

COMPUTERIZED COURT

The last time I was in court was with son Roland, who had been charged with speeding in Orange County on Interstate 64, back in the seventies. When we reached court on the designated day, we were relieved to see that very few people were waiting. The proceedings were simple: the reading of the charges, his plea, a brief questioning by the judge, the fine, including court costs.

Now, some years later, I was charged with failure to yield at an intersection in our neighborhood, resulting in a two-car accident. Fortunately, there were no injuries, but I not only got a ticket but was advised that I must appear in court.

Paul attended with me. As we entered the courtroom, we were told that there should be no talking, no eating, no sleeping, and no reading in court. In our long wait, we had ample opportunity to observe the changes that time and the computer had brought to traffic court. The first big difference I observed on my day in court was that this courtroom was crowded with people. I already appreciated the convenience of computer communication to the arresting officer, who had been very considerate and kind. He had asked me for my driving permit, ascertained that I was not injured, and had returned to his car without asking me any further questions. After a while, he returned with two papers for me: one stating the charge, along with complete data about my car insurance and previous arrest record (none), the other with a summons to traffic court.

At the courtroom, the judge instructed all present who wanted a continuance to form a line down the middle aisle. The line formed instantaneously. These people must have been there before and knew what to expect; the line filled the center aisle and wrapped part way around the room.

In order, people in line stepped before the judge and stated their name. A clerk then read from a computer screen the charges and the name of the arresting officer and handed the judge a computer printout of the case. The judge questioned the reason for the request for continuance, granting it if the individual wanted time to hire a lawyer and rescheduling the case. Sometimes the individual was represented by a lawyer who spoke for the defendant. When the judge had satisfied himself about the facts, he announced the penalty, most of the time a fine and jail time, occasionally involving probation. Once, the established procedure was interrupted for a full trial which took place in the middle of the continuance line. It involved all the trappings we've become familiar with from TV trials: witnesses, a prosecuting attorney, the lawyer's examination and cross examination, even some objections (both sustained and denied). The defendant was fined and assigned jail time. This continuance part of the proceedings used close to two hours' time.

Again, those in court who had been there before knew what the next step was. Before I heard the call for those who were pleading guilty, most of those left in court formed a line that compared in length to the preceding one. I found my place near the end of the line, Paul by my side. The routine again involved the clerk at the computer, with the judge questioning the person and the arresting officer based on what the computer revealed, reinforced by the defendant and the arresting officer. The line moved with dispatch. The judge pronounced a number of large fines, some with a

certain amount of jail time, usually a month, with some probation for a year. The time, another hour, passed very slowly for me because of the severity of the sentences. How much would my fine be? Would I be allowed to go to Defensive Driving School to mitigate the charge against me? Surely, I wouldn't be assessed jail time!

Eventually I arrived before the judge and gave my name. Before the clerk named the arresting officer, he was by my side and, much to my surprise, he declared that I could not have seen the car I had failed to yield to. He added that both my victim and I had shown extraordinary caring for each other. Judge Jones looked at me and said, "Case dismissed!" I asked about Driving School. He said, "No need!" I couldn't resist telling the judge that Officer Rairdon had been wonderful (and he had); and Judge Jones said kindly, "I agree!"

Undoubtedly, the computerized proceedings had substantially shortened the conduct of business, but the added bonus of the calm nature of Judge Jones' words to all who appeared before him and the considerate, kindly nature of Officer Rairdon made the long morning seem more like a positive experience for me instead of an ordeal. I have every intention of driving so carefully that I will not again be summonsed to traffic court, but I do have a decidedly positive memory of my day in court.