

We Didn't Know We Didn't Have Them

Bill Browning



Photo by Susan Pogany

Bill Browning is a retired small town doctor and rancher from Madison, Kansas. He reports being irked by the cell phone junkies we've all seen sitting together at a restaurant, both engrossed in their cell phones for fifteen minutes at a time, or worse, one hunched over the phone while the other stares vacantly into space. Reluctant to join that cadre, he was the last to buy a cell phone himself, simply in order to have a way to call for assistance—a need the following story will underline. He treats his trac flip phone solely as a call-out device, and seldom turns it on. He reports having had 700 unused minutes on the phone before this story begins.

I have apparently lost my cell phone. It might have fallen out of my pickup at a friend's Tuesday evening and I fear his German Shepherds might have chewed it up or eaten it. Being without it has gotten me to thinking about how things were for people out in the country and especially out here on the edge of the Flint Hills before we had cell phones.

The first time I remember getting stuck, I was a boy, my grandfather was driving and we high centered on a rock out in the pasture. It's the closest I know my grandfather ever came to cursing. We walked a mile and a half home. A few years later when I was big enough he sent me out to pry that rock up, break it into pieces with a sledge hammer and throw it in a ditch. I was very careful around my grandfather after that.

While I was finishing up my medical training—1975—my wife and I came out with another couple for a weekend at the ranch and in the afternoon caught a bunch of crawdads in the creek, just to see how they would taste. On

the way out of the pasture I drove into a ditch, causing Jennifer's head to break the windshield, and leaving a swatch of her hair hanging from the crack. Jennifer was very unforgiving about this.

As the radiator was also cracked there was a three mile walk home. And finally the crawdads had spilled and we could not find them all. The Dodge never smelled the same. I cannot recommend crawdads.

Thirty years ago we ran out of gas at the Big Spring. The fuel gauge was broken. That was a full five mile walk home for four of us. A cold December day, my son being only eleven at the time.

It must have been twenty-five years ago that someone pulled up in our drive and began to pound on our door at two AM—a scary time for that. I phoned my sister's house before going to the door so as to have a line open in case there was trouble. My brother-in-law answered and said to send the door-pounders the half mile down to their house, that they knew all about it. It seemed a drug dealer had been driving around out in the hills and possibly had imbibed too much of his product and had freaked out and fled into the pastures, finally driving his car off an embankment. After walking at least four miles he had found my sister and brother-in-law's, and they had let him use their land line to call for his friends who, lost, were at my door. In spite of our reassurances to him, the perpetrator was fretting that the red lights of distant radio towers to the west were really fast approaching squad cars.

We heard there was quite a search for the car and that the dealer and his buddies even rented an airplane to look for it. This was late summer and I thought I had a good chance to find it during my fall quail hunting, hoping thereby to come into what must have been a trunk full of drug money. But it was coyote hunters who finally came across it in late winter.

A few years later the purported drug dealer was killed in a shootout with the KBI over east of Madison in a rancher's driveway.

It's probably been twenty years ago, a summer afternoon, that I was out in the pasture afoot to get the horses in when I heard someone yelling in our yard. A man and a boy, I saw. "Thank god we've found you. You've got to take us to Cassoday." To get to my house they had to pass my sister's. Either nobody was home or they hid. I wish I could have. Cassoday is a 50 mile round trip on some bad gravel.

Back when this situation occurred with some frequency we called these people "walk-ins". Some of them had walked a long ways. West of my sister's house it is more than 12 miles to the next place. These people could be tired, lost, or desperate. Here I had all three. And worse, the guy said I had to take him back to his car (with two flat tires) because he had forgotten to lock it up.

Oh, wow! Some of these walk-ins, when they find you, it's like some exhausted sinking swimmer—they won't let go of you and you know you're their only hope—and you are not happy about it. So I drove them back out to their car—about six miles and way off the road. It was obvious that they had been trespassing on the neighbor's, where they were planning to fish.

On the way back out of the pasture I mentioned hopefully that they might get someone to take them home to El Dorado if I could get them to Madison. "Madison," he said learning where he was. "I know someone in Madison," he let slip. I pounced. Preston Pierce was home and sort of remembered "Jim" and that's where I took them. Sorry, Preston.

The next time I saw Jim and his son was about a year later. I was quail hunting with my Brittany and walked up over the pond dam where they were trespassing and fishing on our place without permission. So this was my reward for giving them my time and transportation. It is only with the benefit of the retrospection of all these years that I can imagine the threatening aspect I must have presented. Here he was fishing out in the middle of nowhere when all of the sudden an angry man pops up

over the pond dam with a 20 gauge shotgun in hand. That was the last time I saw Jim.

Maybe fifteen years ago I ran across an old man (the age I am now) two miles from our home. He was hopelessly stuck. Madison Township was doing a major overhaul on road 370; it had rained a lot and the project had turned into a quagmire. The old guy was in a truck pulling a long trailer. You've seen those trailers that have stalls for horses, kennels for field trial dogs and a living space for humans. There he was in the middle of the road, frames buried in the mud and because I found him, his problem instantly became mine or else I would be a bad person.

Obviously our Ford 8N tractor could not help here and nothing else on our place stood a chance. He climbed in with me and off we went. The neighbors who had the right size tractor were not home and no one else this side of town had the muscle to move that size rig. When we got to town poor Bob Cox was home. With the Township's backhoe and maintainer he could surely take care of it. Sorry, Bob.

Perhaps the episode that would have been most changed by access to a cell phone was in 1981. I was horseback at 5:00 pm repairing water gaps (where the fences intersect draws they are subject to washouts) after a big rain. Loping up a hill, my horse suddenly did a front somersault—a trick we had never practiced. Although I managed to fling myself out of the stirrups and saddle it was only to find myself on my back watching his accelerating rump smash down on my lower torso. He was unhurt. I, however, had too many broken bones to crawl away. A cold rain fell much of the time during the next six hours as I lay there. As my core temperature began to slide into the early stages of hypothermia, finally down to the 95 degree range, I began to have the violent shivering that is typical of that state. You probably have never witnessed such a shaking but with broken bones it becomes a sufferer's indelible memory. Oh, for a portable communication device.

Bill's wife, Jennifer, realized that he was not getting back home from fixing water gaps on time and it was getting dark, so she started calling people for help. The local bars cleared out with people coming to look for him. "One of the celebrants stopped to drain off a little beer — when he stepped out of his pickup he could hear me yelling 'Larry!'

'Bill!'

'Don't drive over me!'

Bill reports that he had broken some ribs, suffered a shattered pelvis and a broken lateral process from a lumbar vertebra. That was a time when a cell phone would really have proved its utility.