

Billing Blues



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→ Robert E. Horseman, DDS

ILLUSTRATION
BY CHARLIE O.
HAYWARD

I remember the red gingham oilcloth on the kitchen table. (Oh, no! Not another nostalgia piece! What’s up with this preoccupation with the Old Days? — *ed.*)

Sorting through the bills stacked before him on the first of every month is my father, wearing the same frowny expression he uses when checking the dipstick on our Ford Model A.

“For Services Rendered” ... “What the #**@* does that mean?” I hear him fuming audibly from three rooms away where I am busy solving basic quantum physics problems with my No. 2 Erector Set.

“Ernie! Please — not in front of the children,” my mother, who resembles an early version of June Cleaver, only without the pearls and sling heel pumps, gently admonishes from her position at the kitchen sink. She is busily engaged assembling tuna casseroles to ship to starving Armenians who eventually have to file protests with the American Embassy in Yerevan.

My father always felt that “For Services Rendered” was a vast conspiracy — right or left, he wasn’t sure which — to cover up charges for things that never happened. When a justification of the charges was eventually wrung from the guilty party submitting the bill, he would triumphantly shout to my mother, “Well, why in the #*&\$!# didn’t they just say so!”

I wonder how Pop would react today, some 75 years later, as I scanned the 10-page billing I received from Verizon Wireless (motto: More bars than Bourbon Street and the Las Vegas Strip combined). Somehow, during that length of time, federal and state edicts have convinced companies to delineate on paper every transaction, real or imagined, initiated or received during the last month with surcharges for especially annoying ring tones.

Sensing this may arouse customers to revert to the less expensive two-cans-on-a-string technique, or even limit sharing their most vapid thoughts with others,

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DR. BOB, CONTINUED FROM 902

utility companies have defensibly taken to ratting out the government. This is like the petroleum industry that suggests the real cost of a gallon of gas is only 4 cents, but state, county, city, federal, and galactic taxes have unconscionably boosted the cost of a gallon to rival that of a Ritz-Carlton cheeseburger.

Not our fault, they demur, then proceed to list throughout the voluminous bill that comes with a thoughtfully provided return envelope with the little square cautioning the post office will not accept your money without a stamp that changes price about as often as airline

fare, except that never in recorded history has the price of a stamp ever gone down. Oh, sorry! The list — well, here's just a few on Verizon's bill:

- Package residence line charge
- Interstate subscriber charge
- Federal excise tax
- Funding to support the Public Utilities Commission (note: The PUC does not count as a dependent on your 1040 IRS form.)
- 911 state tax (I thought that was New York)
- Temporary surcharge as allowed by the PUC (that was placed 150 years ago)

■ California relay service and communications devices fund

■ California Teleconnect fund surcharge

Rounding off the first section is the California High Cost Fund-A and the Federal Universal Service fee. In between a couple of those ambiguous charges are the CHCF-B and the CASF charges, but they are 9 cents combined, so are obviously a bargain only a cheap-skate would dispute.

Nobody knows what any of these entries represent. This is supposed to be a telephone bill, not an unabridged history of telephonic communications! However, this is the answer to people like my father who disliked the "For Services Rendered" distillation. These items are not to be questioned unless you want to be placed on hold for 30 minutes because "your call is important to us."

A little further down the list, almost hidden behind the "Inside Wire Maintenance charge," is a conciliatory line stating that I am blessed with "unlimited ZUM." I don't know what this is, but apparently Verizon has lots of it. I think I would have recalled if somebody in a position of authority had asked me if I wanted ZUM, to which I would have replied, "No, thanks, I just had ZUM."

The point is, if you have any influence over the person issuing your monthly dental statements, I urge you to see if you can get away with the return to the simpler "For Services Rendered." Chances are you won't get any more complaints than for a listing of No. 14, PFM crown, high noble, porcelain margin, occlusal staining, Septicane surcharge, RDA's optional Starbuck's in-house lunch fund.

You might want to try this on the insurance companies first; they are always looking for ways to streamline their operation. ■■■■