

Goodbye Havermeyer

I am entering another year in my life, celebrating another birthday, noticing who's still around and who's not, making note of what has changed in those decades from 1949 until the present. It's pretty remarkable.

One of the things I remember is that phone numbers were much more interesting as was the telephone itself. Telephones were black or beige and they were the size of a handbag. The thing you talked into was about eight inches long and shaped like a dumbbell. It sat in a cradle where it depressed two buttons, ending the connection. There was a big dial on the front of it with holes that you put your fingers into in order to get the party you were looking for. Put your finger (or your pencil) in a hole and rotate the dial, do it six more times and voila! you've dialed a number.

The numbers were much cooler then too. Not just numbers but letters and numbers. There were "exchanges" in various parts of the city usually named after important men, long forgotten. Our phone number was HAvermeyer 4-7805. If I live to be a hundred and ninety seven, sitting in a corner, batty and trying to recall my own name, I will still remember HA4-7805.

My aunt Terry, who lived down stairs from us had a TV before we did. So my sister and brother and our cousins, her boys, would pile up and watch our shows. The TV was a huge white Philco. The cabinet was about four feet tall and three feet wide. The screen was probably eleven or twelve inches across and the picture was broadcast in varying shades of gray. It was magic.

The milkman left bottles of his product outside the back door in the milk box. And on specified mornings throughout the week we would be alerted to their presence by the vegetable man, the seltzer man, the knife sharpener, the bleach man and the ice cream man. My mother paid our insurance policies to Harry, who came to the front door once a month and wrote his transactions in a book. He was large and noisy and he called me "Rusty". I did not like him.

I walked to St. Sebastian's Catholic School every morning for eight years where the uniform of the day was blue slacks, white shirt, blue tie. Every year before school started my mom would take me up to

Roosevelt Avenue, a four block walk, to the Woodside Men and Boys Shop where I would be fitted for a new pair of blue gabardine pants.

I had no idea what gabardine was but I liked the way it sounded. Gabardine, kind of military and musical at the same time; I thought it was the kind of word that Professors or Presidents would have their pants made out of.

St. Sebastian's School had all kinds of statues in and around the school, most of them depicting the great saint himself. For those of you who don't know, Sebastian was a Roman soldier, centurion as a matter of fact, a big man in the army, who converted to Christianity and was executed for it. The manner of his demise was particularly gruesome. He was tied to a tree and shot full of arrows, he was saved miraculously by divine intercession and then shot full of arrows again. This time it worked. Anyway, us little kids would go to school every day surrounded by pictures and statues of poor St. Sebastian looking heavenward with all these arrows sticking out of him at the oddest angles. There's nothing quite like memorizing the times tables under the gaze of a guy in a half-tunic who has just been executed. It kind of put things in perspective.

My cousin Tommy wore his hair in a sort of Irish pompadour, full of Vitalis and piled ever so carefully above his freckled face. He thought of himself as quite the tough guy with his cigarettes (Chesterfield unfiltered) rolled up in the left sleeve of his white tee shirt but he actually looked more like a Kewpie Doll. He was a great guy though even if he would never be as tough as Brando or as cool as Dean. He had a '49 Ford with the shift on the column. They don't do that any more but at the time it was standard. The car was pale blue and a streamlined thing of beauty. He would park it in the alley next to our house and we would all stand around looking at it. Young people did that a lot then. We stood around and looked at a car, sometimes for an hour or more. Things were simpler.

Tommy's gone now as are a lot of those cool cats and your telephone can do things today that it would have taken six machines, five professors and a science fiction writer to do back then. It's been a very long time since anybody put a nickel in one. Phone numbers are ten digits long now, goodbye Havermeier, so long Bigelow, hello 1 800 555 1212.

But that's all right. There are new little kids staring wide eyed at their own cousin's new vehicle, holding their own Tommy in awe. There are all manner of machine and custom now that will seem just as outdated sixty years from now. You can count on it. And all those years down the road another old codger will be writing for another audience and it will all still be true. Looking back wistfully is part of the deal isn't it? It's what we do to reassure ourselves that it all happened just the way we remember it.