

COMMUNICATING WHILE GROWING

By William Nicoson

Today, March 1, 2000, will enter the history books. This is the first day in Northern Virginia when telephoning across the street requires punching a ten-digit number. How have we come to this? Northern Virginia has grown great. If we all keep our existing phone numbers, there will soon be too many phone lines in use to permit identification by the seven-digit numbers of the past.

I'm not going to add up the burdening seconds required by NV's burgeoning population to punch in the three added digits. If that troubles you, a speed-dialing phone is available at modest cost. That's a phone you can program to dial a number of seven, ten or more digits by punching a single digit. Sounds like the perfect solution.

Well, that's what I thought before the ten-digit day hit me. My memory for numbers is feeble, but I now know that my memory for steps in computer programming is worse. In anticipation of the ten-digit day, I knew all numbers in the local area code had to be reprogrammed for two of my phones but couldn't remember how. All I could remember was that the process was different for each phone.

The phone manuals I used for initial programming had to be somewhere. I'm not going to add up the hours required by NV's technology-shy population to locate manuals because I'm too busy still searching for one of mine. When in the search I came across my fax manual, it hit me that all local numbers entered for automatic dialing by my computer or fax would also require reprogramming.

I naturally assumed that the 703 area code should be preceded in dialing by the digit 1 as with all other area codes. The manuals were of course silent on the subject. After completing the herculean task of manual retrieval and digital reprogramming of machines for which manuals had been found, a friend, who had taken time to read a newspaper account, informed me that the prefix 1 would screw everything up. Back I went to change all the altered numbers once again. Then my wife suggested I consult the phone book.

I discovered that a new area code 571 now overlays the 703 area code. New numbers within the 703 boundaries will be assigned a 571 code. In large print the book advises that when "CALLING WITHIN AND BETWEEN 703 and 571", dial "AREA CODE + SEVEN DIGIT NUMBER" and, when calling "OUTSIDE 703 and 571", add the prefix 1. This seemed to confirm my friend's tip. But in much smaller print lost in a maze of other information, the hefty book advises that "any call that is dialed using 1 + area code + seven digit number will be completed."

In other words, my initial programming would have worked. The subsequent correction was a waste of time. I refuse to add up all the hours lost to NV residents in pointless reprogramming

because most people aren't dumb enough to consult the sacred text only after completing the required ritual.

Anyway, I'm comforted by the thought that in the prosperity of frenetic growth flooding Northern Virginia, all swimmers, whether slow or fast, will rise with the tide. If one or two shout for help but can't be heard for lack of a program, well, it's a sink-or-stink... I mean a sink-or-swim world.

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