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THE WORST SWINDLERS:
How They Prey on Women

THE TELEPHONE BLACKOUT
in Portsmouth, Ohio

CITY OF SILENCE

How the people of Portsmouth, Ohio, fared during the 61 bitter days when no one could make a telephone call, no matter how urgent the necessity.

By EVAN HILL

Firemen arrived too late to save the house of Robert Nutter (right) and his aged parents near Portsmouth. Their telephone was dead because of the labor-management battle in the Ohio Consolidated Telephone Company.

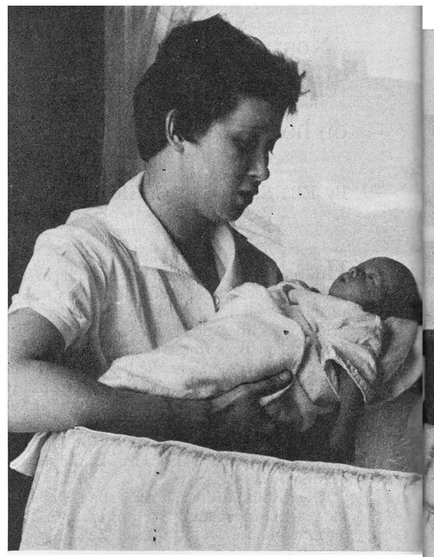
She was awake in her bed, listening now, automatically reaching for the husband who was a hundred miles away on business. She heard the twins toss in their cribs in the next room. Then it came again, the intruder's sound at the kitchen door, the soft slithering of metal against wood.

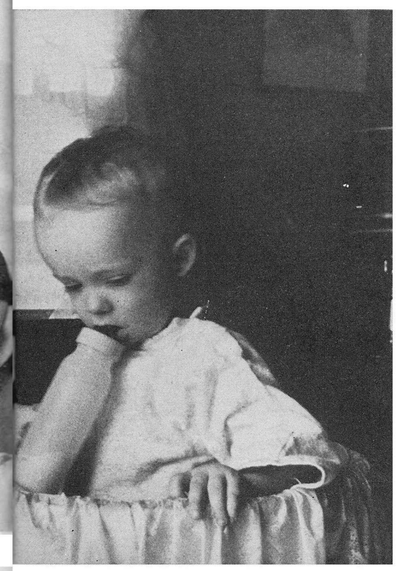
She padded downstairs to the telephone. "Police," she whispered even as she dialed. But there was no dial tone; the line was out.

For a moment she slumped against the wall, holding the dead phone against her side. Then she walked slowly to the front door and snapped on the porch light. Waiting there, her finger still on the switch, she heard the sudden silence at the back door, and then the soft tread of retreating feet.

Minutes later she crept into the kitchen, flicked the switch of the porch light, then tested the door. It was still locked. She dropped into a kitchen chair and waited for dawn. It was 1:30 A.M., October 16, 1956, in Portsmouth, Ohio.

A mile away at Smith-Everett Hospital a seventy-one-year-old man died in his sleep. A nurse pulled a sheet over his face and went to notify his relatives. But the telephone was out of order. Relatives were informed twelve hours later.





Mrs. William Kempton with her baby, who had to be delivered by a substitute doctor during the strike; her own could not be reached in time.

Strikers under police surveillance picket the Portsmouth telephone exchange. The often-violent feud dragged on from July, 1956, to February, 1957 over the issue of a union shop.

Supervisors who stayed on the job scurry into the exchange. A mob attack on emergency operators ended service altogether for 61 days.

At 7:30 that morning Larry Wear, a high-school senior, tried to telephone classmate Roger Pitts to get a ride to school. But the phone was not working. So Larry ran the block to Roger's house, to be told the Pitts' car was needed because their phone, too, was out of order. At home he begged the family car and drove to school. Both boys were late.

At 7:40 A.M. Mrs. Louis Glick dialed her niece to make arrangements for a Red Cross blood drive. The telephone was silent. She thought a party-line neighbor might have left a telephone off its cradle. "Marty," she said to her teen-age son, "go see who it is, will you?"

Marty sprinted next door, but it was not their telephone. Then he ran five doors away. But it was no use. All three phones were on the hook. The line was dead.

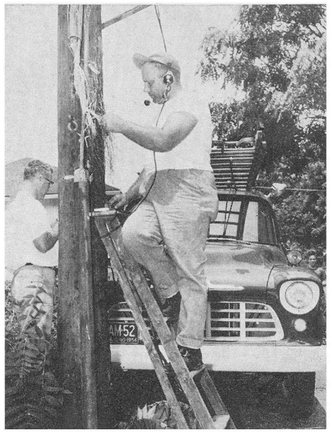
This was the morning that every telephone in Scioto County, Ohio, went silent. For sixty-one consecutive days 17,428 telephones did not ring, and approximately 110,000 persons in Southern Ohio and Northern Kentucky could not telephone for a doctor, a policeman or a fireman. For two months they were desperately, sometimes frantically, without a service that most Americans take for granted.

But in Portsmouth, an industrial county seat of 40,000, residents found themselves on the edge of disaster when their telephone voices were silenced by a bitter labor-management dispute.

Trouble had started July fifteenth, when the Communications Workers of America struck against the Ohio Consolidated Telephone Company after two months of futile negotiations. Most of the region's telephone users could sympathize with both sides. Only recently the General Telephone Company had acquired Ohio Consolidated, a company which for fourteen years had operated under a union-shop agreement. Now the new parent company proposed that maintenance-of-membership and no-strike clauses be included in the new contract. The union vigorously shook its head about both proposals, but it was the union-shop fight that was to prolong negotiations.

Townspeople shrugged. "You can't blame the company for not wanting a union shop," they said. "But you can't blame the strikers for wanting to keep it." And Portsmouth, a strong union city with its steel mills and railroad shops, respected picket lines and hoped for quick settlement while it used dial phones kept in operation by automation and supervisory personnel.

But a month later the strike was no longer an impersonal dispute; it was involving every householder, reaching into his home through the copper wires (Continued on Page 108)



A repair crew splices cut wires. Nighttime vandals knocked out 13,000 telephones by severing cables.

Goons set this supervisor's car on fire in a riot on October 11, just before the long telephone blackout.

City of Silence

(Continued from Page 33)

of his telephone. At night, vandals were chopping, sawing and burning telephone cables; utility poles were being axed down. Daytime repair crews were losing ground to nighttime saboteurs. Police were unable to make arrests and increasing numbers of residents were unable to use their phones.

On August sixteenth the company closed two small county exchanges because of violence. By September third there had been sixty-seven cable cuts; some lines had been slashed three times.

Twice police evacuated emergency operators from the main Portsmouth exchange, and both times the region of more than 600 square miles was completely silenced for three days. Each time the company reopened the exchange when protection was promised.

By October fifteenth vandals had slashed 290 cables. And that night a mob stormed the telephone building, smashing windows, hurling stones at the shadows of emergency operators. Police, unable to control the violence, recommended evacuation of the frightened supervisors, and the main switch was pulled again—this time for sixty-one days.

Within hours Portsmouth was on emergency footing, practiced in communications emergencies by its two previous three-day blackouts. Swiftly, twenty-three auxiliary policemen were deputized to patrol city streets all night in their private automobiles. Police call boxes, not used since radio had been installed in patrol cars, were examined for possible use. Four were still operable. Their doors were wired open for public emergency calls.

A police cruiser was rushed to Mercy Hospital, where it was parked at the curb. When nurses needed a doctor, an ambulance or a special drug, they ran outside, talked over the radio to police headquarters, where the message was relayed to patrolling city police, highway patrolmen or sheriff's deputies. Within minutes an officer was pounding on a doctor's door, waking a druggist to take him to his pharmacy or alerting an undertaker.

In police headquarters additional radio transmitters were stacked on desk tops and placed on the floor. They were tuned to highway-patrol headquarters a mile north; to the Norfolk and Western Railway yards; to the operator at the Yellow Cab office. Assistant chief Albert Bailey, an amateur radio hobbyist, brought in a transmitter that was used to send death notices to next of kin in Kentucky and West Virginia.

The Yellow Cab Company placed its twenty-one radio-equipped cabs at the disposal of the police. Some were used as cruisers; others were stationed at key spots to relay messages to headquarters.

Detroit Steel pulled a radio from a yard locomotive and lent it to the city for communication between the $100,000,000 plant and the fire department. An emergency at a blast furnace or an open hearth could involve hundreds of its 4200 employees.

The city's two radio stations, WNXT and WPAY, went on a twenty-four-hour schedule to broadcast emergency calls. Funeral homes moved ambulances to the police station, where their drivers waited to rush to an accident scene, and a Ford dealer stationed a wrecker there. City firemen joined police in burglar patrol. The General Hospital kept technicians on twenty-four-hour duty.

The Portsmouth Motorcycle Club and the Kustom Kouriers Kar Club—formerly the Hot Rod Club—volunteered to rush messages.

Additional state-highway patrolmen were assigned to the area; before normalcy returned to Scioto County, the patrol was to send in sixty extra men and forty additional cruisers.

And in all of Portsmouth only three telephones were in operation. One, in the lobby of the General Hospital, could ring a second instrument at the Yellow Cab Company by a direct, private line. The third, at police headquarters, spoke only to the four police call boxes wired open in the main shopping district. This was the emergency voice of Scioto County, a network that could mean life or death to more than 100,000 persons.

On the fifth day of the blackout the Portsmouth Times printed a sixteen-word front-page editorial: "Greater Portsmouth has been without telephone service for five days. Who's doing what about it?" The editorial was repeated on the seventh and eighth days of the blackout; then it disappeared. Portsmouth began to realize the area would be silenced for a long time. With calm urgency people made an adjustment that no one had ever thought would be necessary or possible.

The Portsmouth Times worked overtime to tell its readers how to protect themselves. Editor John G. Green published the routes of sheriff's cars and their arrival times at intersections. He informed them that if they turned on a porch light at night a police car or a taxi would stop to give aid.

Portsmouthites memorized the location and operation of the nearest fire-alarm box, the home address of doctor and druggist. But despite the magnificent co-operation that threw an emergency communications network around the crippled region, there were times when residents were in personal jeopardy.

Shortly after dawn on the tenth day of the blackout, Mrs. Samuel W. Lawrence, a twenty-six-year-old mother of three preschool daughters, felt the strong contractions that told her that her fourth child was arriving. Her husband was in Columbus, ninety miles away. She had no car, no telephone. She awoke a neighbor to care for her sleeping children and went out into the street, hoping to hail a taxi to take her to the hospital. But although cabs were cruising Portsmouth with the zeal of volunteers, now there was none for Mrs. Lawrence. In desperation she flagged a car. The two young men in it had been on an all-night drinking party. They frightened her.

One man got out of the car, urged her to enter and took her by the arm. She shrugged him off, but he persisted. Then Miss Irene Weisenberger, driving to work, saw the struggling woman and stopped. The man released Mrs. Lawrence and she was driven to the General Hospital. A fourth daughter was born that morning.

Another young Portsmouth woman might be alive today had a telephone been working. Eight months pregnant, she had been placed in a hospital because of possible complications. She improved, then suddenly she was worse. Typical of small hospitals, there was no house physician, and her nurses immediately sent for her doctor, who was out on house calls. It took two hours to locate him. He sped to the hospital, saw that surgery was needed at once and sent messengers to assemble an operating team. This took an hour and a half. A Caesarean section was performed. Both mother and child died.

An elderly man suffered a heart attack while exercising his dogs in the woods. He died while his companions drove him six miles looking for a doctor.

A youth was stricken by convulsions at school. Teachers drove him immediately to the home of the nearest doctor, but he was out on calls. The boy was taken to the hospital, but was dead on arrival. There is a possibility that he would be alive today if his teachers had been able to find out that the doctor was away and he had been taken directly to the hospital.

On Route 52 two cars collided and burst into flames. A passing motorist drove four miles for help, while only fifty feet from the burning autos was a useless telephone.

Meanwhile ninety miles away, in Columbus, Gov. Frank J. Lausche was meeting with members of the Portsmouth Voluntary Citizens' Committee for Law Enforcement and representatives of both sides of the dispute. The governor, then nearing the end of a placid but successful campaign for a United States Senate seat, lost his temper during the four-hour conference, and castigated both company and union. "The public should not have to carry the burden of your stubbornness," he told them.

Ohio Consolidated offered to restore service if employees were protected. The governor said he would send the Ohio National Guard to Portsmouth at the Citizens' Committee's request. But the committee declined, hoping that local law-enforcement officials would find a way to end violence.

The blackout continued. Two weeks later the Scioto County Medical Society warned that the county's blood supply was being rapidly depleted and might be exhausted in two weeks because donor groups were disintegrating. It demanded "quick restoration of a semblance of telephone service" before a disaster or epidemic overwhelmed physicians.

Later, Dr. Chester H. Allen said, "We are having deaths that could have been prevented, but too often we are not given the chance to see if we could prevent them."

In one emergency a doctor simultaneously dispatched three messengers to find a surgeon, and six Ladies Aid members to find a special-duty nurse for a man who had fallen thirty feet from a crane. But even so, aid arrived too late to save the man.

Along the hillside across the toll bridge that connects Portsmouth with Kentucky there is a scattering of houses built among the trees. These homes, too, were silenced, a part of the blacked-out region. Three nights before Thanksgiving Day, Mrs. Loyd Stone sat in one of those houses, tensely watching her two boys choking with pneumonia. Mrs. Stone's husband was away with the family car, and she sat helpless without a telephone. She and her mother watched two-year-old Gary and four-year-old Larry grow steadily worse. They needed a doctor.

Suddenly Gary was contorted by a severe fit of coughing. Mrs. Stone, who had given birth to a daughter only six days before, snatched up a coat and rushed into the night to find a car to drive her children across the bridge to Portsmouth. An hour later she returned alone;

Sometimes the only thing that keeps the human race going seems to be the lack of parking space.

IMOGENE FEY

she could find no one. At dawn the sleepless women found transportation to a doctor. The children recovered.

On Thanksgiving Day, Harm Medley became violently ill. It was two days before his wife, Clara, finally got him to a doctor. By then he was past the danger point.

Now residents began to pull fire-alarm boxes for other emergencies. One night two fire trucks and eight firemen rushed to a call-box alarm and found a pregnant woman standing there needing transportation to a hospital. In another alarm, firemen found that a family argument had erupted into a brawl. A neighbor had pulled the alarm to get police.

Normally 65 per cent of Portsmouth's fires are reported by telephone. During the blackout almost all calls came in through the city's 200 alarm boxes. However, the department's fire runs dropped to two thirds of normal. Fire chief Howard Kiebler explains, "The people were tense and on edge. They were careful. The potential was so serious that they had to become fire-conscious. And the radio stations and the newspaper helped by announcing safety measures."

Day after day, mothers, doctors and businessmen hoped to hear the startling jangle that would tell them their telephones were working again. But time swept into the forty-first day and the forty-second and the forty-third.

> We thought nothing of working ten or twelve hours a day when we were young. As we get older, we think even less of it.
>
> G. NORMAN COLLIE

Meanwhile, on November twenty-sixth, Governor Lausche asked a special session of the Ohio General Assembly for a law authorizing state seizure of struck public utilities, a measure designed to return the voice to Scioto County. But both labor and management opposed the measure. And legislators of both parties criticized the governor for calling a special session, saying the matter could wait until the regular session, almost six weeks away.

When committee hearings began, police chiefs of two Scioto County communities said they would not appear to be questioned on law enforcement during the strike. New Boston chief Fred Brown later changed his mind. But Portsmouth chief Hugh Rudity never did appear. Under intense public criticism for not being able to halt violence, he had already resigned, effective January first, in a move that came three days before his city manager was to make public the results of an investigation of police activities during the strike.

On November twenty-eighth, two days after the legislature had gathered in special session, the governor's bill was rejected 110–0 by the House. Legislators sped back to their homes, and the people of Scioto County continued into their seventh week of silence.

Now the business community was beginning to feel the pinch of local depression, but not so much as had been anticipated. In the seven and a half months of the strike, retail sales dropped an estimated 10 per cent. Dentists, hairdressers and repairmen, all geared to the telephone, were hit harder than most, for the others could revert more easily to systems used before Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone eighty years ago.

A contractor assigned two pickup trucks to run messages from one construction job to another. Russell G. Ketter, manager of the Merchants' Credit Bureau, assigned four of his office girls to twice-daily routes, where they walked twenty blocks servicing requests for credit ratings. One girl borrowed a bicycle and pedaled to her customers. The three others lost weight.

A scrap-steel dealer who normally uses four trunk lines temporarily moved his office to a motel room in Waverly, thirty miles away, because it had the closest telephone.

William A. Burke, president of the Ohio Stove Company, installed a mobile telephone in his station wagon, leaping by radio twenty-five miles over the muted zone to Ironton, Ohio. His shipping clerk, Paul Harrison, often drove a desperate Portsmouthite to the top of Reservoir Hill to make emergency calls from there rather than from the noisier downtown company parking lot. It was used by Portsmouth police, by a teacher adjusting the speaking schedule of an educator, by a father-in-law worried by the sparse words of a telegram telling him that his son-in-law had been burned in a New Mexico oil-well explosion.

Postmaster Frank E. Smith saw a 16 per cent increase in special delivery, a 10 per cent drop in parcel post. Western Union traffic doubled; four relief operators were added, and four additional delivery boys rushed messages by bicycle and automobile. During normal telephone times only one of every ten telegrams concerns an emergency; during the blackout 60 per cent of Portsmouth's traffic was business or personal emergency.

Every evening dozens of businessmen, housewives and teen-agers formed queues at the telephone booths in Waverly and Piketon, twenty-five miles from Portsmouth.

Housewives started making their shopping lists more complete and their memories more acute. They banded together, worrying about one another as well as themselves.

One young woman was concerned about three elderly ladies in her neighborhood because each lived alone, and if one fell or became ill, there was little likelihood of quick aid. She bought each a toy policeman's whistle and felt better, knowing that now there was less danger that one might lie with a fractured leg at the foot of the cellar stairs and not be heard.

The prolonged hush cut deeply into the incessant talk of the local teen-agers. Hour-long telephone gab fests were no longer possible. Some youngsters studied more; others simply went next door or down the street to visit.

But the parents suffered. A mother of two teen-age girls says, "When we didn't know they were all right, then we began to think there was something wrong. We couldn't telephone to find them. We were on pins and needles all the time they were out."

A father said, "We waited up for them when they went on dates. If they were late, it could have been a flat or simple forgetfulness. Or it could have been an accident."

Blond Karen Deist, a high-school senior, says, "It was just awful. The boys had to ask for dates two or three days ahead of time, but sometimes they forgot things. You know, like when they'd pick us up or what kind of a party it was, and things like that, and we just didn't know what to wear. It was horrible."

Two men, however, were relieved by the muted phones. They were Howard Baughman, high-school football coach, and George Heller, basketball coach. Both had losing seasons.

Social life did not suffer. There were still bridge games and cocktail parties, and family dinners on Sunday. But arrangements took just a little more time, a little more planning. Personal calls increased, and if no one was home, the caller returned or left a note that required an answer by another personal call or another note.

Then nine days before Christmas, phones jangled with startling shrillness at the Twin Motel on U.S. 23; in the police station; in a housewife's kitchen. The sixty-one-day blackout was over.

Two weeks previously, the Portsmouth city council had declared a state of emergency, authorizing city manager Robert E. Layton to call for National Guard troops if necessary, and permitting him to work city police more than forty hours a week. Immediately he started highway patrolmen teaching city police how to control riots.

Now the area around the Portsmouth exchange was sandbagged and barricaded, and Ohio Consolidated felt it could restore vital service. But only 4500 telephones were still connected. Cable cuts before and during the blackout had knocked out 75 per cent of the region's original 17,428 telephones.

But, fortunately, telephones rang at the emergency centers—law-enforcement agencies, the hospitals, most doctors' offices and the fire stations. Scattered business offices and private homes were also served by the remaining cables.

But even this minimum service was not to last. Three nights before Christmas a gray sedan stalled in the middle of a downtown street. It was more than sheer coincidence that it coughed to a stop over a manhole giving access to buried telephone cables. Next morning four more cables were found cut.

Again on January third vandals dropped into a manhole, and the instruments at three hospitals and at all law-enforcement offices went dead. These lines were restored immediately, but another 650 telephones had been scalpeled out of the city's nervous system.

Two days later airlines officials announced they would not start serving the new Scioto County airport until the strike was over and telephone service could be assured. On that day only 3500 telephones were operating.

The county had even less service at eight A.M. on January seventeenth, when the temperature stood at six below zero. That morning Robert V. Nutter, sixty-two, a night-shift yard conductor for Norfolk and Western Railway, was driving home to his eighty-seven-year-old father and his eighty-year-old mother.

"I saw the white smoke from Dry Run Road, two miles away," he says, "and I knew what it was." When he got to the rural, ten-room house, he saw fire gushing from the windows. His partially dressed parents were standing helpless in the snow; his mother was near collapse from shock.

There was nothing he could do. Already his father had shouted a neighbor awake, and the neighbor was now driving to the volunteer fire department. Nutter drove his shivering parents to his cousin's house. Then he spent four hours searching for a doctor to treat his mother, who even today has only a vague memory of the morning her house burned to the ground.

The Nutters' loss was mirrored an hour later on the Kentucky side of the Ohio when Mr. and Mrs. Clyde Duzan were burned out while neighbors tried desperately to drive to the fire department in cars that would not start in the bitter cold. Toby King, chief of the community's volunteer fire department, shakes his head in memory. "If we had been called only minutes sooner, we could have saved the Duzan house. But we weren't; there was no phone."

That night more cables were hacked through with an ax. Two days later thirteen vital telephones in Portsmouth's "Doctors' Row" were cut off. On January twenty-second, downtown Portsmouth was crippled after vandals crept into manholes and severed four huge cables, hacking their 12,000 pairs of wires in six places. A week later both Mercy and Smith-Everett hospitals were knocked out.

Scioto County residents had telephones, but only at the whim of vandals. For thousands the blackout was far from over.

On February sixth there were eleven new cable cuts, reducing the operating telephones in the county to 2500.

Then, on February twenty-third, when only 1700 phones were in service and Federal mediators were indicating their first optimism about strike settlement, vandals finished the job, plunging Portsmouth into its fourth blackout. Cable slashes cut off the main exchange. Every phone in the region was silent again.

The people of Portsmouth were as furious as they had ever been in the seven months of the strike, but the Federal mediator's optimism had been justified. Even as repair crews labored to bring the exchange back to life, agreement was reached at the conference table. The union yielded; it agreed to accept a maintenance-of-membership contract instead of a union shop. The company increased wages about five cents an hour, and both sides gave way slightly in accepting a modified no-strike clause.

Neither group was completely happy, but the people of Scioto County were released from the nutcracker that had squeezed them for 228 days. The strike was over. Thirty-seven repair crews began splicing slashed cables, and phones began to ring again in Scioto County.

For days the return of the telephones was the main topic of conversation. Some residents actually had forgotten their own telephone numbers; some, with childlike delight, talked to every friend they could reach. Others were frightened at the first ring, fearing its news might be tragedy. One housewife repeatedly called her husband at work because she had missed his telephone voice.

Today the voice of Scioto County is back, recovered from the hoarseness of disuse. Exactly what it cost 110,000 persons to be muted for so long is immeasurable. Who can say when a telephone could have prevented a borderline death? Who can place a yardstick on fright and tension? But the people know they want no more of it. Today it is a rare man in Scioto County who takes his telephone for granted. THE END