



RETRO REPLAY

ANN-MARGRET CHATS her way to stardom on a Princess phone in this publicity still from *Bye Bye Birdie* (1963).

COLLECTIBLES

A PRINCESS IN EVERY HOME

The Sixties called—they want their phone back.

BY MARY-LIZ SHAW

During the late 1950s, in a bustling economy focused on youth culture, companies devoted a lot of research and development to products that appealed to our sense of fun.

The toy industry boomed, and the success of a new product usually depended on an elusive quality that was hard to measure, but we knew it when we saw it. Today, we might call it the cool factor. Wham-O's Frisbee ('57) and Hula Hoop ('58), Roller Derby's skateboard and Mattel's Barbie (both '59)—all had that special something in spades.

And so did the Princess phone.

Ma Bell was late to the party when it came to

sexy products—with a monopoly on the phone business, it didn't have to finesse us—but the little oval gem that hit Bell's lineup in the fall of 1959 made up for lost time.

Made by Western Electric from a blueprint by leading industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss, the Princess had a slim profile and one-third the footprint of the standard desk phone—ideal for a bedside table. Its regal name was a direct appeal to teenage girls, a fact not lost on the filmmakers of teen romp *Bye Bye Birdie* (1963), who gave breakout star Ann-Margret an aqua blue Princess phone as a prop.

Here are more fun facts about the phone every girl wanted for Christmas.

ROYALTY IN THE BEDROOM

PRETTY IN PASTELS

The Princess came in five colors: aqua blue, beige, pink, white and turquoise. After 1963, turquoise was available only on request and was discontinued in 1970. A lamp in the dial served as a night light; it glowed softly when the phone was not in use, brightly when the handset was off the hook.



NOT EXACTLY A RINGING ENDORSEMENT

Although instantly popular, the first Princess version came with a few quirks that annoyed early adopters. Its housing was too small to fit an internal ringer—an external ringer was an add-on. It required a special transformer for the light-up dial, and it was significantly lighter than the usual desk phone, which caused it to slide around whenever you dialed a number.

FOR HER

Advertising openly appealed to a feminine aesthetic. Early print spots for the Princess show women's hands reaching for the phone, with the slogan, "It's little! It's lovely! It lights!" Princess ads targeted both homemakers and businesses that catered to women, including salons, dress shops and jewelry stores.

TALKING POINT

The Princess was made lighter than the typical Model 500 desk phone after the design team at Dreyfuss and Associates noticed teen girls chatting to friends while relaxing on their beds—with the heavy base of the extension resting on their stomachs.

LITTLE BLACK DRESS PHONE

In 1963, Bell introduced several new colors to its Princess line, including black—said to be because first lady Jacqueline Kennedy asked for it. Though black was the standard, default color for all other phone styles, it was supplied only on request in Princess models.

BUTTONED DOWN

Bell came out with a push-button Princess in 1963; 12-button models, which included the pound and star keys, came out in 1968. Several other modifications, including message-waiting lights and hold options, were added to the Princess for the next several years, until AT&T discontinued the model in 1994. ●



SMART BY DESIGN

If one person could be said to be behind the look of the mid-20th century, it would be Henry Dreyfuss. Born in Brooklyn, NY, in 1904, Dreyfuss went to art school, but after graduating, he pursued industrial design, which was just beginning to take off in the 1920s.

Dreyfuss pioneered what came to be called ergonomics—designing around the human form and behavior—and his clients included industry giants such as New York Central Railroad, Bell, John Deere, Honeywell and Hoover.

Along with the Princess phone, his most famous household product designs include:

- Big Ben alarm clock for Westclox (1939)
- Model 500 desk phone for Bell (1949)
- Circular wall thermostat for Honeywell (1953)
- Constellation vacuum for Hoover (1955)
- SX-70 camera and case for Polaroid, above (1972)



EARLY ADS for the Princess phone directly targeted women and teen girls.

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