

Listen Clear, All of You Future

By Art Buchwald

A great deal has been written about the man who invented the telephone. But very little has been said about the first man to tap one. As everyone in law enforcement knows, the telephone is absolutely worthless unless you can find out what the people on each end of the line are saying.

The man who gets full credit for having tapped the first telephone line anywhere in the world is J. Edgar Soosa, a young agent in the Justice Department during President Ulysses S. Grant's administration.

Soosa was not only a dedicated law enforcement officer but a whiz at electronics. He believed that when fighting crime, domestic and foreign, you had to use every weapon at your disposal. It was thanks to Soosa's determination and skill that anyone can now tap a telephone in this country without fear of detection or retribution.

This is what happened: In 1875 Ulysses S. Grant was

finishing out his term of office. Grant was hoping to run again in 1876 but he was worried about his political enemies whom he believed were everywhere. One in particular was an Alexander Graham Bell, a Scotsman who worked in Boston. Someone at the White House had told President Grant that Bell was working for the election of Rutherford B. Hayes. (The aide actually had confused Alexander Graham Bell with a Boston politician named Arnold Choate Bell, who was a big Hayes supporter.)

President Grant called in J. Edgar Soosa and told him, "This is very confidential but I want you to go to Boston and find out what Alexander Graham Bell is up to.

"When you get the information, I want you to report directly to me. Use any method you have to as long as you get results. If you get caught I'll see that you get an executive pardon."

Soosa, who was used to following orders, immediately proceeded to Boston. He discovered that Alexander Graham Bell was working with deaf children which

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obviously was a cover for his real job, which was to get Rutherford Hayes elected president.

Bell lived in a boarding house with an assistant named Thomas A. Watson. Soosa rented a room in the same house under the name of Zimbalist.

When both Bell and Watson went out one day, Soosa broke into their rooms. He discovered a series of wires going from one room to another. They were connected with strange-looking speakers. His curiosity was aroused. Why were Bell and Watson communicating by these wires when their rooms were only 100 feet apart? It was obvious that they were afraid that if they were in the same room together they might be overheard.

Soosa reported his findings back to President Grant, who became terribly perturbed. "We have to know what they're saying to each other," he said.

Soosa agreed. "I've been thinking about it. If I could attach a wire to their wire and have a speaker in my room, I could record everything they say."

"Then do it," Grant thundered.

"There's only one problem," Soosa said. "It may be

illegal. I'm not sure you can attach a wire to somebody else's wire and listen in."

"Dammit," said the irritated President. "The national security of the United States is at stake. I want to know what they're plotting."

Soosa went back to Boston and attached a wire to Bell and Watson's. All during winter he sat with earphones on his head, but the line was dead. Then finally on the morning of March 10, 1876, Soosa's patience was rewarded. Over the line he heard Bell shout, "Mr. Watson, come here, I want you."

Soosa immediately took the tape to Washington, D.C., and, while Grant sat drinking a whisky, the agent played back the immortal words.

Grant smiled. "Just as I suspected. They were out to get me. Mr. Soosa you have made a great contribution to your country. In years to come every president will owe you a debt of gratitude and say, 'Thank God for Soosa, who made the first wiretap possible.' Without you, sir, the telephone wouldn't be worth a damn."

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