

THE TRUTH BEHIND THOSE 9999 NUMBERS
by Mark Bluebox

Once upon a time, I was talking to one of my favorite friends, one of the nation's oldest and most experienced telephone enthusiasts -- some might refer to him as a phone phreak. In this particular conversation, he mentioned to me that I might want to experiment with a series of 800 numbers: exchanges starting with 9, followed by the suffix 9999 (800-9xx-9999). And so I did, and a whole new world began to open up in front of me.

They were mostly weather and time numbers in various locations throughout the country. And since these were 800 numbers, there was NO CHARGE! One number in particular was of a great deal of interest to me and many others. This was 800-957-9999, which hooked up to WWV, the radio station operated by the National Bureau of Standards that does nothing but tell the time and give shortwave reports. This is the most accurate clock in the entire world! You either have to tune to WWV on the shortwave receiver or dial 303-499-7111 in Fort Collins, shortwave enthusiast, I don't have to tell you how convenient this was for me. Unfortunately, it got too convenient from too many people.

I guess I made the mistake of giving the former president of a large amateur radio club in the Dallas area. He, in turn, printed it in the Amateur Radio Newsbulletin where thousands of people probably saw it. Another statewide newbulletin picked it up and printed it. Through an amateur radio news network which this bulletin was a part of, the news got as far as California.

One day, I called up the West Link Amateur Radio News Service at 213-768-7333. (This is a service located in West Link, California that broadcasts news over amateur radio, VHF, UHF, etc.) Their latest report had this little item: "Speaking of interesting things, the National Bureau of Standards has got a very convenient time number for those of you that are not constantly at a shortwave receiver. You can dial 1-800-957-9999 for WWV. It's just another good toll-free service for us to use." The avalanche had really begun now.

The West Link report was heard on bulletin stations all around the world and, apparently, one station in Nashville, Tennessee broadcast it. From there it fell into the hands of one of the writers for the DX program on Radio South Africa! I happened to be listening to the program where they were talking about pulling in distant time stations, weather station, etc. He then mentioned, "For those of you that live in the United States, a convenient toll-free 800 number has been provided by the National Bureau of Standards for WWV and that number is 1-800-957-9999." Imagine my surprise! Once again, the number had been broadcast all around the world. People in many, many nations now had that number. Of course, the number only worked inside the United States, but the word was being spread by shortwave and QSL people everywhere.

The number was getting swamped. Needless to say, it was busy much of the

9999NUM.TXT

time. A government official, who also had this number, thinking that it was legitimate, called up WWV and complained. He told them that they needed to add some more lines to their new 800 number. The general manager of the station said, "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know of any 800 number that gets you WWV."

The government official told him what the telephone number was. The general manager called it and heard his own station. Astounded, he contacted the Mountain Bell Telephone Company in Denver, Colorado. They said, "You're not paying for any 800 in-WATS number. We show 303-499-7111 for WWV, but we don't have any 800-957-9999."

Mountain Bell checked it out and sure enough, the number existed but not on their records. No one was getting charged for this! Now, of course, you know a monopoly as well as I do -- they're sure not going to let anyone have a free ride. So they told the WATS coordinator to find out what happened. He finally made the discovery that some technicians had hooked that number up for transmissions testing. [These switching technicians are toll technicians, AT&T Long Lines switching technicians, and carrier systems technicians. In other words, they're the group of people who link switching centers together, from New York to Los Angeles, for example. In this case, the whole escapade was a kind of group effort. The switchmen and the carrier people got together and set up this number for testing, finding noisy carriers with cross-talk on them, etc.]

The WATS coordinator told them they'd better get this number off -- too many people knew about it. He told them to erase every 800 test line that was on the system. Not surprisingly, someone also got chewed out very severely.

So, consequently, 800-957-9999 is no longer in existence. But since then, less than two weeks later, several of the 800 test numbers have begun to defiantly reappear. Check around, you'll probably find a few interesting ones. But I doubt if WWV's brief stint as a toll-free service will ever be repeated. <>

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