

The Telephone Book is Not Long for this World, Probably
by Luc Sante

The telephone book is not long for this world, probably. It still exists, in ever more reduced form, mostly the yellow pages with a diminishing white section of the people who still possess land lines. Where I live that section is down to a thin afterthought, although in the yellow part there are thirty-three pages of lawyers, which is less an indication of the robustness of that profession than of its oppressive importance to the class of people who do not own personal computers. These days the book is so flimsy even I could tear it in half without breaking a sweat. Any of the books, that is, since I receive no fewer than three every year, covering overlapping territories, only one of them issued by a telephone company. They arrive, separately, in plastic bags thrown in my driveway, and are placed on a shelf in the pantry closet, where they reside undisturbed until the new ones come a year later. The fact that I keep them at all is probably just a vestigial reflex, a function of my age.

I remember when the phone book was something to be reckoned with. In the city where I lived for thirty years it came in multiple volumes, each one two or three inches thick, which would take up a disproportionate amount of space in a narrow tenement apartment. But you could not live without the phone book. There was no other way of finding a tailor or a locksmith short of canvassing the neighborhood on foot. If you wanted to know the times of screenings at the movie house and didn't have a newspaper handy you consulted the phone book and called the theater. If you were in need of an unusual item not found in stores--lengths of rubber tubing, a bulk supply of card stock, an East Asian spice unassimilated by Western cookery--you would leaf through the yellow pages until you found the appropriate category and begin calling suppliers.

Figuring out under what category certain things would be listed was a form of labor in itself. The phone book might be helpful in redirecting your search--for lawyers, see "attorneys," for example--but often you were on your own. It once took me an entire day of blind calls and cross-referencing to locate a supplier of blank record sleeves. Sometimes such a search would verge on the existential. You eventually came to know that cooking pots would be listed under "housewares" and bigger cooking pots under "restaurant supplies," that wainscoting might be found in "hardware" but more reliably in "lumber," that aftermarket car parts might fall under "automobile parts used and rebuilt" or "automobile wreckers and salvage," unless the car was old enough to qualify for "automobiles, antique." But what if you were looking to have a quantity of paper perforated like so many sheets of stamps? What if you needed elbow-length asbestos-lined gloves? What if you required five yards of nautical chains? Where would you even start? You would have to try to think like an indexer, and more often than not you would be wrong. Nevertheless, you knew that the answers, however recondite, inarguably lay somewhere within the phone book.

In that bygone era you could reliably use the phone book to locate people as well. You had met someone at a party but had forgotten to obtain her number, but so long as you had her last name, and it wasn't transparently false, you could usually find her the next day. It cost money to have your phone number unlisted, so most people didn't bother. Only the most famous movie stars and plutocrats were absent from the listings. If you were bored, one way to while away an afternoon would be to sit down with the Manhattan White Pages and look up every well-known person you could think of; they were mostly there. Writers and artists and independent

filmmakers and most musicians were listed, and you could find out where they lived, too. Igor Stravinsky was in the phone book, and so were Ornette Coleman and Shirley Clarke and Robert Frank and Elizabeth Hardwick and Claes Oldenburg and Sylvia Miles. If someone wasn't listed it was often because their phone was still under the previous tenant's name, or under the name of the person they lived with, or maybe because they were eccentrics who didn't have a telephone but used the booth in the bar downstairs as their base of operations.

The telephone book was the key to all the mysteries. In a large city the listings would begin with names that started with long series of A's ("Aaaaaabel") and end with those preceded by strings of Z's ("Zzzzzzygmunt")--because there were jokers whose ambitions included being the first or last listing in the book. There were pages upon pages of Smiths and Changs and Garcias and Browns and Williamses. There were rich families whose listing included a subhead for the children--"Teenagers' Phone." There were weirdos who had themselves listed as a single letter, or a larkish pseudonym, or who had constructed an elaborate fantasy life that included multiple telephone numbers. In New York at one time there was a Republic of Montmartre, for example, with a series of bureaus and departments--a Military Mission to the Royal Scottish Jacobite Government, an Office of the Grand High Commissioner for the Shanghai Concession, among others, all with listed numbers, some of them individual--which appeared to be a conceptual artwork intended strictly for the puzzlement and delectation of phone-book browsers.

The telephone connected everyone and everything, at least potentially. Every person and institution in the country was accessible through some combination of seven or ten digits. Any random entry might lead you to Greta Garbo or the Aga Khan, or to whatever esoteric and officially nonexistent cloak-and-dagger agencies might lie hidden within the labyrinth of greater Washington DC. There was a bit of folklore about this, at least among kids. There weren't any exchanges that began with "1," for example, so that was taken to mean that the secret numbers began with that digit. The fact that various combinations, when dialed, would yield only the ominous three-note signal and then a recorded voice saying "We're sorry, the number you have dialed is not a working number" only meant that more dialing was required, notwithstanding the fact that an arena full of chimpanzees could be kept busy for a few eons trying out sets of seven digits. But then the telephone and its book provided an endless source of amusement for undersupervised children everywhere. Your town may not have contained anyone named I. Seymour Butz, but undoubtedly there was a succession of Finks, who spent a decade or more being tormented by piping voices inquiring after Rat.

In 1973, people answered the telephone if they were in the house when it rang. You never knew who might be on the line. Of course everyone knew an oddball or two who kept their phone unplugged, or kept it in the refrigerator--where it could ring away soundlessly--when they were working or indisposed. But a ringing phone could mean anything. You might have been dialed randomly by a radio DJ who would offer a valuable prize when you answered; you might be sought by a lawyer executing the will of an unknown rich relative; your nearest and dearest might be lying in the hospital after a sudden accident. There was nothing like Caller ID in those days, and few people had answering machines, although they had been in existence for a decade or two. They were cumbersome and expensive; only the very wealthy and very busy could justify the outlay.

Such people did exist, and some of them explored all the possibilities of combining telephones with tape recorders. Most Americans were made aware of this by Richard Nixon, the 37th occupant of the White House. He had been reelected to a second term a year earlier, and a few

months after that five men were caught breaking into Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate buildings in Washington DC. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post*, following leads provided by a source initially known only as "Deep Throat," established connections between those arrested and Nixon's circle. It was then that the nation learned of Nixon's secret taping rig, which recorded every phone call, as well as every conversation held in the Oval Office. When the tapes were subpoenaed by the special prosecutor assigned to the Watergate case, Nixon provided only a transcript, citing executive privilege. Eventually Nixon's lawyers revealed that a tape of conversations held on June 20, 1972 was marked by an eighteen-and-a-half-minute gap. When Nixon's secretary, Rosemary Woods, claimed that she had inadvertently erased part of the tape, no one believed her. The gap became a smoking gun, became the butt of a thousand jokes, became a national symbol for everything the government was keeping from its citizens.

In 1973 people were ready to believe all sorts of things. Fed in part by Watergate, a general disinclination to subscribe to official accounts swept the country, reaching unprecedented levels. But that skepticism itself opened a gap that begged to be filled--if everything you knew was wrong, everything you didn't know was potentially the truth. People, masses of them, believed that the government had suppressed the facts about Unidentified Flying Objects and was concealing somewhere in underground vaults material proof of contact with otherworldly beings, who had perhaps crashed their vehicle in Roswell, New Mexico, two decades earlier. People believed that their plants responded to music and speech. They believed in astrology, numerology, and the secrets of the Great Pyramids. They believed in a thousand cults, ten thousand creeds. They believed you could cure your psychic ailments by reenacting the cry you emitted when you emerged from the womb, or by lying in silent and pitch-dark saltwater immersion tanks, or by undergoing hypnosis to uncover the nature of your previous incarnations, or by ingesting large quantities of psychedelic substances, or by renouncing all worldly ties and performing menial labor at the behest of some foreign elder who wore robes and spoke in gnomic riddles.

Or else they believed that the Chinese army was covertly assembling along the Mexican border, or that their activities were being watched and recorded by an agency that had harnessed the power of lenticular clouds, or that the nation had been traduced and suborned by shadowy forces that had purposely overthrown the gold standard, which everyone knew had been decreed by nature itself. They believed that common law gave citizens the right to organize militias and to prevail, by force if necessary, over judges who had in their opinion passed treasonous judgments. They believed they could escape the moral corruption emanating from the cities by moving with their kin and their comrades to remote rural communities, where they would plant their own groats and follow their own laws and dispense with money, synthetic fabrics, and plants of the nightshade family. They believed they could achieve success, the principal goal of life, by training themselves to discard emotional weakness and instead grab whatever it was they wanted without concern as to the consequences for anyone but themselves. They believed that agencies planted suggestive words and images in advertising that could only be apprehended on a subliminal level, such as the nearly invisible word "sex" filtered among the ice cubes in a tumbler held by a model.

People in 1973 were moving west and south in search of the sun and more unbridled lifestyles. They were shedding spouses, shedding family bonds, shedding traditional creeds, shedding neckties, shedding hairstyles, shedding everything that had previously held them fast. They sought pleasure, ferociously: frequent sex with as many different partners as possible, industrial

quantities of cocaine, endless drinks. They were the new people--not hippies, mind you, but enlightened citizens who worked to realize their full human potential even as they sold real estate. They weren't like their fathers and mothers, who were packed into gray suits and panty girdles and forced to trade hollow ritualistic phrases with their coevals at the country club instead of grabbing life by the horns. The 1973 people wore bright colors; the men let their hair come down partway over their ears and usually cultivated some facial patch as well, while the women carved theirs into aerodynamic helmets, the better to resemble popular figure skaters. They professed knowledge of Eastern mysticism; frequently they considered themselves to possess a philosophy of life. They attended vast hangarlike new churches; they attended consciousness-raising sessions; they attended key parties.

But then again you might have only been vaguely aware of much of this if you lived in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Or in a great many American towns, for that matter. To the time-traveler, 1973 in most of America looks more like 1953. The futuristic present exists mainly on TV and in magazines. The 1973 that is being hydroponically grown in cities and the more vogueish suburbs will arrive full force in most towns four or five years later. In Fond du Lac there isn't even a record store for your pot smokers to hang out in--Gene's Camera Shop sells a few platters, but you know Gene: he still listens to Tommy Dorsey. You won't find macrobiotic cuisine in a town where every other restaurant is a steakhouse, and where you can enjoy football-themed dining at a chain franchise owned by a couple of former Green Bay Packers. You're not likely to purchase burnt sienna bodysuits for men at Ahern's or Goranson's, where the clerks have been measuring the same inseams since the Hoover administration. But it's a resort town, which means that things do get a bit lively in season, and even off-season you can go gape at the go-go girls at The Other Place: "The Going Place in Fond du Lac," "Where Friends Meet." There certainly are a lot of places to get hammered, old-style: Bingo's, Brownie's, Cap's, Carol's, Chisel's, Dick and Ed's, Dick and Helen's, Don's, George's, Irish's, Leo's, Odette's, Pete's, Ray's, Red's, Rocky's, Joe's Fox Hut, Lloyd's Lazy Lounge, Punky's Tip Top Tap, Club 23, Club 41, Club Trio, and the list goes on. You can just about smell most of these places right through the page.

Fond du Lac 1973 is now a slightly different place than Fond du Lac actually was in 1973, because the past changes just as the future does. It is now a snow globe of itself, as expressed through the pages of an enhanced phone book: a place where businesses live by their mottoes, where people who hold telephone receivers to their faces are invariably smiling, where cartoon Scotsmen stand for thrift and creative flair is expressed via stylized script. In Fond du Lac 1973 things are under control. But there are hints the reality is a bit different. Cracks form in the ice on the lake. Things are hidden in the snowbanks that won't be found until spring. There are possibly disturbing things going on in the basement. You can't be certain. Do not rely on memory...