



# Party Line

*As it had been in former times, so I founded, I made it;  
as it had been in ancient days, so I exalted its summit.*

Issue 10, Spring 2025



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Thanks to our public telephone hosts G. Upshaw, xnor, Anonymous, Sou'Wester Lodge, Landline Creative, Saluthaus, Sebastian Noack, J. Mejía, tishbite, Anonymous, Microcosm Publishing, M. Hansen, and Ghost Mountain. Thanks to our other telephone hosts Right To Dream Too, Upright Brewing, Bottles and Cans, and Ground Score Association.

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# Support Futel!



Futel is made possible by volunteers and contributors, who we thank!

Support us by subscribing on Patreon, buying Party Line issues 1-9 from Microcosm Publishing, or making a donation, see our website. Futel is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

Installation host? Contact us. Hacker? See repositories. Artist? We can help you implement your ideas in this exciting new format.

Email operator@futel.net, or dial 0 from any Futel phone.

**MORE IMPORTANT THAN  
ANY MATERIAL THING**



## Image Credits

Front cover, puzzles: Fiona Bearclaw  
Map: Mathew Lippincott  
p11, p16: Pest  
p22: Microcosm  
Back cover: Kwad Damage

# Ten Years of Futel



In 2014, we stuck a phone in the ground to see what would happen. In the ten years since then, we've put more phones in and taken some out. We've answered calls, helped people and been helped. We've had interesting conversations, listened patiently to some people and hung up on others. We've dug holes, ground off frozen bolts, sanitized handsets, and picked locks. We've experienced things coming down the line that we can't explain. And most importantly, we've continuously provided free telephone calls and telephone-mediated services.

What is Futel's future? Nobody knows, but we're doing at least some things right, so we will continue.



# New Phones!



Futel crosses east of 82nd Ave! NE Brazee W of 108th. Installed with support from an East Portland Action Plan Community Support Fund Grant. (971) 293-2956.



SE Clinton just W of 27th.  
(503) 212-6803.

42nd Ave S north of Myrtle,  
Seattle. (425) 243-1894.



## Logic Puzzle

Futel operators have to field a lot of calls. Some are fun and quirky, others strange or serious. In this game, try to match the callers via their location, the operators who took their call, the questions asked and answers given. Names have been changed to protect the innocent and guilty.

The caller who asked "what are these for?" didn't call from Cesar Chavez, and was told either "art or whatever" or directed to use the menu and call. The Ypsilanti caller, who wasn't answered by nxor (who just hung up), was either told "it's as close to the portal as possible" or "I don't".

The Sou' Wester caller was interested in the Druid. The Druid was true neutral to the caller. The Saratoga caller was told "art or whatever".

The five callers are: The one responded to by thit sebi. The one who was told "I don't". The one who asked "why is this here?", and wasn't hung up on. The Ainsworth one. And the one who's call was taken by H. Mannes, who either answered for the question "what are these for?" or "where are you?".

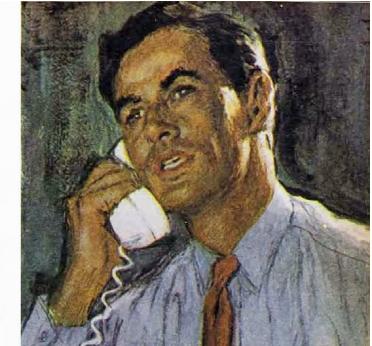
Ypsilanti asked "how do you make money?" Their call was taken by Arson Danklar or T. Ticpoplimm, the other took the call from Cesar Chavez.

T. Ticpoplimm & H. Mannes answered "art or whatever" and "it's as close to the portal as possible" in some order.

Callers	Answers	Questions	Operators	Questions	Answers
Saratoga	close to the portal	why is this here?	Arson Danklar	who is the druid?	thit sebi
Cesar Chavez	whatever if it's portal	how do you make money?	T. Ticpoplimm	what are these for?	nxor
Ainsworth	interested for art or whatever and call menu	where are you?	H. Mannes	where are you?	I don't
Sou' weste	close to the portal	why is this here?		close to the portal	art or whatever
Ypsilanti	they just hung up.	close to the portal		use the menu and call	I don't
	I don't	they just hung up.		they just hung up.	they just hung up.

We got a report about a temporarily disabled Futel phone from a Multnomah County Library administrator, who wrote, "I was checking the Futel phones closest to Woodstock library, as I want to make sure if we refer patrons for assistance, that the expected outcome happens." Thank you to Multnomah County Library workers who are going to great lengths to support our community, and everyone who has reported on the conditions of Futel phones.

**SOMEONE  
HAS TO SAY  
SOMETHING**





Futel installed a free "pay" phone on our lot and it is one of the most used in their network. Yesterday after power cycling it, a passerby shouted over a boombox "They get that fixed?! OH SHIT YEAH!!" -Microcosm Publishing



## Year in Review



2024 was a hard year for us, but let's not dwell on that because 2025 is going to be a hard year for everybody. We persist.

- An article about us appeared in Street Roots. We love Street Roots.
- Party Line #9 was published, available from Microcosm Publishing.
- People went to ToorCamp.
- Three new public phones were installed, in Seattle, on SE Clinton, most importantly on NE Brazee, our first east of 82nd.
- An East Portland Action Plan Community Support Fund Grant provided support for the NE Brazee phone.

Usage for the year included:

- Over 15,000 outgoing calls from a dialtone
- 1,020 calls to the incoming line
- 363 selections of the most popular Church of Robotron sermon, "The Doctrine of Error"
- 347 joins to the voice conference
- 141 calls to the Phone Losers of America from the directory entry
- 89 plays of Longmont Potion Castle
- 84 calls to the mayor of Portland (70 to Detroit's, 28 to Ypsilanti's)
- 72 calls to the Druids of Sisyphus Gardens
- 59 calls to 833-NATR-XXX from the directory entry
- 26 calls to the Dark Fiber - be careful in there!
- 22 calls to our apology service, an homage to the Apology Line



# Operator Log Excerpts

Answering operator calls can be very random, and it can be annoying, but also very fulfilling. Logging those calls is sometimes not what operators are good at, but here are some.

**2024-02-22** What is Futel? You're talking into a Futel phone right now. Yeah, but what does it mean? Why don't you use the phone to find out?

**2024-03-25** Caller reported that the Ghost Mountain handset was busted, for which I thanked them.

**2024-04-21** Caller was a young person. I think they thought I was a robot? They just said "play Taylor Swift" over and over. I told them my name is not Alexa, and that I am a human being. But they only wanted to hear Taylor Swift, so I asked them to teach me a song and I would sing it. They sang me a few bars of Look What You Made Me Do, and I tried to sing it back but they weren't satisfied. So I told them they should sing it and I would beatbox. "Okay," they said, "but are you going to interrupt in the middle?" I promised them I would beatbox through the entire song, and I did. We sang the whole thing together on the phone. I told them they made my day, and they should call the Futel operator any time they need someone to beatbox for them.

**2024-04-27** Caller wanted to know why the 8 and 9 buttons don't do anything. Verified that the phone buttons themselves are working. there's just no menu options for 8 or 9 I guess? Thanks for trying all the buttons tho!

**2024-04-27** Caller reported issues with the Ghost Mountain and Microcosm phones. I commiserated about how long the Microcosm phone had been down

and explained that the lock was jammed and I had to break in. Caller thanked me for providing the phones and told me they haven't been able to afford their own phone.

**2024-05-07** Caller asked for the number of a specific emergency room, they lost their insurance ID number and this was the last place it had been used.

**2024-05-09** What is this? Do you need an operator? What is an operator? I am an operator.

**2024-05-28** The connection is clicking on & off in a funky rhythm! Caller didn't seem to notice it on their end. Tried to find a number for caller's friend, but google didn't have it.



# Sole Survivor on the Streets of Portland

We announce without joy that the only public telephones, pay or otherwise, on the streets of Portland are now operated by Futel. If you can't use a Futel phone, you will have to enter a building and go to Union Station, or a hospital lobby, or find another solution. There are probably other indoor locations, surely one remains in the airport, but the knowledge is esoteric. There used to be lists of payphones out there published by geeks like us, but they're so scarce now, nobody can bear to maintain them.

The last collection out there was at MAX stations, each of which had a payphone, but the contract ended and TriMet wasn't willing to pay enough for a maintainer. The corpses of WiMacTel still litter the city. Rumors can be chased in the suburbs. On the streets of Portland, only Futel survives.





©Color by Klimbim

protest times. A sculptor replaced it with a large bust of York, who participated in the Lewis and Clark expedition as a slave. It was a beautiful and powerful work and was eventually destroyed by a white supremacist group. The sculptor didn't reveal himself until afterwards, when that would further the work and the preservation of its motivation. The work stood for itself. I think that's how every truly successful creative person operates. They make the thing and put it out there - and that's the work, not just the creation, but getting the creation into people's experience. Sometimes it gets into people's heads, and sometimes it doesn't, but they just do the work without knowing the outcome. Then they do it again and again, knowing that any particular effort might succeed, and it might not.

## Status Report

So why all this talk about myself and my feelings? Because Futel is a mature project. Ten years! And because I'm not a mature artist, or director, or handset cleaner, or whatever I am. I'm the one who writes the rants. It's a good way to be, even for someone this old. Can we get to the status report yet? Nobody knows the status of Futel. I am the person most immersed in it and I have no clue. It does a lot for many people, including us, the people who do the work. I can't tell you where Futel will be in the future. I don't think I have those qualifications, I'm someone who thinks running a free payphone company is a good idea. But today it is doing well. We will see more problems, and possibly further essays in the first person, for which I apologize in advance, but we will continue.

**2024-05-21** Caller recited a stupid joke which did not amuse me.

**2024-06-18** Caller needed to know how to make a call.

**2024-06-18** Caller asked how to make a call, I told them. Caller had been doing that but "every time I try I get some kinda weird prayer line".

**2024-07-14** I'm at a baseball game, you will have to speak up. I just wanted to say you guys were awesome and thank you. You're welcome.

**2024-08-08** Caller asked for the number for the Rose Haven shelter.

**2024-08-11** Caller said they were a pay phone collector from Milwaukie, OR and were interested in helping out with Futel and maintaining phones. Operator took their name and contact information.

**2024-09-09** Caller asked how to make a call to a friend.

**2024-09-17** Caller told me that people being called had trouble hearing them and that calls were being cut off after around 30 seconds.

**2024-09-24** Caller asked what year it was. I told them 3000 B.C.

**2024-10-12** Hello, the microphone is broken and I don't think I can hear you, it will be fixed.

**2024-10-14** Hi, is this Futel? Yes. What's the point? You will have to figure that out, good luck.

**2024-10-30** I told caller if they could hear the Operator's voice they should say "Bag O' Crab" into the mouthpiece. Caller hung up.

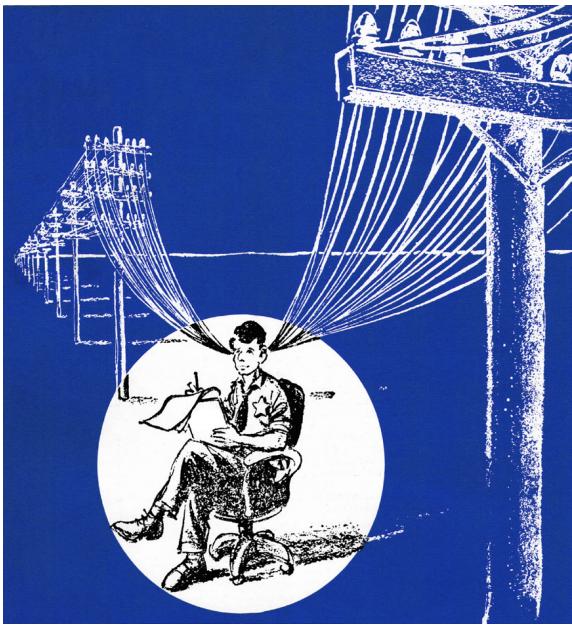
**2024-11-07** Caller asked for the number of a drop-in mental health clinic. The clinic only had a web form for contact, no phone information. Caller asked for the number for Call To Safety, which I provided.

**2024-11-23** Another Futel Operator, testing the repair of a smashed handset. Victory declared, pleasantries exchanged.

**2024-11-23** Silence, but did not hang up. Malfunction? I asked them to try their call again.

**2024-11-23** Explained the dial-1-for-outside-line thing to a grateful caller.





**2024-11-26** Caller is loud and wasted. Asks: do I have any tits? Do I have any dicks? Do I have any tits and dicks? Sorry buddy, the Futel Operator has no tits or dicks for you at this time.

**2024-11-30** FYI: i answered an operator, pressed 1 to accept, but then heard the main Futel payphone menu. I dialed 1 for an outside line & got a dialtone. From there i tried 503-HOT-1337 but got a busy signal. So dunno whats up with that, but maybe some misconfiguration.

**2024-12-02** Caller asked for the police non emergency number. Electrical installation across town is causing heart problems for people.

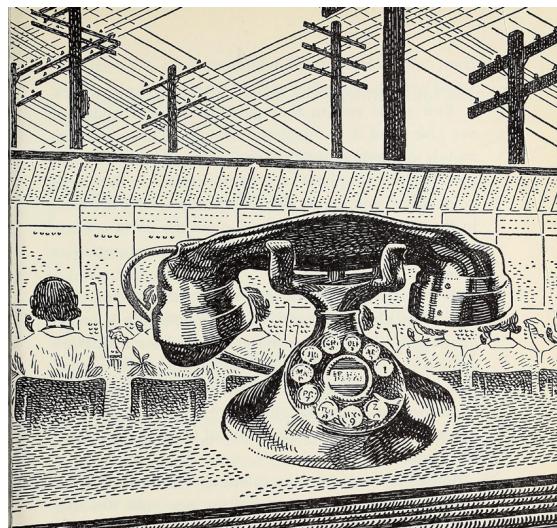
**2024-12-02** You say you would like to make a call, but you're not sure what number to press?

**2024-12-07** Caller needed to report a natural gas outage to DTE (Detroit something Energy). Found the number.

**2024-12-10** We are sorry. An application error has occurred. Goodbye.

**2024-12-21** Caller asked how to make a call to their mom without charging it. I told them to hang up and dial at the dialtone. Caller said that their mom wouldn't want to accept a collect call. I explained that it was free. Caller said "thank you operator" very sincerely.

**2024-12-21** Caller reported that the Ghost Mountain phone was broken. I told them about the hassles I was going through and that I was having a hard time getting 6 my shit together to fix it.



and destroying a larger number of the people around us than before, and with greater horrible consequences. So I feel like apologizing for talking about myself. Whatever, everybody's life shrinks. It's just that mine is being reevaluated for me, and that's relevant to Futel.

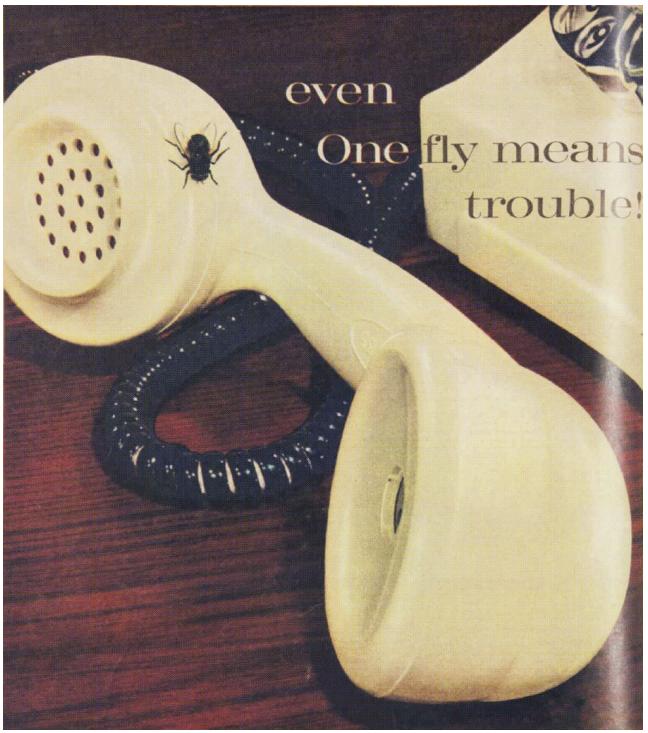
The good thing about an established system, one that has a nonprofit board or that people depend on for wages, is that it has a lumbering inertia. Enough people need it to stay the course that the influences are reinforced, and the issues in one person's head can stay there. A term for this is "bus proofing", in that the endeavor can survive any one person being hit by a bus and killed. A process run by mad people is much more dependent on the zephyrs of their thoughts.

The project was so much more powerful as a faceless entity. When we were just putting down payphones and not telling anyone what we were doing, we blended in with the institutions that actually run our lives. By now the telecom companies are processes that are generated by the environment, and the individual carriers are like eddies in that weather pattern. We could just show up and do our thing and hide in the scenery. Futel wouldn't exist without that kind of agility, of course, but the drawback is that we have to reveal ourselves and communicate like humans sometimes, because that's what we are and how we live.

Maybe this is a sign of my immaturity as an artist and the maturity of the project - the bad kind of maturity, the kind that signals that growth and change has stopped.

There's a plinth on Mt. Tabor that glorified a statue of a historical evil Portland white man until it was knocked down during the Black Lives Matter





and someone started calling to me. Of course, I ignored them, but they caught up to me and told me that they had seen a talk I had given about Futel and how glad they were that the project existed. They made an effort to communicate that to me on the street. It was a real reward!

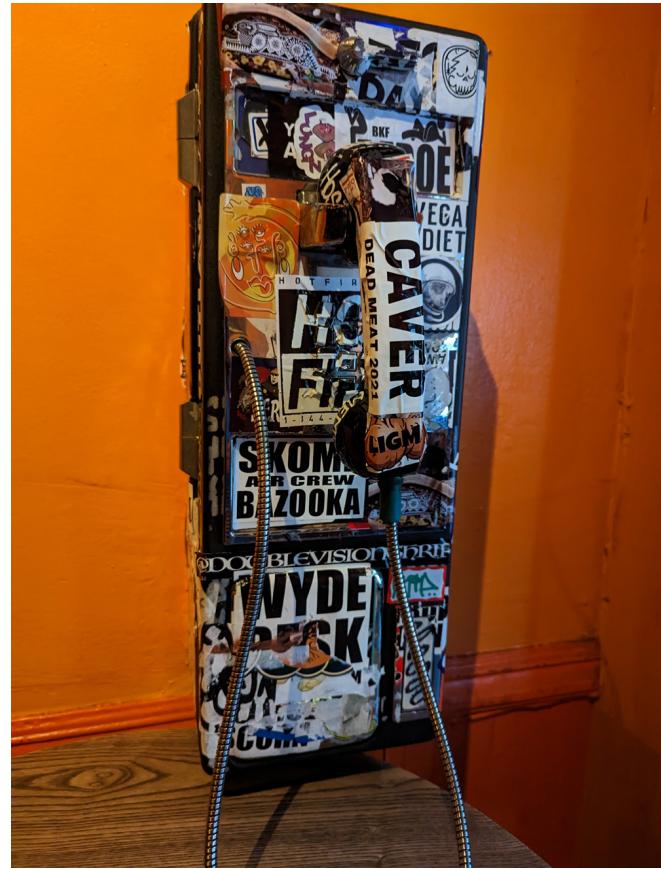
There is community. We have an identity, we are the people making the project work. We belong to something and we can point to it.

And there's also the ability to just do the work, the effort itself. It keeps us alive. I often joke that projects keep me from committing suicide, and it's true! I'm not going to kill myself, but I'm going to find something to do instead, and this is one of them. I don't think anyone else on the project feels that way, but having the capacity to expend that effort is our privilege. We do the work and figure out the effects. The work itself is part of the feedback. Then we can decide whether to keep doing it.

The problem with these benefits is that they're all in our minds. It's a completely ad-hoc effort to fulfill an imperative without much rationalization. It seems to be positive for us and it fills a role for the community. But all of these reasons are internal. We rationalize them in our own heads, and feedback from other people is like glimpsing shadow puppets on the wall of Plato's cave. It can all get driven away. I was so excited about having this project survive for ten years. Then I was stricken by events, experienced a minor traumatic brain injury, my family got shaken up, a close next-door neighbor died. Large parts of my life were swept away, some of them came back, others didn't.

Complaining about personal issues with being alive isn't going to be interesting. Everyone has problems, many more than I do, and as an operator I speak to 18 Futel users who seem much worse off. And the current fascist push is abusing

## Death of the Payphone



Payphone continues its secondary purpose of collecting and displaying stickers. They started creeping over the parts that previously needed to be kept clear, and now the layers will accrete until the whole thing is a barely recognizable blob.

This one isn't even a bad thing. It's in a San Francisco Mission bar, so microscopic particles from my body are in there, along with those of many others. It's a repository of culture. And soon enough the entire thing will get pried off the wall. No archaeologist will scrape off and view the stickers, they will vaporize in the smelter. All the words that passed through it, the vibrations, electrons, the spit and breath, they only exist in the minds of we who are still thinking about them. And those minds will also eventually cease to convey. This device, this structure, it's memorialized here, also temporarily. Probably these words are being read on a printed zine, a page which will decay and get recycled. Memento mori.

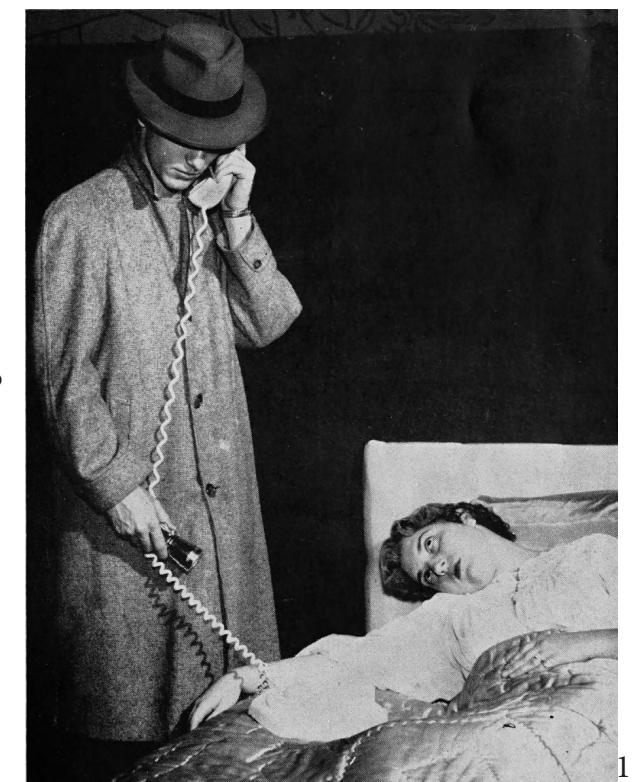
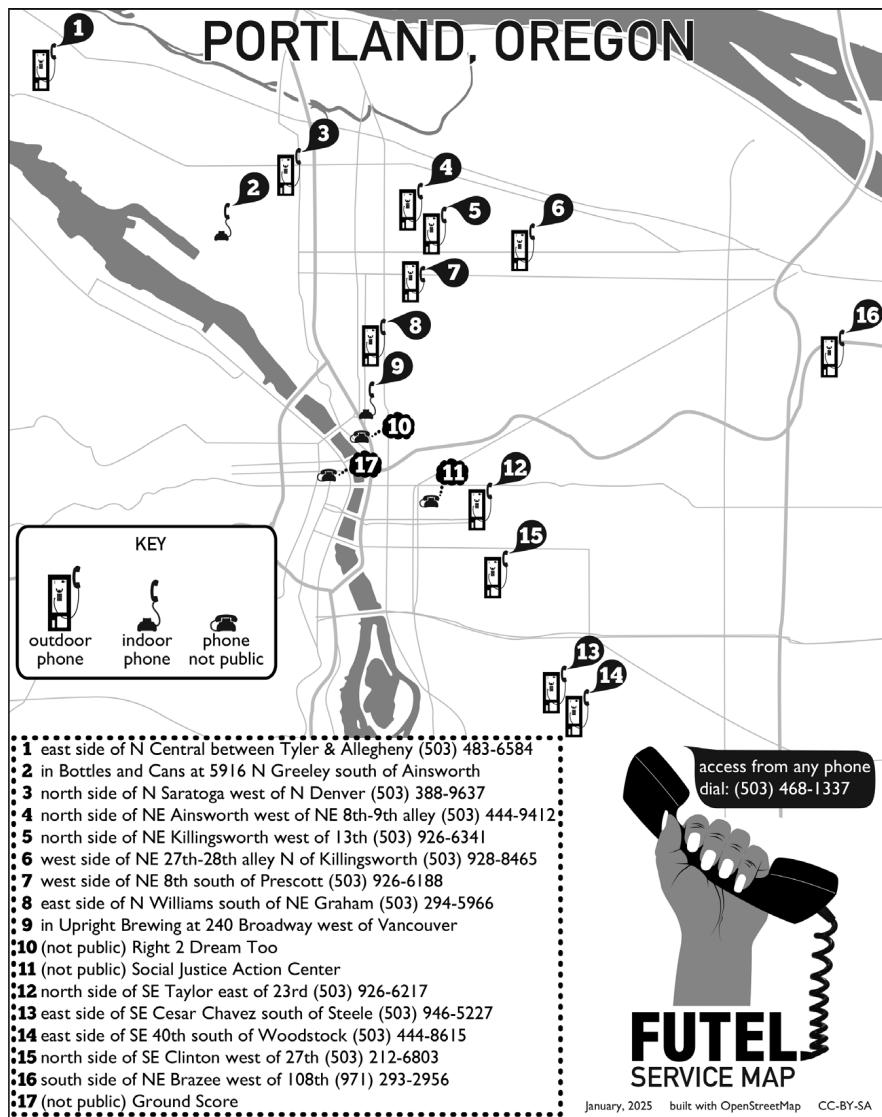
## The Challenges and Rewards of Running a Telecom Empire

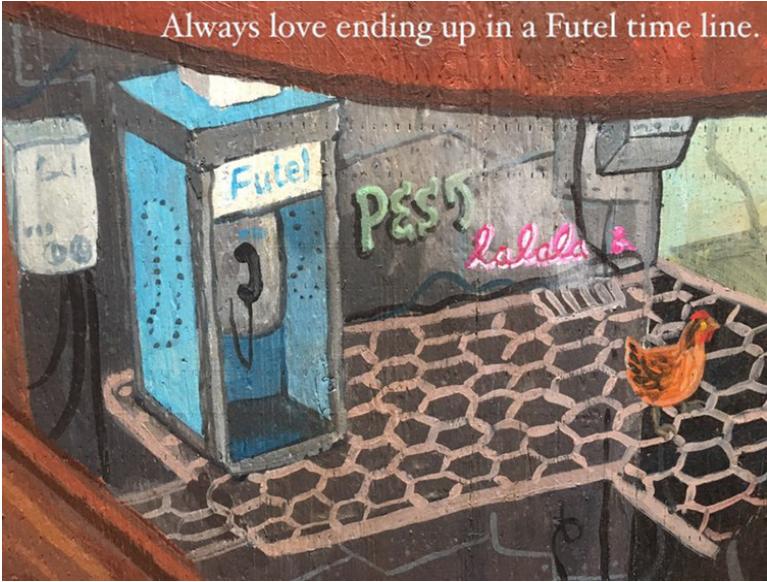
It's also getting harder to ignore the personal aspects, and there will always be times when maintaining a human life and family will get in the way of running a phone company. There has been a lot of solitary work, many rewards but many periods in between them, and in general a large amount of rejection, failure, and doubt. It usually isn't worth mentioning because any worthwhile project will involve those, and complaining isn't interesting unless it's entertaining or educational.

I've written a lot about Futel, and it's all been true, surprisingly, but it's always been about the collective project. I've maybe acknowledged the challenges, but those have always just been an environment to continue to exist in. It's been worth it, otherwise it'd be kind of stupid to be doing this work for ten years. Futel is run by volunteers. What do we give? Time, money, supplies, and stress, or at least hassle. What do we get? Everyone gets something, or we wouldn't be doing this.

There's the knowledge that we are doing good. This is not some handwavey thing, we all need to know that we are worthwhile.

There's the knowledge that we are creating something which is being experienced by others. I've talked to random people who knew what the project was before I explained it to them, and it is an interesting experience to know that I have some small effect outside of my immediate reach. This can sometimes turn into direct social rewards like recognition, having another human take the time to say that they appreciate something. I was walking down the street in Old Town years ago



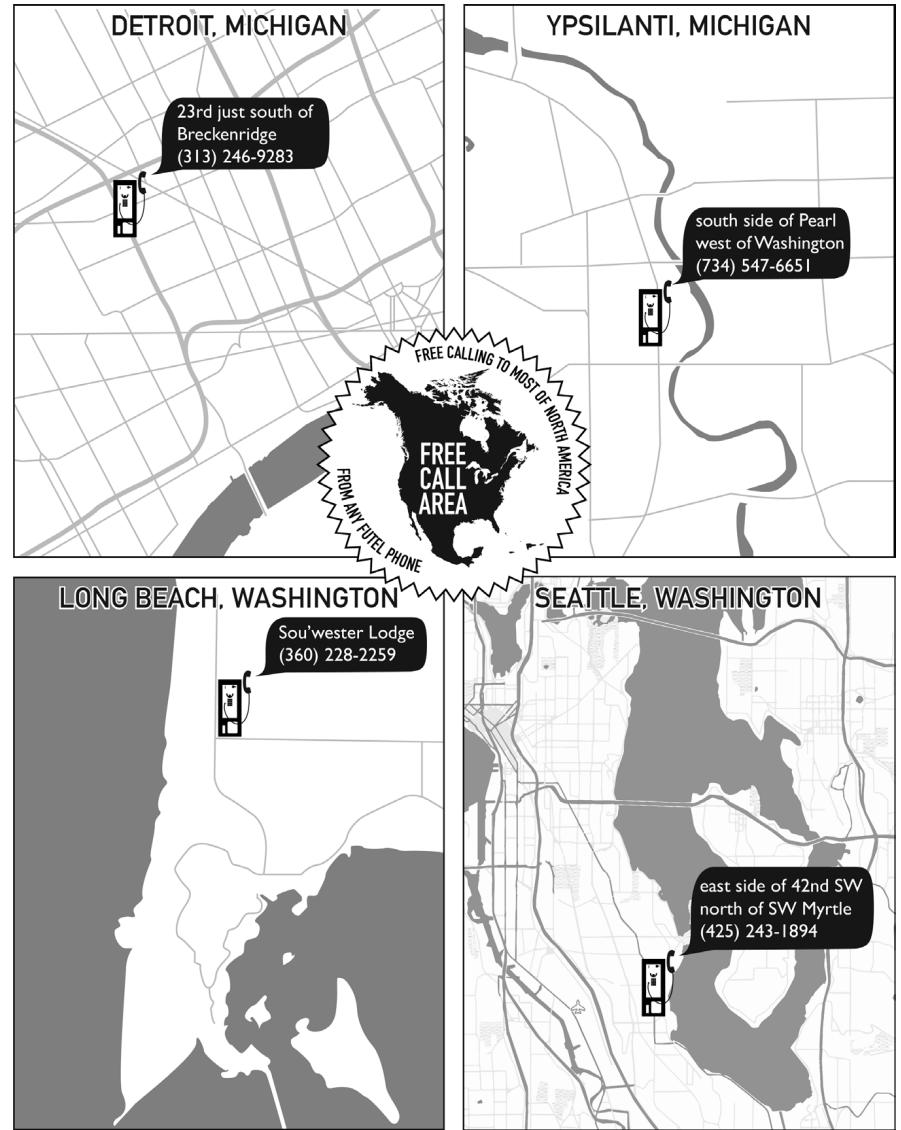


Always love ending up in a Futel time line.

the actual experience is in the head of the the experiencer. And we have to admit that Futel is partly an art project. We never wanted to claim that, even to ourselves. One reason is that it tells people about some of our motivation, instead of letting them decide for themselves. Another is that by ignoring any artistic desire, we can avoid pretense. Nobody needs to try to understand it. We are doing it because we need to and there isn't anything to figure out. We call it a social service project, which it is, but we've never had to have thoughts about how people were affected by the experience.

It was made easier because we didn't care if anybody knew who we were. We didn't need to promote ourselves or position the project as part of our creative careers. Most people involved with Futel use pseudonyms, and I've usually done that for previous projects. Why use my name, what's important about me? If the recognition is attached to a fragment of a personality that doesn't have all that sloppy humanity, it's more focused. But I abandoned that for Futel years ago. I fund Futel by pursuing grants and donations. It's easier to attach my name to a proposal. There's more assurance that the money is being used as intended.

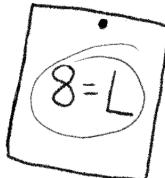
So while the project has always been creative, it hasn't drawn attention to that. The work speaks for itself. But we can't deny the artistic angle. Most of the grants have been from arts organizations, and the less art-oriented proposals still reference the cultural aspects. To have that make sense Futel needs to interface with other artists, it can't just be enigmatic. And to be effective as a social service we need to interact with groups like neighborhood associations and civic-minded organizations. Really, no public project works unless it learns from other people, otherwise it will lose relevance.



## decoder puzzle

9 10 23    9 22 26 7 12  
(resurrected urban furniture)

26 9 12 14 10 5 26 14  
(sometimes standing by)



24 26 6 25 12 21 10 6 8  
(you have a message)

2 6 10 8 5 26 7 12  
(listen while you wait)



# Status Report

By Karl Anderson

Director and Chief Handset Cleaner of Futel

Futel has been around for ten years! Longer than that, but events have gotten in the way of publishing, and I'm not just referring to the fascist direction that this nation and its people are taking. But here we are, history is being written.

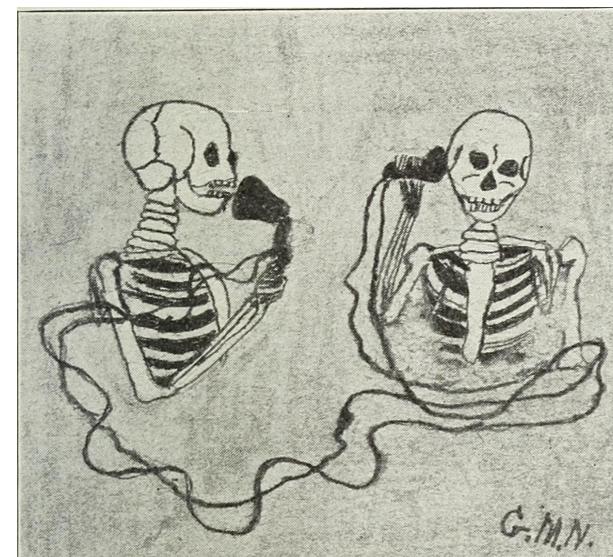


### The Plan Behind Futel, or Lack Of

The plan was never to reveal anything about what is behind Futel. The plan was to install the phones, make them available for the people who wanted to make calls, and provide ways for people to interact. Would people use them? Was there a point? These were questions that we didn't know the answer to. But we didn't need to know, because we were just finding out by doing it. One would think this would be an easy project to describe, and I just did in one sentence, but it is very frustrating to talk about because of all the irrelevant questions. Why do you want to do this? What is the goal? Do you know what you are doing? No, we don't know. We just want to do it.

But one of the biggest strengths of the project was that it didn't need to explain itself. When we started, there was no publicity. We didn't hype it or warn anyone.

There wasn't even any pertinent copy on the phone at first, it was just a payphone. At the time, there were still payphones out there in the wild, so it had cover. We didn't care if anybody got it or not. If some people wanted to make a call, and other people were confused, then the project would be successful.



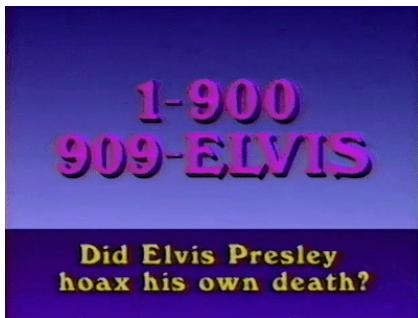
That's how art works, there is something that is being expressed, but 15



That era is over. Public phones are greatly reduced, of course, and the ones which accept incoming calls are extremely rare. It became an annoying feature to maintain because payphones are all COCOTs now, and those almost always answer an incoming call with a modem for toll auditing. They pick up before the other phones get a chance, which wrecks the possibilities. The feature had to be tested often to purge those numbers.

The end of the line was when a previously used number was repurposed for an elevator emergency phone. I found out when I called the demultiplexer and the elevator answered automatically. Eventually I was able to get a menu that revealed what it was. I've had some lists of elevator phones for a while, and they can be fun to call, eavesdropping on unsuspecting passengers or confusing them with the speaker. But while it might be sketchy to call a phone which was deployed to be usable in an emergency, it's just wrong to set up an unsuspecting Futel user to do so, and there's a chance that it could accidentally delay or deny service for someone who was trying to make an emergency call. It's an extremely small possibility, but it's not something to be done for amusement.

Thank you to everyone who picked up a demultiplexer call over the years.



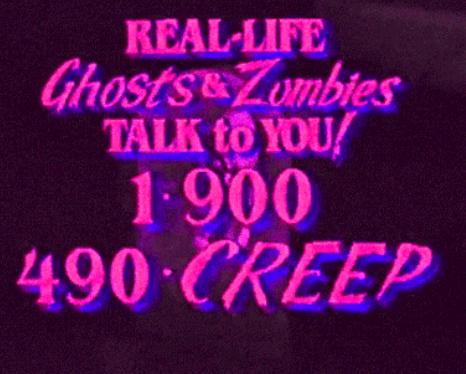
## Druids of Sisyphus Gardens Log

Ah, 2024. A year of descent into the year 2025. As avowed sci-fi/fantasy nerds, the Druids have been warned about techno-fascist oligarchs and enshittification-fueled cyberpunk dystopias all their lives... but nothing could prepare them for how unsettling and petty the weird little billionaires could be. More than ever, we are seeking out any pocket universes for communication outside of the giant multinational e-commerce conglomerates, and human telephony connection.



**Jul 28** Caller was a hopeful future Seattle Futel street phone host. They were testing out telephony services, and discussed some of our favorite menu items. Talked about furthering the conversation through other interfaces.

**Jul 30** Voicemails while the Druids were out planting brassicas. One was someone peddling Druid crystals, the other was a bartender roughly 200 miles north of our location and wished us well in continuing to breathe fresh air.



**Aug 2** Voicemail. Claimed to be a kid, "so I don't know what's going on. I don't know where my parents are" Left a second voicemail trying to call their own phone.

**Aug 13** Caller was bummed to get our messaging machine. Left a nice voicemail: "The woods look good, the fog looks good, thank you for advocating for Palestine."

**Aug 23** Friend caller on the Taylor street phone trying to make plans for a yet-unsuccessful visit, said they would try another Futel node, also unsuccessful.

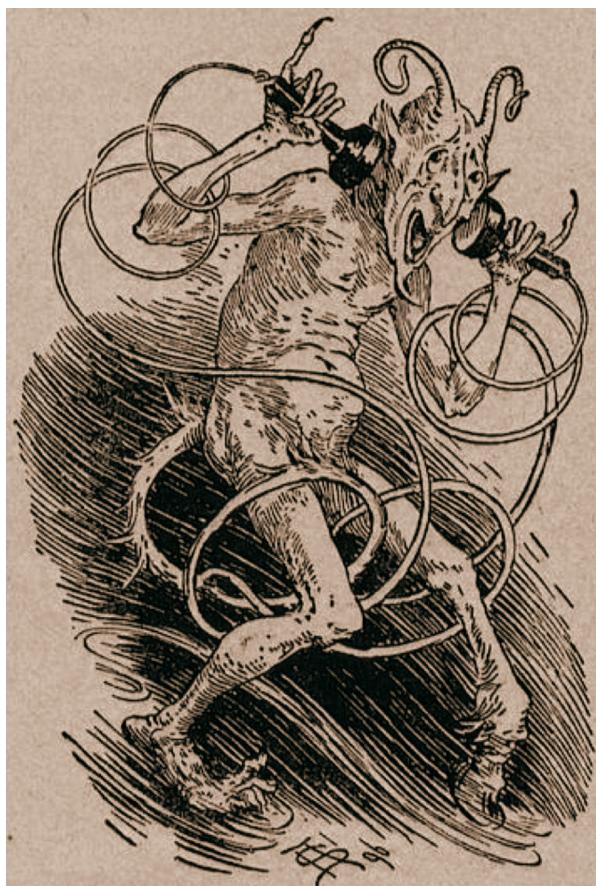
**Sep 15** Caller wanted to know what Futel is about.

**Oct 29** Gave a vague answer to my location, wished each other happy Halloween.

**Oct 29** Callers wanted to know if we were on a secret Druid cult compound in the woods. One caller was going as a romance novel cover model for Halloween.

**Nov 1** Caller was an old friend, who called a mutual friend, who told them to call the Druids.

**Dec 16** Caller was excited to find out about Futel and that it was near their location. They were grateful for the Druids as well.



## Death of the Payphone (Demultiplexer)

Since the beginning of Futel, the payphone demultiplexer has been one of its most amusing features. When selected, every public phone with an incoming number that we knew of would be called simultaneously. The first one to be answered would be connected.

It was also fun to implement. We collected every incoming number that we found and tested every payphone that we ran across. It was always a thrill to find a callable phone because we knew that we could be talking to a stranger at that location in the future. It was fun to try and figure out what trick would reveal the incoming number of a communication device that didn't want to reveal that it could be called.

### HOW TO BROADCAST TELE-COMMANDS THAT MUST BE OBeyed WITH THE AMAZING HYPNO-PHONE!

And calling the demultiplexer was always a good time. Who wouldn't pick up a ringing payphone? I personally have spent a lot of time hanging out at a Futel phone with a beer, calling unknown people. So many possibilities. When people were curious about why I was calling, maybe assuming that I had a wrong number and trying to help me find my way, I was sincere back to them and tried to make us both enjoy learning about each other. When people were annoyed, I encouraged them by annoying them further. Those who wanted mystery, or appeared open to the possibility, got it. I was a spy, a time traveler, an alien, an

emergent phenomenon. I got to be all of the people that I believed I have talked to over the years. Even if nobody answered, it was nice to know that I was making bells ring all over the country.

