget, though, is the air raid siren, whose singular purpose in life was to tell us to head for cover. In our neck of the woods that usually means tornadoes, but during WWII (and the early Cold War years) it also meant enemy planes or worse...an atomic bomb.

Back then, every child played "Blind Man's Bluff," but when I was alone I would sometimes close my eyes and pretend to be sightless as I walked through the house and out the back door onto the grassy lawn, processing each individual sound like the wind causing sheets on our line to flap or the barking of our neighbor's cocker spaniel. Life has gotten considerably more demanding, and our sounds reflect it. I fantasize about disconnecting the seat belt and 'door ajar' bell on my car and doing away with the irritating chirp of the smoke alarm's low-battery reminder and all those inane customized cellphone rings.

I wonder how children today would fair if they were blindfolded, transported back in time and exposed to the sounds of my youth. Would they be struck with fear without all the familiar beeps that inhabit their world? Anyway, it's good to know that some things never change, like the sound of birds enjoying a dip in our birdbath when the sun dares to break through the clouds of winter. Think I'll go out and check the sundial to see if it's time for my nap.

Author: Site Admin