

IOWA NEWS



HARRY BAUMERT/The Register

George Preston never met a telephone he didn't like. The Belle Plaine chatterbox owns four, including a cordless one, and now has a 900 number.

Iowan has lots to say, even if you don't ask

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BELLE PLAINE, IA. — Never ask George Preston "How's it going?" because he'll tell you. And tell you. And tell you. And tell you.

"Talking is my thing," says Preston, making the understatement of the decade. It's like saying basketball is Michael Jordan's thing and singing is what Frank Sinatra does.

Preston's high-pitched, slightly raspy voice is familiar to anyone who listens to radio call-in shows, particularly those on WMT in Cedar Rapids. One can always turn off the radio.

But going one-on-one with Preston face-to-face is like fighting off a swarm of gnats.

He's an insistent, aggressive talker who punctuates his conversation with "have you seen this ... look at this ... here's something else I want to show you."

The question is, will folks spend about \$1 a minute to listen to him? Preston thinks so.

So he now has a "900" telephone number. That means if you dial the number — 900-773-8111 — a meter starts as soon as the connection is made. The first minute is \$1.75 and each additional minute is 75 cents.

What you get for your money is the taped voice of Preston, 79, talking about the Lincoln Highway — another name for U.S. Highway 30, which runs coast to coast across the United States, passing through Iowa.

Each tape runs 4 to 5 minutes, so you could run up a tab of \$4.75 if you listen to an entire tape.

Preston says he has made about 15 tapes. His barber here in town, Dale St. John, says that although Preston may stretch things a bit when he gets going on a topic, town fathers should give him lots of support because he is responsible for tourists stopping by during the summers.

The 900 number? "I can't see him getting more than one telephone call from any person because after you listen to him once you've heard about all of it," St. John says.

When the guys who play rummy at the back table in The Pub, the watering hole in downtown Belle Plaine, were asked if they will call Preston on his 900 number the answer was a collective groan.

Former Mayor Robert Burrows, who says he

once gave Preston the title "Belle Plaine's Ambassador Without Portfolio," says he might call the 900 number, although he doubts he will hear anything he has not heard before.

"George is a local fixture here. He's got an ego that won't quit," Burrows says.

He's also a collector who won't quit. For years he has accumulated items ranging from old tractors, to a stuffed two-headed calf, to early Iowa road maps. The stuff fills several sheds. Some in Belle Plaine have called the collection junk.

But Preston claims tour buses stop to allow passengers to browse around. None of the items is for sale, he says.

The sheds' exteriors and that of the old gas station Preston and his late brother used to run are covered with signs carrying the decals of gasoline, tire, spark plug and automobile companies.

This mishmash of color and printing of various sizes brings to mind the ransom notes kidnapers

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For price of call, you'll get an earful from Iowan

PRESTON

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used to fashion by pasting up various letters cut from newspaper headlines.

Preston never met a telephone he didn't like.

He owns four, including a cordless one he can carry around out in the sheds or in the old gas station. He knows the numbers of the radio call-in shows the way you know the telephone numbers of your kids.

In person or on the telephone he is comfortable talking about the oil business, sports, Iowa history, road signs, speed laws, hobos, cars, trucks, the Lincoln Highway or, as Preston likes to say, "you name it."

Jim Zabel, the WHO Radio sports-caster who has hosted a talk show for many years, says any successful talk

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—George Preston

show has its own stable of characters, people that the listening audience looks forward to hearing.

“George is one of those characters,” Zabel says. “He has an opinion about everything, and he is always upbeat. Radio voices become like TV faces, you remember them.”

“George has a wonderful radio personality. If this was 1900, George would be the guy sitting around the old cracker barrel at the general

store telling stories.”

Now Preston is telling his stories nationwide on the 900 number, talking about the Lincoln Highway. What does he say?

Well, for example, in one tape he gives Belle Plaine a plug and talks about how folks got lost so frequently trying to follow the old Lincoln Highway through Chicago that the city had to put police officers at various inter-sections to keep drivers on the route.

He mentions the tourist camps along the highway and closes by quoting a Burma Shave sign slogan — “Thirty days has September, April, June and the speed offender.”

The Lincoln Highway ran through Belle Plaine, right past Preston's gas station, which he and his brother opened in 1923. It has been out of business as a gas station for many years.

It also was years ago that the Lincoln Highway, or U.S. 30, was rerouted around Belle Plaine.

He insists he has no money invested in the pay-to-listen 900 number deal. He is equally insistent that he will make no profit from it. If there is a profit, he says, he will donate it to cancer research.

It looks like there will be a profit. Preston's grandson, Joseph Preston, is president of Network Telephone

Services Inc. in Woodland Hills, Calif., the company that is marketing George Preston's telephone talks.

Joseph Preston says a couple of hundred calls a day are coming in on the 900 number, most of them from Iowa. He estimates that more than half the gross income goes to the telephone companies that handle the call, including \$1,000 a month in service charges.

“I remember visiting in Belle Plaine when I was a kid and George would be sitting around telling stories to anyone who would listen. He stirs up a lot of interest.”

George Preston does not argue with that. Here's his philosophy: “The good Lord gave me two arms, two legs, two eyes and a mouth. He said ‘If you don't take advantage of it, it's your fault.’”