

Hello, Who's There?

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Ohio newcomers almost flood their pants upon first experiencing a high intensity Florida summer thunderstorm with its quick strobe-like lightning and deeply penetrating thunder. No one warned them the noise would be so sudden and loud, rattling the bones of the stucco-coated subdivision houses that they bought. They came here to relax in the sun and do the Disney thing with their kids and grandkids, not for this.

It's old Mama Nature at work. She says, "In Florida I will have the greatest number of thunderstorm days of any place in this country." Most of these storms occur along a wide belt running from St. Petersburg and Tampa, on toward Lakeland and Orlando, ending in Daytona Beach. Personally, I think these storms occur where they do because she wants to destroy that man-made monstrosity running along the same path, Interstate Highway 4.

The lightning often seems to strike right behind you, unexpected. A number of years ago we had teenage Czech visitors and had gone inside due to the heavy rain. A strike came close that afternoon. There was no warning, just instantly with a roaring BRRRAAAAACKKK. I always take a deep breath; we have so many like that. Our young Czech friends almost became Ohioans. Their eyes were big and jumpy, with heads tucked deep into their shoulders, tortoise-like.

Later, I went outside to check the pool water level. Hand-size pieces of concrete littered the pool deck. One plastic wheel on my old rusty but trusty Weber barbecue kettle was broken and blown off its little axle. The concrete chunks were from the pool deck, now with an edge portion missing, this noted after pushing aside the organic debris that endlessly works its way from the base of the nearby majestic camphor tree. The tree, with a 12-foot girth, has thick massive sky-reaching arms with rugged bark

mottled brown like a many times polished favorite old pair of dress shoes. My wondrous tree had large cracks running up branches to a height of 20 feet. It had been a close one.

Where we live in Tampa must be very prone to lightning strikes. We are on a high point, more than 50 feet above sea level. Amusing to you real mountain folk, huh? I did not buy the property for the view, but to avoid Florida's flooding.

Okay, a second story for you, to make you a believer. After we moved into our house, the neighbor across the street laid speaker wire up through the walls of his house and across the rafters, putting music into every room. Unwittingly, he had built a large lightning rod. It was an exciting summer thunderstorm day when the fire truck pulled up to put out a fire started due to a strike on his speaker wiring system. The shiny metal foil wallpaper near the music system made it even more attractive to the electrical discharge; it looked like darkened aluminum foil wrapped around a baked potato in the coals of a campfire.

We Floridians feel that something in those boiling clouds is hunting us, sending out electric tendrils to locate and bite. There may be magic in that jagged energy. Oh, laugh! It seems possible to us who have lived here for a while. I get a creepy feeling that the bogeyman in the sky will get me when least expected.

Hearing nearby thunder, I glance up nervously and walk faster, we all do. When fishing on Florida's bass-filled lakes in my small 14-foot jon boat, I don't think twice when thunderstorms build up. With the fish laughing at me, my head sticking up like a reclining sphinx's, I place my upper body flat with my seated legs and open up the throttle and go as fast toward shore as a 15-horsepower outboard motor can gallop.

A similar storm passed through five or so years after that first near miss. BRRRAAAAACKKK, very much closer than last time. Through the clanging in my ears and wild beating of my heart, I smelled smoke. I ran outside, ready to call the fire

department. The northeast wall was steaming and the stucco had fallen off. A strike in the neighbor's yard had jumped toward our house as a ball of electricity, rapidly losing its life yet trying to get one more thing before dissipating.

Inside was a large burn on the wall around the old-fashioned wooden crank-type telephone mounted on display between kitchen counter and bookcase. Mom bought it surplus for five dollars in the mid-1960s. She got three of them, one for each of us boys. These were the ones used in her old hometown of Pilot Grove, Missouri in the early 1900s. As I recall, she tried to locate the one from her family's house.

The wall needed repair. The outside would require a professional for the broken stucco surface; I could handle the inside. The old phone was undamaged, darkened paint around it and curled up wallboard paper. Loosening the screws to take the phone off the wall, the earpiece fell out of its supporting yoke. Replacing it, I heard a voice. *Strange, the front door is locked; no one else is here. Where was the voice coming from? It's coming out of the old phone! I'm out of my mind; must be something to do with the lightning strike.*

Listening, I heard two women talking about a church dinner. Then two men got on the subjects of farming and weather and new combines for sale. Young girls excitedly shared secrets about a cute boy.

Most of the people spoke English, often English with a slight accent, and others speaking German. *From where were they calling?* I picked up our regular touch-tone phone, also on the wall above the kitchen counter, but just the normal dial tone.

Listening again, a conversation between two older men.

"Have you seen the new Ford cars?"

"Yes, but there is no sense in buying a new one, the 1915 model is almost the same. I will buy one of last year's."

Did he say 1915? What is this? It can't be 1916. Is this some kind of Candid Camera sort of thing? Maybe if I rest a bit. No, I will cut the grass before the next storm; it grows so fast.

I didn't want to touch the phone again. Something was wrong. However, I can't leave things well enough alone and eventually moved slowly over to the old phone and tentatively touched it, moving the earpiece in its yoke. *Well, I'll just pick it up carefully. It's all in my imagination.* However, the voices were still there; the two young girls were talking about the cute boy. *I am out of my mind; I know it!*

Over the following days, I picked up the phone to listen. It provided insight into the past, the early 1900s, somewhere. My hunger for history, inherited from my father, got the best of me. I became addicted to the phone. Rushing home from work, I would sit for long periods, eavesdropping on what had been.

One voice was young, pretty and melodic, with a bit of a German accent. I liked to listen to her, to her laugh. She would often talk about her family, the things they were doing and activities in school and in the big Catholic church in town. What town?

Then, one day, after the other party hung up, she said, "Hello, who's there?" I didn't answer, even though she asked a number of times. I hung up.

I was insatiably drawn to the phone. Each time she was talking to someone, I sensed her listening. Then one day after finishing a call, she said, "I know there is someone there. Have the decency to answer me. Who are you?"

Surprised at myself, I answered. "Me."

"Well, that doesn't tell me much. Don't you know that it is impolite to pike a phone call? Lots of people do it and it really bothers me!"

"What is pike?"

"That's listening in on a private conversation."

"Actually, I was placing a call and I keep getting onto this line."

"Well, who are you? I don't recognize your voice. Do I know you? Are you calling from in town or outside of town?"

"Outside, I guess." I didn't know what else to say.

"Hmm, from Clear Creek? We have had a lot of trouble with calls from there since they joined the Independent Telephone Company here in town two or three years ago. Or, are you calling from Boonville?"

"No, from Florida."

"Florida! How is that possible? No one from Florida ever calls anyone in Pilot Grove, Missouri. I don't even know if we can call Florida."

Pilot Grove? This is really getting to be weird! "I honestly have no idea as to why I keep getting on your party line? I swear that this is the truth."

"What's your name?"

I blurted out, "John. What's yours?"

"Rosa Bock."

I gasped and started to cough. *This can't be! Rosa Bock is my mother! I was talking to my mother from 1998 and she was in 1916. She was only 15 years old. She died in 1985.*

"Are you OK?" She asked.

"Yes, I have a dry throat; the weather here is a bit dry now.

I couldn't tell her about the old phone and the lightning strike. She would think I was nuts. All I could do was talk.

She wanted to know about Florida. 1916 in Florida, what was it like? I had no idea. Mumbling a few things about swamps and palm trees and alligators and hurricanes, I said that I would talk to her again later. I had to find out something about life here in Florida at that time.

I located books about the early years here in Tampa and West-Central Florida. Armed with this information, I picked up the phone again. It was the two guys arguing about buying a new car or one from last year. Then, two farmers talking about a new type of seed corn. In addition, the two young chatty girls were there again, this time complaining about another girl and the cute guy. Rosa was not on the line. *Well, some other day.*

Now and then, I picked up the phone to listen. One day she was on the phone again; I waited. She said goodbye to the person she was talking to and said, "Are you there?"

"Yes. How have you been?"

"Oh, quite well. However, the ragweed pollen is quite bad now. I sneeze a lot"

We talked about Florida and Pilot Grove. I had some idea about life there, but just a little bit from stories that the old folks in my family had told. Most of us don't realize the value of finding out about our parents' lives, their families, towns and activities until they take that history with them. I am sure that she enjoyed hearing about Florida in 1916. Nevertheless, for me 1916 in Pilot Grove was just unbelievable.

"What do you for fun in Pilot Grove?"

"Oh, lots. At Heinrich's Mercantile, in town, there is a moving picture theater. They showed *The Perils of Pauline*. Have you seen them, the serials I mean? It was so scary when Pearl White was tied to a buzzsaw and then later placed on a railway track before an oncoming train! One of the ladies in town played the piano while the moving picture ran. But we don't go very often, it costs 15 cents for adults and 10 cents for children."

"No, I haven't seen it yet. But, that sounds exciting."

"On hot summer Saturdays we go in cars and buggies to Chouteau Springs to swim and have picnics. The water is really cold, less than 60 degrees, and it stinks like rotten eggs. Can you believe that some people think that it is good to drink it for cures?"

"That is strange, isn't it? We have the same kind of water in our deep rock wells in Florida."

"Oh, the businessmen and citizens in town are planning a Chautauqua for next year. Doesn't that sound great?"

"What's a Chautauqua?"

"You don't have them? They are so interesting. There are plays, talks by famous people, and readings by poets, and music for a whole week. People come from

all around to be here in Pilot Grove. There may be a thousand. It will be one of the biggest things ever in Cooper County.”

“Yes, now that you explain it, I know what a Chautauqua is.”

“But, I don’t want to talk about Pilot Grove. You have all kinds of animals in Florida, don’t you? I can’t imagine seeing an alligator. Moreover, I hear that people eat their tails. We had a cough medicine salesman come through here once wearing an alligator skin belt; he let us touch it.”

“They can be quite dangerous, but are generally afraid of people and move away.”

One day it seemed that we were pretty well talked out. “Well, Goodbye John. Hope we can talk again.”

“Goodbye Rosa, see you someday.”

“You mean you might come all the way from Florida?”

“Well, it is a strange world. You never know how things will work out.”

Hanging up, I realized I wanted to say something else. Picking up the phone, nothing. I pick it up now and then, nothing. I grab the handle and crank it so an electrical current is generated, making it ring, but nothing.

Well, someday will come, for her. For me, it is already gone. I really miss 1916. There was so much more to talk about.

When I was in my middle teens, my voice changed and got deeper. My mother looked at me one day in a very strange manner. I didn’t pay much attention to her then,

thought I was in trouble for something. Now I know; she recognized the voice. I recall her shaking her head, continuing to get supper ready for the family. Periodically, she would glance at me with that look. Dad would be arriving home soon. I would know what I had done wrong soon enough. However, nothing happened.