

Southern Pacific's Unique Concrete Telephone Booths

An SP Distinctive Fondly Remembered

by Frank Scheer



The Oakdale Local rumbles past the station sign and phone booth at Farmington, California, on the Oakdale Branch on October 24, 1983. Although a bit tattered, the bay window caboose, the wood station sign board, the depot palm and, yes, the concrete telephone booth were all distinctive icons of the Southern Pacific. -*Dave Stanley*

As unique to the Southern Pacific as its Cab Forwards and Daylight engines were its concrete telephone booths. Those old round, cement telephone booths with the conical roofs were once as much a part of the railroad scene as the tracks and the trains they ran on. They were everywhere and in the days before the use of radios rendered them obsolete they were a vital part of railroading. They could be found at most strategic locations, such as industrial spurs, siding switches, road crossings and anywhere else without an open office where there was apt to be a need for someone to call in.

The need to protect field telephones is believed to have begun in 1918 with the use of wooden call boxes mounted to line poles. These proved to be easy targets for vandalism and phone theft, although many continued to be used to the 1970s and later. The need for more secure field phones and protection from the elements began with the solution of concrete telephone booths in 1921. A known location of their manufacture was at the West Oakland Maintenance of Way Shops. Untold hundreds were manufactured there with a 2 cubic yard concrete mixer and the concrete cast into wood and sheet metal molds. They were usually cast in one piece, and after curing, were loaded onto flat cars for the destination of various field locations, where they were set off with a small crane.

They were at first equipped with Western Electric model 1517 BU wood cased telephones with a push to talk button and head set receiver to write down train orders. A hand crank generator was used to ring the other party on the line. Sometimes different ring signal sequences were used to alert a particular party to be called when multiple phones were connected to a single line. Two dry cell batteries in the phone powered the talk circuitry with 3 volts out over the line. Bell ringers and the ability to receive calls was not normally used on these phones. There were usually two phone lines to the local SP dispatcher and SP phone line operator. The selec-

tion of phone lines was made by the use of a double throw knife switch. This was mounted on a thick wood board that the phone was mounted to, as well as lightening arresters connecting to a ground rod under the booth. A knife switch was mounted on top of the door jam that would automatically open the phone circuit as a hinged wood block mounted to the door, would close against it. This was to prevent phones from drawing down pole line voltages along the railroad. When opening the door, the knife switch would be closed by trainmen to use the phone. If desired, the door could be closed, and the hinged block moved down to clear the knife switch. Also a 6 inch gate hook could be used to keep the door open about 6 inches. The door could also be held wide open by a clip on a post positioned outside the booth. A hook was mounted on the inside wall to hang a railroad lantern for light during nighttime use.

Early booths had a small rack to hold train order blanks. A complaint among crews was that when booth doors were opened in high wind areas, wind would blow the train order blanks out of the holder. A few years later booths came equipped with a box built into the desk board with a hinged lid to hold train order blanks. In later years the writing desk board omitted the hinged lid for the train order box and just became a piece of plywood.

It is believed that SP quit making telephone booths with the advent of the 1930s economic depression, and did not manufacture anymore until the late 1930s. This time the design was changed omitting the protruding base and roof resulting in a cleaner appearance. Some train crews nicknamed them "pillboxes."

Sometime around 1950, Western Electric phones were no longer available, and some of the booths were equipped with brand name "Automatic Electric" phones. These had a regular phone receiver with a push to talk switch on the receiver handle, and a hand crank generator to ring out calls. By the 1970s regular dial and touch tone phones began to appear in some booths. The last concrete booths were made in 1955, and the molds for

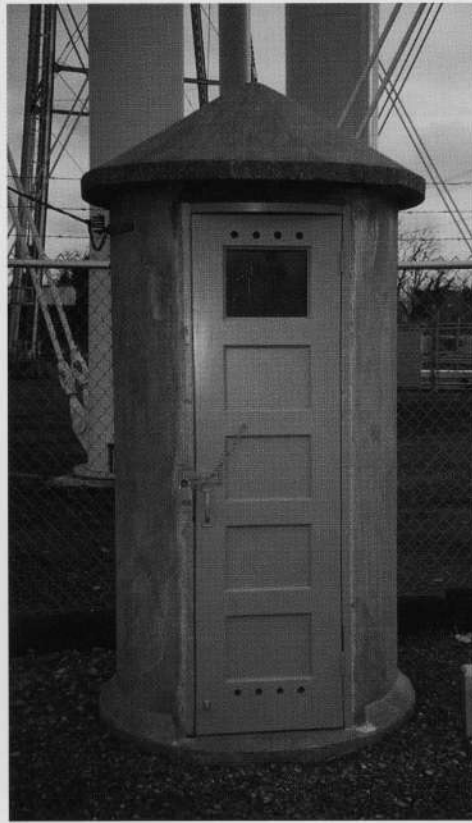


A familiar scene: A track inspector has set off his speeder at MP 337.2 in the Tehachapi Mountains between Caliente and the old siding of Allard, and awaits the passage of train No. 52, the *San Joaquin Daylight* about 1961. The ever-present concrete phone booth is close at hand. The door is open, and after No. 52 passes, the inspector will step inside to confer with the dispatcher about his next move. - *R.O. Stolzenfels*

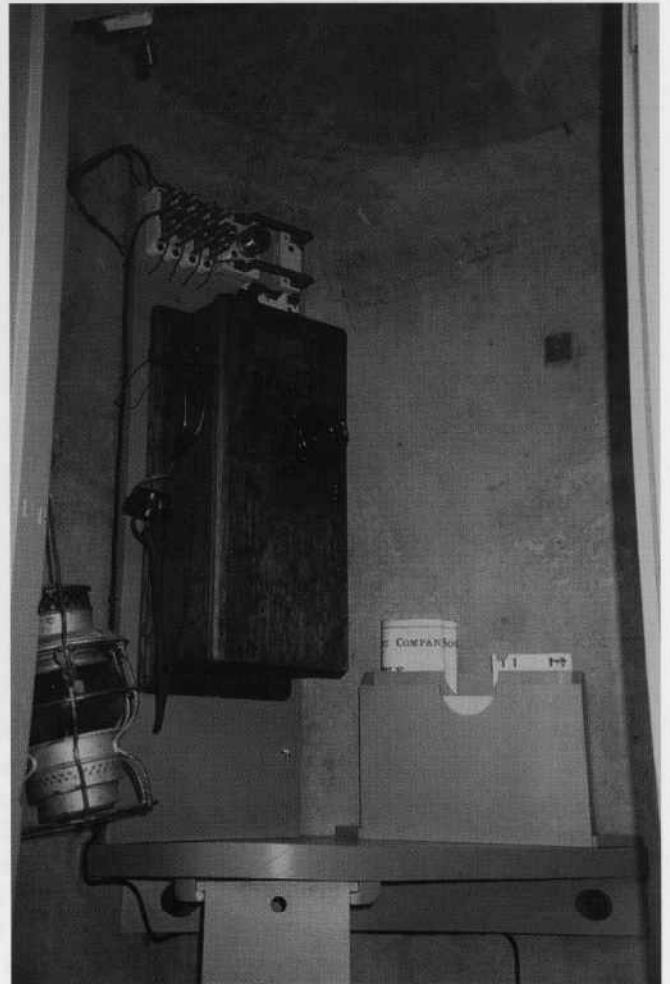
making them were broken up in 1960. Many booths were retired as CTC installations relegated phones into signal huts. Many booths were abandoned or removed and dumped for use as riprap along the tracks. Others were used for tool and grease storage in rail yards or along the right-of-way.

Phone booths were a part of every day life on the SP for track workers, signal maintainers, linemen, maintenance of way workers, and traincrews. Phone numbers were written on the walls, and later about 1950, small SP phone books were hung on a string from the phones. The booths

were often home to mice, squirrels, black widow spiders, and sometimes, rattlesnakes. Especially at night crews would be careful in opening the door, and the use of fuses to scare and clear them out was often necessary. And on occasion, it was known for lightning strikes on pole lines to blow a phone off the booth wall. The use of telephone booths on the SP continued up to the 1980s, and gave way to the use of train radios and the high cost of pole line maintenance. They were fondly remembered by all who used them "as a good place to come out of the rain and cold." ●



This phone booth was originally located at Lemrock, Oregon, MP 718 at the mainline junction near Salem with the branch line to Dallas. It is believed to have been manufactured in the early 1920s according to the number 165 inscribed in the floor. It was abandoned in 1967 when the branchline tracks were pulled up on nearby Union Street. It sat unused and vandalized until 1996 when it was donated to the Oregonian Railway Historical Society in Woodburn. SP's Signal Department delivered the booth by truck to the SP 1785 locomotive display site on the last day of SP's independent existence on September 10, 1996. The cleaning of spray paint graffiti was accomplished with oven cleaner and muriatic acid. A new door was made from drawings and photos in a cabinet shop, and is complete with mortise and tenon joints, and clear fir lumber. 1920s chicken wire pattern fire glass for the window was a challenge, but was found in a nearby glass shop. Lightning arresters and authentic hardware was donated by retired SP linemen and signal maintainers. A new desk complete with a way bill drawer and train order holder was replicated using parts from abandoned booths for patterns. The door and all woodwork was painted semi-gloss Battleship Gray, SP color drift panel no. 24 – the standard color for all SP phone booths. A phone that was used in a SP booth was procured from a railroad artifact collector and totally reconditioned and cleaned. In 1999, the Union Pacific Signal Department donated an 1898 Western Union pole removed from a nearby mainline siding. It was set up next to the booth complete with authentic line drop and pole line hardware donated by retired SP signal maintainers. The pole and booth project was completed by the writer in 1999, and the booth was sealed with a clear coat architectural sealer on the exterior to protect the concrete. –All, Frank Scheer





Train No.5, the *Argonaut*, rolls into Beaumont, California, with AC 4287 and GS 4431 on January 14, 1951. Conveniently located at siding switch is one of SP's concrete phone booths. -Donald Duke



Baldwin 5233, coming off the West Side Branch, stays in the clear for train No. 663 with engine 5031 at Willsburg Jct., Oregon, in 1953. At strategic locations such as this, the concrete phone booths played a vital role in train operations before the advent of two-way radio. -Tom Dill collection



A familiar scene on the Coast Division finds empty reefers rolling through Honda, California, in March 1949, with a concrete phone booth conveniently located midway in the siding. -*Al Phelps collection*

Mud daubers loved to build nests in them and one's first thought when you removed the padlock and opened the door was to stand back lest a mad hornet come roaring out to protest your entrance into its domain. Your next thought as you stepped inside was of spiders. They too made their home in those old phone booths and if the phone had not been used for a few days it would be necessary to brush away the spider webs before entering. In New Mexico it was common to throw a fusee inside to roust snakes.

Sometimes it seemed as if the people who built the railroad had gone out of their way to locate sidings at locations where a public road crossed the track. No matter what the hour, day or night, there was always sure to be at least one car that would show up and want to cross the track while you had the crossing blocked, waiting on a meet. This was bad enough on straight track before we had hand held radios, but when your train was wrapped around a curve cutting the crossing could be a real chore. To help this situation the company placed telephones at many of the crossings. As soon as the train stopped, the head brakeman would go to the telephone and listen in on the load line. Meanwhile, a brakeman would walk up to the crossing from the caboose and if it became necessary to cut the crossing the instructions were passed to the head man by telephone and he in turn relayed them to the engineer by hand signals. -*Jack Bowden*

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Those old cement telephone booths were a treasure trove of railroad history. Written in pencil on the walls were the names of conductors long dead, the numbers of steam locomotives gone to the scrap heap over half a century earlier, political comment and railroad doggerel such as....

I'm the conductor of the train,
With my head in a phone booth,
And my ass out in the rain ...

Or perhaps, up hill slow, down hill
fast, tonnage first and safety last...

Obscenity was rare, if non existent. This graffiti was traced from inside phone booth No. 161, once located at the east switch at Hito, Oregon.

-*Jack Bowden*

Opposite: The older style booths were widely used in the 1920s. The panel door and window made these booths more susceptible to vandalism and theft of phones. This type of booth was difficult to roll on the ground for positioning, and a sling was used around the booth to lift and move it with a crane. These concrete telephone booths weighed about 3,000 pounds and were comprised of about 3/4 of a cubic yard of concrete. Monterey white sand and granite gravel aggregates were used in the concrete that was quite durable, and gave a good appearance to the booths. This drawing dates from March 1921, revised to September 1927. -*Steve Peery Jr. collection*



Restored newer style phone booth at Canby, Oregon, Depot Museum, above and left, restored by the writer in 2000. -Two photos, Frank Scheer



Still in use in 2003, this phone booth at Macdoel, California, left, exhibits the sad effects of reactive sand and gravel aggregates that have deteriorated the cement used in the concrete making it porous to moisture which freezes in, resulting in crumbling concrete, and corroding reinforcing bars. -John R. Signor

This is a newer style phone booth interior with a later Automatic Electric phone. Just above the phone, a three-way knife switch allowed the user to select the line he wished to use. When centered the phone was disconnected, but by moving it to one side the user gained access to the dispatcher's line and by pushing it the other way to the load line. This was a party line connected to telephones in all of the depots and section foremen's houses for perhaps 100 miles along the line. Before placing a call on the load line you first listened in for a few seconds to make certain the line was not in use. The train dispatcher's line was also a party line. To talk to him you simply listened in for a few seconds and if you heard no one talking you pushed the "talk" button and spoke the name of the station you were calling from and then waited. Bye and bye, when he felt so inclined, the dispatcher would answer and you could state your business. -Frank Scheer

