By Jim Langham

If there is anything that reminds me of my age these days, it is the sense of an "impersonal world" created by technology and the structure that accompanies all of the services available these days in the world around me.

Recently on a Saturday morning, I had a simple question about whether or not an office was open on the weekend in an area business.

I dialed the main number, at which time I was given 10 options to call in order to receive the answer to my question. In addition, number 10 gave eight other options if needed, all of which produced recordings that weren't even close to the answer I needed.

Finally, somehow, my attempts actually reached a "real live person" who transferred me to another office that was supposed to be able to answer my original question. The receptionist in that office, however, told me I had been given the wrong extension so she transferred me to another person who told me what number to dial to get my answer.

"At last," I thought, until that number actually turned out to be the original "live person." This time, she decided to "try something else" to get me to the office I was inquiring about. At this point, the search had been going on for over 20 minutes.

This time, the extension was correct. I received a recording that put me on hold for "few minutes" only to finally be told that the office would be closing in two minutes, the computers had already been shut down and I would have to call back on Monday to receive the answer to my question.

What a contrast to a time earlier in my life when Joyce and I and 3-month-old Julie were traveling along Interstate 80 in Pennsylvania after visiting relatives in New Jersey. On a hot July afternoon, we had stopped for some snacks. When I tried to drive away from the station, my transmission began to race and to my chagrin, would only respond to "reverse."

Thanks to a motor club card, I was towed 15 miles to a service center that agreed to search and replace the transmission if I could come up with cash necessary to replace it. In our young marriage, I didn't have any credit cards and we were certainly traveling home with far less cash than necessary to replace a transmission.

Bewildered, I did the only thing I could do. I called my parents in Berne, Ind., for advice on how I could be rescued from what seemed like a hopeless situation at the time.

Immediately, the personal touch of small town assistance kicked in. Thankfully, there was a Western Union office located right next to the repair service. It was 7 p.m. and our local bank in Berne had been closed for two hours, but my parents knew the banker. They called him and he opened the bank to make it possible for them to retrieve the needed cash and immediately send it to the Western Union Office.

Thanks to that favor on his part outside of office hours, we were rescued, the transmission was replaced late that night and the next morning we were on our way home.

Aside from that, I think of the little personal touches available in the world I was raised, how I would receive letters from church camp friends as a child mailed to, "Jimmy Langham, Geneva, Ind." Nothing else was required and the simple-addressed envelope was delivered to our home.

Of course, there were disadvantages to such a simple world, such as the party line telephone. Those of us from the era can still remember asking the person we called whether or not they had seen Bob and having six people listening on the line respond by saying, "I saw him at the grocery store a half hour ago."'

But it was admittedly nice to pay bills directly at a local business where we were "Harold, Elnora or Jim," rather than a 12-digit number.

A few months ago, I was reminded once again that such times are as many decades behind me as my age. I had forgotten to mail in a bill at a certain time so I decided to take advantage of the 800 number given on the billing slip to pay by phone.

For the novelty of it, I had decided to keep track of the numbers I would be told to punch into my cell phone before successful payment would be acknowledged. There was the original 10-digit number of my phone, the numerical responses to several questions, my Social Security number (for security purposes), and the amount I wanted to pay. Then I waited for the billing number in acknowledgment of my payment.

From payment to completion, there had been 67 numbers involved in a transaction that once involved a nice chat and a cup of coffee at the small business where we paid our monthly bill.

While I know maintaining a personal touch in a world that is exploding in population is next to impossible, I still prefer to be known as Jim rather than IY3750482TT438. Hopefully the day will never come when the heading on this column changes from "Homespun by Jim Langham" to "Column number 3826284029-RY3-1119."