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Digititis Has Got You by the Number

THE OTHER day I went to a hardware store to get a package of small brackets that used to cost a dime. They now cost 95 cents, plus tax.

In an old-fashioned store, the clerk rang up your purchase on the cash register, dropped in the coin and that ended the transaction. In modern computerized stores a clerk punches digital keys, the beeper beeps, lights flash and finally out comes a ticket confirming the sale.

In point of digital time, the hardware store I patronized was somewhere between these two. Using a 7-by-11-inch pad of invoices the clerk wrote a ticket in duplicate with as much care as he might have used to sell hardware for an entire house.

He made it out to "CASH," dated it, inserted the 6-digit stock number, quantity, description of item and size, price per unit, total price, sales tax, subtotal, and grand total of 99 cents. Probably the digits were important, because there were a lot of them.

Later at a lumber yard checkout counter I waited while a young man offered a check for more than \$100

worth of merchandise. He couldn't remember his Social Security number. He said his driver's license had been lifted by police. His telephone number belonged to a neighbor. He had no credit cards. This frustrated young man had run out of cash and out of numbers, but he looked surprised when the manager refused his check.

You just can't get very far in modern life with your numbers. We have a pandemic case of digititis.

The digital industry is claimed to be the world's fastest growing business, and it might be. Almost anything, it seems, can be converted to digits, even so-called photographs of distant planets which are later reconstituted as color pictures for earthmen.

Computers are not new for cars but when the dashboard (a carry-over from horsepower) is replaced by cathode ray tubes, as is predicted, they will shower us with additional numbers, in color. CRTs will display speed, fuel efficiency, how long before you run out of gas, oil, brake and temperature data, and give your location on a map.

When I was a reporter on The Ada News in the 1930s, that newspaper had single digit phone numbers, No. 3 for business and No. 4 for news. Now when I make a long distance call I have to dial 11 digits and give the operator 14 more if I use a credit card.

Postal zip codes soon will be expanded to nine digits, which eventually might replace street addresses. And don't be surprised if the Postal Service starts charging three digits for postage stamps.

Many years ago someone predicted that the time was coming when a baby would be given a personal number at birth, to serve all his or her life. It would be used for employment, taxes, credit, retirement, and numerous other purposes, including some not figured out yet. It could mean a reduction in numbers if we adopted such a system.

By combining our Social Security numbers, area codes, zip codes, street addresses, phone numbers and private radio call numbers into one string of digits, we might ultimately memorize them.