

The Zack Diggerhole Story

In the early 1980s when I was 14 years old, I somehow talked my way into an overnight job at a classical radio station WCPE in Raleigh. My teenager voice was not announcer material yet, so basically my job was to play these huge 3 hour long reel-to-reel tapes made earlier in the day to serve the overnight audience.

Aside from some transmitter maintenance, most of my time was just keeping the lights on and answering the telephone. I can't express enough how important it was to the management that I answer the landline everytime.

It got boring fast.

In 1980s America, some FM radio was considered a 'public service' by the government because it was a media outlet. If a disaster occurred or dangerous weather developed, radio outlets were required to put the public interest first. Regulations decreed stations must answer the telephone during transmission times, which was 24/7 at WCPE.

I think I was really employed as a cheap way to satisfy this regulation. My boss would sometimes call me at 3 am just to check. I had to answer any call the station received and I did. Until one night in March.

Back in the day, phone numbers were listed in "the phone book", an actual tome the size of big dictionary. In the production office, we had phonebooks from dozens of major American cities - I'm not sure why. At some point I got so bored I began to look for funny names in the 1979 Miami telephone directory. After the predictable 'Dick Hardman' and 'Chris P. Bacon' got giggles, and then I came across 'Zack Diggerhole' of 123 N. Main Street.

Odd, I thought, such a strange name with such a common address. Whatever.

Just then the phone rang and it was a listener wanting to know what music we just played. I found out, chatted a bit and then I returned to my new past time. After a while I was going through the Chicago phonebook and I found another Zack Diggerhole! And he ALSO was downtown at 123 N. Main Street! Wow. Coincidence? Maybe not.

I quickly pulled down Houston and Zack was there too, same address, different number. Tampa? Yep, Zack Diggerhole. Atlanta? Zack Diggerhole, same address, different number. What's going on??

I was a little scared to pull out the Raleigh directory, as this was my hometown. I carefully leafed through the book until I got to the right page where the truth screamed silently "Zack Diggerhole, 123 N. Main Street, Raleigh, NC"

Here's the problem. There is no 123 N. Main Street in Raleigh. Holy crap.

There's a 123 WEST Main Street because the road runs east to west downtown, but this was a fictional address.

For some reason my heart was racing. The phone rang again and scared me into 'skid marking' my underwear. Then I formed a plan, a stupid plan.

I knew it was a bad idea, but I knew what I had to do. I had to call this number. And it was 5 in the morning. What's wrong with me?

Back in the day, there was no caller ID. Plus, I was 14 and simply not thinking about the bigger picture. The dumb plan was to call and just see if anybody picked up, that's it. My theory was that this was a joke played by some prankster somewhere. One call wouldn't hurt and would reveal all. What's the worst that could happen?

After the 5 am BBC news broadcast I went back and picked up the phonebook and found the Raleigh number again: 919-2X7-97X0. Finally, using a rotary phone, I called it. It rang. It rang again. Someone picked up.



I froze up. I could hear a lot of typing and voices as if in a big room in the background and then a woman said cheerfully, “T-M-P 4 East N-C Can I have your associate code and...”

[click] I hung up.

I was totally weirded out but almost immediately the phone rang again. Instinctively I picked it up but forgot to say ‘WCPE 89.7’.

For a moment there was only the ‘crowded room’ in the background when suddenly the same woman, now NOT cheerful said something like. “This is TMP4East NC calling – what is your associate code and truck number?” I gasped and hung up. Now I was shaking and trying to figure it all out when the second line rang.

This time I was horrified at a simple telephone. I let it ring five times but then, well, I just *had* to pick it up. It was my freaking job!

“WCPE 89.7” I tried to sound confident in case it was a real call. But no, she was asked again for my ‘associate number’ and I hung up again. A moment later the radio station phone line lit up for the third time. Same thing happened. A fourth call. Then a fifth call and after that I stopped answering the phone altogether, though it continued to ring. My mind was swimming but I was rocked back to reality by the clock, 5:40am – just 20 minutes until the shift change. Still, the phone kept ringing the whole time, hundreds of relentless rings.

At 5:55am the ringing finally stopped, but just a moment later the ‘proximity alarm’ at the transmitter site went off. James, the morning guy, was early. Except he was NEVER early, he was always late due to his long commute.

I gazed out the window into the foggy half-light. A vehicle was crawling up the gravel drive way too slowly. It was a truck with rotating yellow lights like a television news van but with a bucket arm on the top. Finally, I could make out the logo on the door.

It was Southern Bell, the telephone company.

Turns out, **Zack Diggerhole** was a fictional name all telephone linemen know they can look up in any town and get live tech support. The workmen, or ‘associates’ all have an employee code and a truck number so the operator knows they’re legit. The laughing lineman explained all this after seeing the humor in it all, but just then the phone rang in the control room and I ran to get it – “WCPE 89.7”.

It was someone asking why we were off the air, I had let the damn tape run out!