

Later that evening Gilbertson finished telling me how delighted he was at the flood of blue boxes spreading throughout the country, how delighted he was to know that "this time they're really screwed." He suddenly shifted gears.

"Of course. I do have this love/hate thing about Ma Bell. In a way I almost like the phone company. I guess I'd be very sad if they were to disintegrate. In a way it's just that after having been so good they turn out to have these things wrong with them. It's those flaws that allow me to get in and mess with them, but I don't know. There's something about it that gets to you and makes you want to get to it, you know."

I ask him what happens when he runs out of interesting, forbidden things to learn about the phone system.

"I don't know, maybe I'd go to work for them for a while."

"In security even?"

"I'd do it, sure. I just as soon play -- I'd just as soon work on either side."

"Even figuring out how to trap phone phreaks? I said, recalling Mark Bernay's game."

"Yes, that might be interesting. Yes, I could figure out how to outwit the phone phreaks. Of course if I got too good at it, it might become boring again. Then I'd have to hope the phone phreaks got much better and outsmarted me for a while. That would move the quality of the game up one level. I might even have to help them out, you know, 'Well, kids, I wouldn't want this to get around but did you ever think of -- ?' I could keep it going at higher and higher levels forever."

The dealer speaks up for the first time. He has been staring at the soft blinking patterns of light and colors on the translucent tiled wall facing him. (Actually there are no patterns: the color and illumination of every tile is determined by a computerized random-number generator designed by Gilbertson which insures that there can be no meaning to any sequence of events in the tiles.)

"Those are nice games you're talking about," says the dealer to his friend. "But I wouldn't mind seeing them screwed. A telephone isn't private anymore. You can't say anything you really want to say on a telephone or you have to go through that paranoid bullshit. 'Is it cool to talk on the phone?' I mean, even if it is cool, if you have to ask 'Is it cool,' then it isn't cool. You know. 'Is it cool,' then it isn't cool. You know. Like those blind kids, people are going to start putting together their own private telephone companies if they want to really talk. And you know what else. You don't hear silences on the phone anymore. They've got this time-sharing thing on long-distance lines where you make a pause and they snip out that piece of time and use it to carry part of somebody else's conversation. Instead of a pause, where somebody's maybe breathing or sighing, you get this blank hole and you only start hearing again when someone says a word and even the beginning of the word is clipped off. Silences don't count -- you're paying for them, but they take them away from you. It's not cool to talk and you can't hear someone when they don't talk. What the hell good is the phone? I wouldn't mind seeing them totally screwed."

The Big Memphis Bust

Joe Engressia never wanted to screw Ma Bell. His dream had always been to work for her.

The day I visited Joe in his small apartment on Union Avenue in Memphis, he was upset about another setback in his application for a telephone job.

"They're stalling on it. I got a letter today telling me they'd have to postpone the interview I requested again. My landlord read it for me. They gave me some runaround about wanting papers on my rehabilitation status but I think there's something else going on."

When I switched on the 40-watt bulb in Joe's room -- he sometimes forgets when he has guests -- it looked as if there was enough telephone hardware to start a small phone company of his own.

There is one phone on top of his desk, one phone sitting in an open drawer beneath the desk top. Next to the desk-top phone is a cigar-box-size M-F device with big toggle switches, and next to that is some kind of switching and coupling device with jacks and alligator plugs hanging loose. Next to that is a Braille typewriter. On the floor next to the desk, lying upside down like a dead tortoise, is the half-gutted body of an old black standard phone. Across the room on a torn and dusty couch are two more phones, one of them a touch-tone model; two tape recorders; a heap of phone patches and cassettes, and a life-size toy telephone.

Our conversation is interrupted every ten minutes by phone phreaks from all over the country ringing Joe on just about every piece of equipment but the toy phone and the Braille typewriter. One fourteen-year-old blind kid from Connecticut calls up and tells Joe he's got a girl friend. He wants to talk to Joe about girl friends. Joe says they'll talk later in the evening when they can be alone on the line. Joe draws a deep breath, whistles him off the air with an earsplitting 2600-cycle whistle. Joe is pleased to get the calls but he looked worried and preoccupied that evening, his brow constantly furrowed over his dark wandering eyes. In addition to the phone-company stall, he has just learned that his apartment house is due to be demolished in sixty days for urban renewal. For all its shabbiness, the Union Avenue apartment house has been Joe's first home-of-his-own and he's worried that he may not find another before this one is demolished.

But what really bothers Joe is that switchmen haven't been listening to him. "I've been doing some checking on 800 numbers lately, and I've discovered that certain 800 numbers in New Hampshire couldn't be reached from Missouri and Kansas. Now it may sound like a small thing, but I don't like to see sloppy work; it makes me feel bad about the lines. So I've been calling up switching offices and reporting it, but they haven't