

Life Before 911

It was April, 1989, when William Shatner debuted as the host of a new TV series, “Rescue 911”. It was one of the first reality TV shows that focused on police, firefighters, paramedics, and ordinary citizens as they respond to real 911 emergency phone calls. This show, which aired for seven years, raised everyone’s awareness of the “new” way to get help in an emergency.

In our area, 911 was first implemented in the 1980s. That means that nearly half of the current population in our area does not remember life before 911.

Today when someone calls 911, it goes to a dispatch center at a local sheriff’s department. These dispatch centers have sophisticated, state of the art equipment for receiving calls and dispatching the proper emergency services.

Obviously with less technology years ago, it has not always been that way. Let’s take a look at how it used to be when someone needed to report a fire in the Columbus area.

For those of you who were around before 911 was implemented, there were local phone numbers that needed to be memorized or looked up in the phonebook to reach the fire department to report a fire or medical emergency. There was a different number to reach the police department. Here is a quiz for you... Do you remember what these numbers were? The answers are listed at the end on this article. No peeking.

Beginning somewhere in the 1960s, the fire phone was answered at Earl’s Café on E. James St. Earl Witthuhn and his wife, Norma, were the owners of the café. Earl was a captain on the fire department. The café was open 24/7 so there was always someone there to answer the phone calls. They had a fire phone in their home as well that could be answered there when they were not at the café.

From the café or their home, a button could be pushed to activate a fire siren (similar to a tornado siren) to notify firefighters of a call. Responders would not know what they had or the location of the emergency until they arrived at the fire station. There were two sirens, one to denote a city call and one for a rural call. This was the only way to alert firefighters at that time.

At a later date, in addition to the sirens, firefighters were notified by a “plectron” which was assigned to each person. This was an electronic device (before the advent of pagers) that was about the size of a small shoe box that firemen could carry with them. Once the plectrons were made available to notify firefighters, so as not to disturb everyone in the city during the night, the siren was not blown between 10:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m.

Calls were answered at the cafe until 1974 when the fire phones were moved to city hall. Calls to the fire department were answered in the city clerk’s office during normal business hours. At night, calls were answered by Ron and Marcella Steindl in their home on W. James St. They provided the after-hours answering service. On weekends, staff was hired to answer the calls as they came into the city clerk’s office. This arrangement lasted until 1990 when a dispatch center was established in the local police department.

911 first came to Columbus in 1987. Columbus was the first community in Columbia County to get 911 service as it was still a part of the 414 area code at that time.

Approximately 12 years ago, the local dispatch center at the Columbus Police Department was closed with all 911 calls now going to the Columbia County Sheriff's Department dispatch center in Portage.

The fire sirens and plectrons are long gone, having been replaced by pagers in the early 1980s that firefighters wear to receive emergency calls.

For the past seven years, our department has also used a phone app called IamResponding. It has many uses including showing additional dispatch information that does not come across the pager, and it allows firefighters to press a button on their cellphone to indicate that they are responding.

Many enhancements to 911 have been made over the years. Today, many calls to 911 are made by cellphones. Modern technology is able to pinpoint from where the cell call is originating.

The one down side to cellphone usage is that the signal will go to the nearest cell tower. There happens to be a tower just east of the city in Dodge County. If you call 911 from a cell phone in Columbus, there is a distinct possibility that the call will go to the Dodge County Sheriff's Department. But fear not, if your emergency is in Columbia County, your call will be immediately transferred to the Columbia County Sheriff's dispatch center who will dispatch the proper fire department, police department, or EMS.

The beauty of 911 is that no matter where you are in the United States, you only have to remember one emergency number, and it's Nine-One-One, not Nine-Eleven. Ask any first grader what number to call in an emergency, and they will all say 911.

In closing, I want to give credit to some "historians" who helped me with this article. They are retired fire chief Fred Dartt, retired fire captain Ray Grueneberg, retired city clerk Anne Donahue, Norma Witthuhn, and Joyce Shepard.

The answers to the phone number quiz... Fire Dept. was 623-5151, Police Dept. was 623-4141.