

Dialing Demonstration

SINCE I'M A FATHER and it's my job to be annoying, I showed this photograph to my 18-year-old daughter and asked her to tell me what she thought it depicted. Since she's a kind and patient young woman, she obliged without even rolling her eyes.

"A game show?" she said.

"Nope."

A long pause. "Is that a telephone?" she asked.

"Sort of," I said.

"I don't know, Dad."

Just as I suspected. My daughter, a smartphone wizard with blazing thumbs, could not fathom why four young women—probably not much older than she is now—might be gathered around a weird display that had something to do with a telephone. So I revealed the photo's secret.

"They're teaching people how to dial a phone," I explained.

"Dial?"

Like my daughter, most Americans under the age of 50 have no idea that people used to place telephone calls by dialing—a process involving the repeated, clockwise turning of a perforated metal disc—and by using a phone number assigned to an "exchange." Each exchange had a name that began with two letters corresponding to numbers on the dial. If you worked in downtown Minneapolis, for example, you might have a phone number in the ATLantic exchange, which meant it began with the numbers 2 (corresponding with A) and 8 (corresponding with T).

But back in 1928, when this photograph was taken, dial telephones were



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brand new. People were used to picking up the receiver of their candlestick talking devices and asking an operator to place a call for them. The concept of dialing a call directly, without an operator's help, was confusing and intimidating. So companies like Northwestern Bell, which controlled the telephone business in Minneapolis, set out to teach their customers how to use the new direct-dial technology.

In this visual lesson, four Northwestern Bell employees are explaining how to dial a number in the LOcust exchange. If you were to place this call, you would dial 5-6-0-7-0-6. Six digits, not seven. Northwestern Bell didn't introduce seven-digit

phone numbers (minus area codes) until the 1950s, when unassigned six-digit numbers were becoming scarce.

—Dave Kenney

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