

The Oakland Police Call Box

You now possess an artifact representing the final chapter in the City of Oakland's Police Call Box system. These units were last in service in 2003, having served the community in different forms for over 100 years. The current external shell is made of aluminum that was cast during the 1940s – 1960s. The doors were redesigned in the 1990s to accommodate newer systems that included modem jacks. The street pedestals were cut down to vehicle height, reflecting the gradual change from walking patrols to patrols by car.

Early History of Oakland's Call Boxes

Police call boxes began to appear in Oakland in 1886, just 10 years after Bell's invention of the telephone. Prior to that period, officers were able to use telegraph units, known as "Police Telegraph Stations" that were placed adjacent to local business in the core Downtown and connected to the Telegraph office. These units were scarce and were not distributed throughout the entire City. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. One of Oakland's original call boxes

During these same years, it was easier for some residents to request help than it was to communicate with the responders. A version of residential call box units were connected to the telegraph office

near Tenth Street and Broadway and connected between homes and businesses by stringing telegraph wire from home to home and business to business. These units had a coded transmitter (much like fire boxes) that would transmit a code to the telegraph office. The telegraph office would then run the request for service via foot messenger. They could summon police, fire or medical help with these units.

The telephone police call boxes were originally purchased from multiple vendors (including Cregier and Gamewell) with different types of telephones. The early boxes (Fig. 2) were connected to switchboards and



Fig.2 Original Oakland Call box

relayed to the police department in City Hall. These units were called “wet cell” units, and required a central battery source and wagons with chemicals to replenish the source each day. The creation of the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company and new self-contained units with batteries led to the modern system that we are familiar with.

Enhancements in Form and Function

The dawn of the twentieth century saw a rebirth of Oakland and its emergency communications systems. As the result of the shortcomings identified in the



Figure 3. Old Eastern Police Station as seen in 2009

Oakland and San Francisco systems after the 1906 earthquake, Oakland started a rebuild of its Police and Fire system. Other events prompting the great change were the expansion of the Oakland’s city limits and the construction of the new City Hall. By 1911, the City had created 3 Police Districts: Central, Northern and Eastern. (Figure 3) Each of these Police Stations managed daily activities and operated as “mini cities”.

The new system included Oakland-manufactured boxes made of cast iron. (Figure 4) Each box contained modern telephone units that were directly connected to police stations. The doors were cast with the words, “Police Station” as shown in photo to the right. Oakland’s “Iron Age” was also marked by the use of cast iron streetlights and dedicated Police and Fire pedestals known as “harps” (Figure 5)



Figure 4. Original style Oakland Police call box

The fire units that were installed with a light had a standard street globe painted with the words "Fire Alarm"; those without lights had a cast iron phoenix. (Figure 6)



Figure 5. Harp pedestal with red flash light

The police/Fire combination poles took on another look and had a special red Hallophane light and lens installed. These lights were called "flashlights" and alerted officers to call the station. In case of major emergencies or an "all call", a special red flashlight was installed on top of the New City Hall to alert officers to call in. With the advent and installation of the first radios in the 1940s and 1950s, the use of flashlights was terminated. The last working unit, located at 17th and Madison, was removed in the late 1970s.



Figure 6. Oakland's Phoenix 1

The late 1930s and early 1940s saw the emergence of boxes made of cast aluminum. Originally used as replacements for the cast iron versions, the cast aluminum boxes were much like the units used today. The change in materials was a huge relief to the installers of that period who were lifting 65 pound cast iron fire boxes and 45 pound police boxes. Enhancements during World War II included a number of call boxes that were painted silver; a special lock

Originally used as replacements for



Figure 7. WWII Silver box plaque

installation that allowed the box to open but did not allow the key to be removed; box numbers painted on the inside and a special sign (Figure 7) indicating that the box allowed citizens to use the phone to report crimes or suspicious activities. This practice was later expanded to area where phone service was not readily available, such as Lake Merritt and Joaquin Miller Park. These were discontinued around 1965.

Consolidation of Systems and Command

In 1955, amidst a police scandal, district police stations were closed and the department was consolidated into one command. Police boxes were routed over “tie lines” between Central (City Hall) and the former district stations. The next change occurred in the late 1960s when equipment was installed at the Temescal branch library to allow for direct dialing from the call box. The old Northern police district lines were routed to this location and rotary dial units were installed. Following was the Eastern police district boxes and the location of equipment at the Melrose branch library and installation of rotary phones. The last transition took place in the late 1970s and included the Central district boxes and the elimination of the City Hall switchboard and City Hall telephone operators.

During the 1960s, the new doors were ordered to replace any damaged units and for new installations. These new units had the word “Station” removed to reflect the new consolidation of the Police department into one central building and command. (Figure 8)

The final modifications to Oakland’s call boxes occurred in 1991 with a move to the current call box doors, reflecting several changes in Police command: the shift of operations from the Oakland Electrical Department to the newly created Office of Corporate Information Services (OCIS); extensive damage to the old underground cable structure due to the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake; and the increased use of touch-tone and modem technologies. The new units were assigned a Centrex number, modem jack and touchtone phone. The units were able to both send and receive calls, which allowed them to contact persons and have them return the call. (Figure 9)



Figure 8. 1960s Call Box

The increased use of laptop computers in the department required modems. The ultimate change was related to the pedestals and number of boxes in use. A

decision was made to eliminate the majority of “street boxes” and replace them with 35 (one for each Police beat), car-accessible boxes. This allowed officers to dive up and easily use the units. The old units, mostly the original cast iron boxes, were donated to the Oakland PAL unit and sold to officers in the 1990s.

The box in figure 9 represents the last 50 Oakland call boxes. These units were sold by Oakland PAL from 2010-2014



Figure 9. One of Oakland's last call boxes

