

## CINCINNATI POLICE CALL BOX INFORMATION.

Information used here has been obtained from many sources. The source of the information is explained unless the source is within the item.

# PATROL AND TELEPHONE SERVICE.

---

CINCINNATI, January 1, 1886.

*Colonel Edwin Hudson, Superintendent of Police:*

SIR: I respectfully submit for your consideration a report of the Police Patrol and Police Telephone Departments for 1885.

During the year the patrol system has been reinforced with two Patrol Companies (Nos. 6 and 7) and forty-three (43) street boxes, making a total of one hundred and forty-three (143) now in operation. In order to properly connect the additional street signal stations, two extra circuits were constructed, together with the purchase of the necessary office instruments, and each of the other circuits lengthened as desired, as the new boxes were located in the suburban police districts.

This branch of the service, now complete, comprises seven Patrol Companies, fully equipped; six circuits, connecting one hundred and forty-three (143) street signal stations, and all the most improved office instruments, constituting one of the best systems of the kind in use.

The Police Telephone Department is operated in conjunction with the Patrol, and is conceded by able authority to be second to none in the country. It connects with the stations and Patrol Companies, the offices and residences of the heads of the department, and instant communication can be had with all municipal offices, the subscribers of the Bell Telephone Company, and all cities and villages adjacent to Cincinnati within a radius of one hundred and fifty (150) miles. One Superintendent and four operators are employed for the perfect maintenance of these departments.

From the 1866 Cincinnati Hospital Report indicates that the Police Call Boxes were used to communicate between the Cincinnati Commercial Hospital (later to be renamed Cincinnati General Hospital) and several police stations.

Every part of the Hospital is in direct telegraphic communication with the Superintendent's apartment in the central building. In a moment the messages are sent to and fro, thus saving the annoyance and delay of foot-messengers. The battery is also connected with the several police stations throughout the city, and with the pest house, more than a mile distant. A telegram is received from one of the stations, "Send your ambulance." And speedily the ambulance is sent. Another is transmitted through the wire, inquiring, "How is the small pox patient, Smith?" And in a moment the answer comes back, "better"—"worse"—"ready to leave"—"dead."

From the 1956 Cincinnati Annual Report, table 142

All along, many improvements were being made in police methods. In 1856, the first uniform was adopted. Registration of persons arrested was begun in 1863, leading to the establishment of a rogue's gallery in 1873. The dial system of police telegraph was installed in 1866 and telephones were introduced in 1878, just two years after Alexander Graham Bell obtained his patent. In 1879, a telephone exchange serving the entire department was installed and the Cincinnati Police enjoyed the distinction of being the first Police Department to supplant the telegraph with the telephone.

The Police, Fire and civilian experience with call boxes and telephones.

From Beth Bagwell, *Oakland: The Story of a City*, Oakland Heritage Alliance, Oakland, 1982.

## Communications

A crowd of friends gathered at the Piedmont home of Isaac Requa in about 1878 to witness a strange wonder. Requa was actually going to speak by telephone to a man all the way across the bay in the Palace Hotel in San Francisco. Would the contraption work? Sometimes it did, and then again, sometimes it didn't. It all depended on whether the wind had blown down a wire strung above Lake Merritt. When that happened, a telephone company man had to row out and fish the line out of the water.

In 1878, only two years after Alexander Graham Bell had patented his telephone, Oaklanders were already getting acquainted with the mysteries of the strange device. In the East patent litigation was providing work for battalions of lawyers and cities all over the United States and Europe watched closely to see which system to put in: Bell's, Thomas Edison's, or one of several others.

The first Oakland telephones were the Edison model, which depended on current from a wet battery. The battery had to be rejuvenated frequently by a telephone company employee with a wagonload of chemicals, jouncing on dirt roads between widely separated subscribers. The biggest job hazard was that sometimes the acid would spill; it could eat the seat out of his trousers or do worse harm. Another nuisance was that people

hid the batteries in dark cellars and cold closets since the Edison telephone's walnut case had no place for the battery. Nobody was happier than the "battery doctor" when Oakland adopted the Bell device instead.

The Bell telephone of about 1880 was encased in a wooden box on the wall. There was an upper part containing coils and a magneto and a lower part containing batteries. On the left side, there was a hook to hang up the receiver. Two bells in front rang when you vigorously turned a crank on the right side of the box. Then you spoke the words that overnight had become part of the language: "Hello, Central."

In the decade just before the telephone, an ingenious telegraph call box system was in use in Oakland. You could have a call box in your home connecting you to the telegraph office. Your circular box had a glass dial with ten or twelve selections: doctor, police, fire, messenger, and so on. A contemporary wrote: "The machinery is so ingeniously contrived that it indicates with unfailing accuracy the location of the signaling box and the nature of the service required.... If a doctor be needed, the family physician, whose name and address have been previously left at the office, is at once notified by a messenger who then proceeds directly to the subscriber's house to receive further instructions, go for prescriptions, etc." A carriage would be sent for simultaneously.

The system prepared the way for the telephone by showing people the advantages of quick communication. Firemen could reach fires much more quickly than before, receiving notice in less than a minute from the time the telegraph office received a fire call. Night watchmen would call in at regular intervals; if they did not, the police would go to investigate. Carriages and messengers could be summoned; the company had its own fine system of new carriages with well-paid uniformed drivers.

In the long run, of course, the telephone was to make this system obsolete, but in the early days of telephone service, it is no wonder that people preferred the trusted convenience of the telegraph call box.

At first telephone subscribers were few and far between, literally, since the East Bay was still largely farms and rural settlements. One or two boys could handle all the Oakland calls. The first switchboard was in the offices of the American District Telephone Company at 1002 Broadway. The switchboard consisted of a strip of walnut four inches wide and several feet long, fastened to the wall. It had a number of brass clips on it, one for each subscriber, that served as terminals. When a call came, a boy would make a circuit by connecting the proper clips with two brass plugs united by a length of cotton-covered wire.

The wires were strung from house to house, since poles were thought to be too expensive. There were no trained engineers with the company, and if anything went wrong, as it often did, a man was sent out with orders to look for the trouble until he found it. Troublesome noises on the lines were frequent, caused by adjacent telegraph lines and household electricity. Rain and fog interfered with the current, and all kinds of conditions could cause short circuits.

Once the line out to the Deaf and Dumb School in Berkeley was not working. Investigators went over every yard of the miles of wire and finally found that gold leaf wallpaper at the school was the culprit. The wires at the time were usually strung side by

side and tacked up with nails through the insulation. A tack had touched the wires and formed a short circuit through the gold leaf and the opposite wire.

In spite of these problems, by 1881 there were approximately five thousand Bell telephones in use on the Pacific Coast, only four years after the invention made its debut in the West. A year or two later the San Francisco exchange had ten offices and seven hundred miles of wires serving twenty-five hundred telephones; a thousand connections each day were handled by seventy-five employees. By 1881, it was claimed that threefourths of the telephones in the United States were connected through exchanges.

A simple, unified system was needed to eliminate the confusion of many small companies and differing technical arrangements. In 1883, the Sunset Telephone and Telegraph Company was incorporated to absorb smaller exchanges.

By 1890, most of the early problems had been solved. It was even possible to make a long-distance call without undue difficulty. But many people still saw the telephone as a newfangled toy, useful in business perhaps, but not in the home.

There were even doubts about whether all this progress might be an evil in disguise. In an 1890s article headed "Are You There? Discovery and Wonderful Perfection of the 'Phone,'" a writer worried that people might stop getting enough healthful exercise if they rode around on electric streetcars and conducted all their conversations by telephone.

The company tried house-to-house solicitation to get new subscribers. A special train even went down the coast, stopping in towns along the way, where agents would canvass from door to door.

What changed people's minds was a clever innovation: the kitchen telephone. For a mere fifty cents a month, you could have a simple telephone in your kitchen. It could not receive calls, but you could call out to any other telephone in the system. People found how convenient it was to order groceries and other supplies by telephone, and the demand increased.

As people got the telephone habit, they began to want incoming service too. The company was ready with another innovation: the party line. For only a dollar more a month, kitchen telephone subscribers could get in on a twenty-party line. Soon, of course, people complained that they never could get a chance at the line, and the company offered ten-party lines. From there people moved in easy steps to four-party and two-party lines and then to single lines.

The earliest linemen had had no equipment except a hand magneto with which to ring in on the line. The Sunset Company sent out patrol wagons equipped with every mechanical device on the market for repairing lines and installing telephones. The lineman and his helper--all linemen were male--replaced poles, trimmed trees, mounted switchboards, and did anything else that needed doing. A complete inspection circuit lasted four months, during which they were expected to camp out at night or find shelter in a farmhouse.

New job opportunities were opened for women as operators, not only in Oakland but all across the country. The first operators were boys, but people complained that they were rude and used rough language. In 1881, the Oakland manager wrote to ask what



Cincinnati's experience had been with women operators. The reply was, "The service is very much superior to that of boys and men. They are steadier, do not drink beer, and are always on hand." That decided the issue. Boys were only kept on at night when it was not considered proper for women to work, and from then on, a whole new category of employment opened to women. In Oakland, by 1898 all the operators were women, and some of them had risen to managerial positions.

By 1911, there were 22,085 subscribers in Oakland, placing 38,194,200 calls a year. Lines stretched as far as Canada and Mexico. The Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company claimed to have enough wire to circle the globe three times. A form of dial phone and automatic switching had been introduced by a rival company, the Bay Cities Home Telephone Company, and these were incorporated into the PT&T system in a merger a year later. Another rival, the Home Telephone Company, also merged with PT&T in 1912. Lines had all been placed underground long ago. Nickel-in-the-slot phones made it possible for almost everybody to use the telephone, not just businesses and wealthy families



Photo courtesy of Stan Willis. Photo shows a Cincinnati Police Officer using a call box. The style of uniform indicates that the photo was taken between 1904 and 1918. The call box shown here has a pull down knob for telegraph use and a telephone for conversation.



Photo courtesy of Stan Willis. This is a second-generation call box. It contains the pull down telegraph and the telephone. The first-generation, which was installed in Cincinnati in 1866 and was replaced by the box with the telephone sometime after 1878. This call box is similar to what was used in Cincinnati. This style of call box was known as multi-call patrol box. This box is in the collection of Stan Willis.





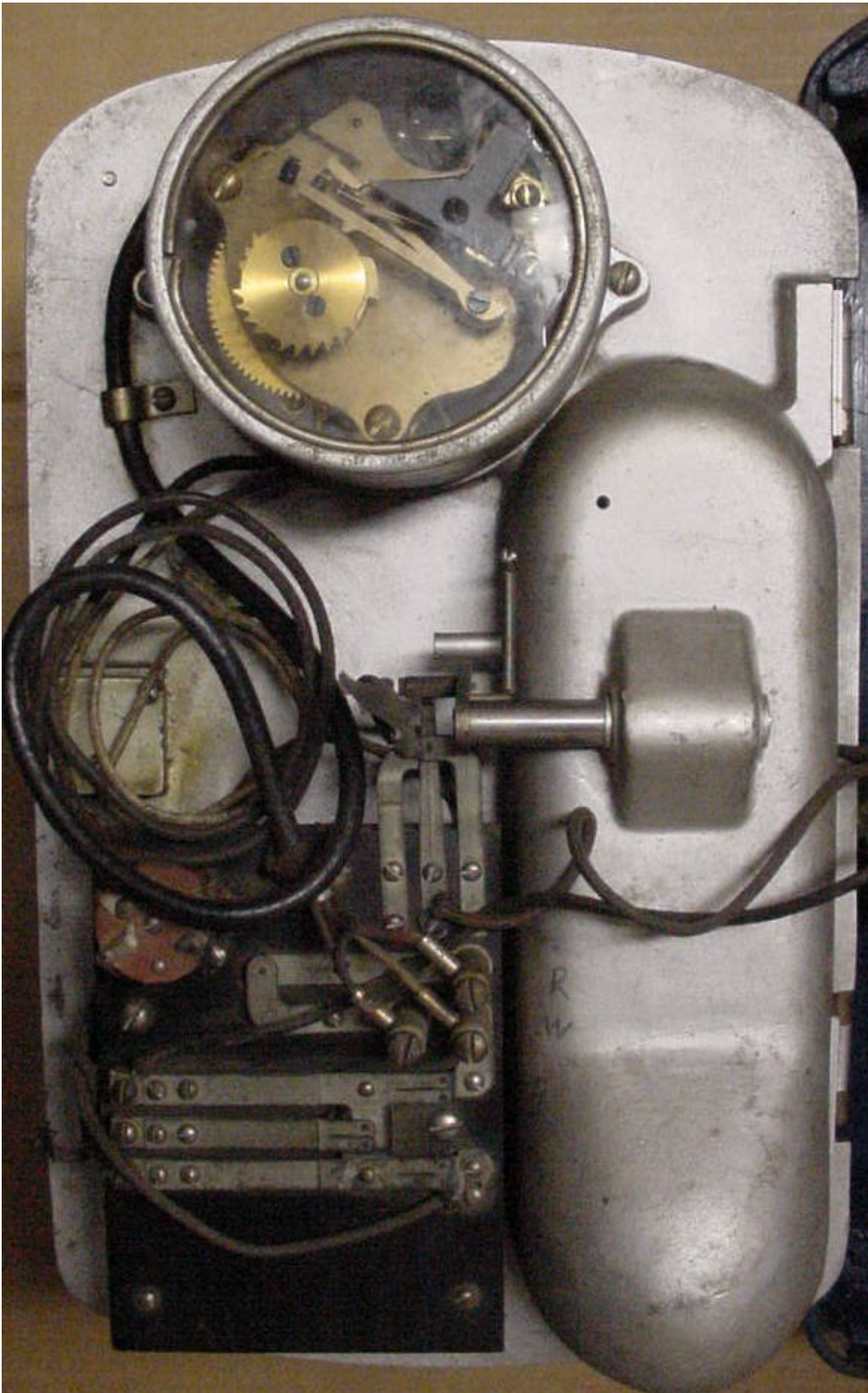
This is the third-generation call box, when the lever is pulled a telegraph type message is sent with the call box number printing out at the receiving location. This photo shows District Two Officer Lou Klotter using call box 242. According to available records this box was located at 13<sup>th</sup> and Vine Streets. Photo author's collection. The picture was taken after 1942.





Fourth generation Cincinnati Call Box Number 643. This box is in the author's collection. No other box of this type is known to exist.

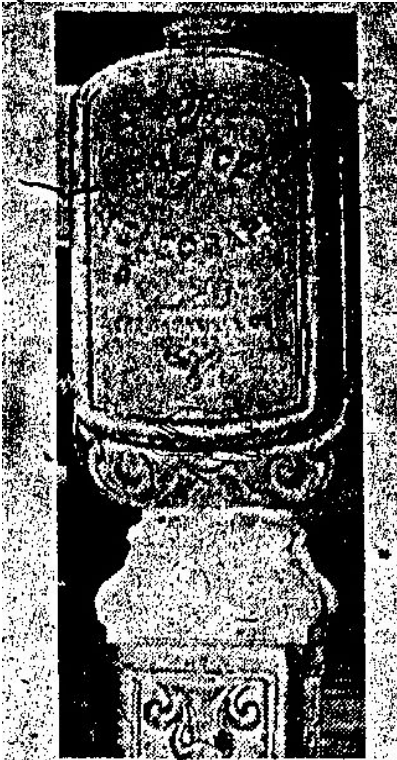




This photo shows the rear of the electrical portion of the call box. The circular glass at the top of the photo shows the gears that would send the box number to a central location. When the box information was received at the central location the box number would be punched out on a paper tape. This item is in the author's collection.

The last generation call box had only a telephone inside. The telegraph device had been removed.

The newspaper article below tells of the abandonment of the call box system.



Photos by Robert Stiggers

Police call box at Eighth street and Eggleston avenue is one of 225 located throughout the city.

## Police call boxes going out

Operation of Cincinnati's 225 police call boxes will end Jan. 3, City Manager Krabach said in a letter to City Council today.

The call boxes, which apparently date back to the early 1900s, have become obsolete as the result of two developments in the city's communications system.

They are incompatible with the Centrex telephone dialing system which will go into effect on May 22, according to Vincent F. Grote, superintendent of the Division of Communications of the Department of Safety.

THE CENTREX system will permit direct dialing to most of the city's departments and offices.

The call boxes also have been made unnecessary by the city's new police communication system, which includes two-way radios carried by each police officer. The system went into operation last spring.

In the early days of the call boxes, beat patrolmen would pull a hook in the box which would signal his district.

THEY WERE modified in the 1960s, according to Grote, by the installation of telephones. The phones and circuit equipment are leased from Cincinnati Bell.

The box housings, owned by the city, will be sold as scrap material.

Cincinnati Post-Times Star December 14, 1971, courtesy of Stan Willis.