

corrected it. I called them up for the third time today and instead of checking they just got mad. Well, that gets me mad. I mean, I do try to help them. There's something about them I can't understand -- you want to help them and they just try to say you're defrauding them."

It is Sunday evening and Joe invites me to join him for dinner at a Holiday Inn. Frequently on Sunday evening Joe takes some of his welfare money, calls a cab, and treats himself to a steak dinner at one of Memphis' thirteen Holiday Inns. (Memphis is the headquarters of Holiday Inn. Holiday Inns have been a favorite for Joe ever since he made his first solo phone trip to a Bell switching office in Jacksonville, Florida, and stayed in the Holiday Inn there. He likes to stay at Holiday Inns, he explains, because they represent freedom to him and because the rooms are arranged the same all over the country so he knows that any Holiday Inn room is familiar territory to him. Just like any telephone.)

Over steaks in the Pinnacle Restaurant of the Holiday Inn Medical Center on Madison Avenue in Memphis, Joe tells me the highlights of his life as a phone phreak.

At age seven, Joe learned his first phone trick. A mean baby-sitter, tired of listening to little Joe play with the phone as he always did, constantly, put a lock on the phone dial. "I got so mad. When there's a phone sitting there and I can't use it... so I started getting mad and banging the receiver up and down. I noticed I banged it once and it dialed one. Well, then I tried banging it twice...." In a few minutes Joe learned how to dial by pressing the hook switch at the right time. "I was so excited I remember going 'whoo whoo' and beat a box down on the floor."

At age eight Joe learned about whistling. "I was listening to some intercept non working-number recording in L.A.- I was calling L.A. as far back as that, but I'd mainly dial non working numbers because there was no charge, and I'd listen to these recordings all day. Well, I was whistling 'cause listening to these recordings can be boring after a while even if they are from L.A., and all of a sudden, in the middle of whistling, the recording clicked off. I fiddled around whistling some more, and the same thing happened. So I called up the switch room and said, 'I'm Joe. I'm eight years old and I want to know why when I whistle this tune the line clicks off.' He tried to explain it to me, but it was a little too technical at the time. I went on learning. That was a thing nobody was going to stop me from doing. The phones were my life, and I was going to pay any price to keep on learning. I knew I could go to jail. But I had to do what I had to do to keep on learning."

The phone is ringing when we walk back into Joe's apartment on Union Avenue. It is Captain Crunch. The Captain has been following me around by phone, calling up everywhere I go with additional bits of advice and explanation for me and whatever phone phreak I happen to be visiting. This time the Captain reports he is calling from what he describes as "my hideaway high up in the Sierra Nevada." He pulses out lusty salvos of M-F and tells Joe he is about to "go out and get a little action tonight. Do some phreaking of another kind, if you know what I mean." Joe chuckles.

The Captain then tells me to make sure I understand that what he told me about tying up the nation's phone lines was true, but that he and the phone phreaks he knew never used the technique for sabotage. They only learned the technique to help the phone company.

"We do a lot of troubleshooting for them. Like this New Hampshire/Missouri WATS-line flaw I've been screaming about. We help them more than they know."

After we say good-bye to the Captain and Joe whistles him off the line, Joe tells me about a disturbing dream he had the night before: "I had been caught and they were taking me to a prison. It was a long trip. They were taking me to a prison a long long way away. And we stopped at a Holiday Inn and it was my last night ever using the phone and I was crying and crying, and the lady at the Holiday Inn said, 'Gosh, honey, you should never be sad at a Holiday Inn. You should always be happy here. Especially since it's your last night.' And that just made it worse and I was sobbing so much I couldn't stand it."

Two weeks after I left Joe Engressia's apartment, phone-company security agents and Memphis police broke into it. Armed with a warrant, which they left pinned to a wall, they confiscated every piece of equipment in the room, including his toy telephone. Joe was placed under arrest and taken to the city jail where he was forced to spend the night since he had no money and knew no one in Memphis to call.

It is not clear who told Joe what that night, but someone told him that the phone company had an open-and-shut case against him because of revelations of illegal activity he had made to a phone-company undercover agent.

By morning Joe had become convinced that the reporter from Esquire, with whom he had spoken two weeks ago, was the undercover agent. He probably had ugly thoughts about someone he couldn't see gaining his confidence, listening to him talk about his personal obsessions and dreams, while planning all the while to lock him up.

"I really thought he was a reporter," Engressia told the Memphis Press-Seminar. "I told him everything...." Feeling betrayed, Joe proceeded to confess everything to the press and police.

As it turns out, the phone company did use an undercover agent to trap Joe, although it was not the Esquire reporter.

Ironically, security agents were alerted and began to compile a case against Joe because of one of his acts of love for the system: Joe had called an internal service department to report that he had located a group of defective long-distance trunks, and to complain again about the New Hampshire/Missouri WATS problem. Joe always liked Ma Bell's lines to be clean and responsive. A suspicious switchman reported Joe to the security agents who discovered that Joe had never had a long-distance call charged to his name.