

Ask most people what the early internet looked like and they picture AOL trial CDs and that unmistakable dial-up screech. In California, though, the story started earlier, on systems that ran quietly over copper phone lines years before AOL became a household name. Those experiments, and the telephone companies that carried them, still echo in how business phone systems, landlines, and even star codes like \*82 work today.

I have spent enough time tracing old trunks in California telecom closets to know that every “modern” phone service sits on layers of history. You can still see it in central offices where legacy Pacific Bell tags share space with AT&T stickers, and the same copper pairs that once carried early online services now backhaul VoIP.

This article is about that through line: what came before AOL, how dial-up and early online communities depended on the phone network, and how that legacy shapes California’s current mix of landlines, mobile carriers, and business phone systems.

## **Before AOL: The online world that lived on phone lines**

Long before people asked “What came before AOL?” network engineers and hobbyists in California were already using the phone system as a primitive data network. The big name in 1973 was not “the internet” as we know it. It was ARPANET, a Defense Department research network linking universities and labs, including several in California. ARPANET is the closest answer to the question “What was the internet called in 1973?”. It ran mostly over leased lines, not dial-up, but it set the ideas.

Outside of defense and academia, a different scene grew up around the public switched telephone network. Most of it looked nothing like a web browser. It felt more like calling a talking bulletin board that replied with text.

### **National services that predated AOL**

AOL went mainstream in the early to mid 1990s. By that time, several national consumer services were already seasoned veterans.

CompuServe is the classic example. Commercial users were on it in the late 1970s, and by the 1980s many California professionals used it for email, stock quotes, and technical forums. When people ask “What were the old internet dial-up providers?” or “What were the internet providers in the 90s?”, CompuServe is almost always on the list. It was joined by rivals such as Prodigy and GEnie, each with their own culture and pricing.

These services ran over ordinary phone lines. You dialed a local access number with a modem, often at 1200 or 2400 baud, long before anyone wondered “Which is the most popular smartphone operating system?” or “What are the top 10 most popular operating systems?”. The only operating system question then was whether your terminal software could handle the service’s character set.

If you lived in California, your experience depended heavily on which telephone company served your area, because that determined whether you had a local access number or had to pay long distance to reach the service.

### **Local BBS culture in California**

The most vibrant pre-AOL world lived even closer to home: bulletin board systems, or BBSes. These were typically one-line systems hosted on a hobbyist’s computer and a standard landline. You would call, hear the modem handshake, and drop into a menu of message boards, file archives, and sometimes online games.

In the Bay Area and Southern California, there were hundreds of BBS numbers printed in computer store newsletters or traded in school hallways. They taught a generation of kids how to configure modems, fiddle with

Hayes AT commands, and understand that a phone line could carry “internet-like” services.

Technically, BBSes were not the internet, and they were not part of the answer to “What was the first website ever?” (that honor goes to the CERN info page, launched in 1991 at [info.cern.ch](http://info.cern.ch)). But they trained people to think of the phone network as a data network, which later drove demand for dial-up ISPs.

## The phone companies behind the early online world

If you are curious “What were the telephone companies in the 1980s?”, for California there is one name you cannot avoid: Pacific Telephone and Telegraph, later Pacific Bell or PacBell. It sat under the umbrella of the old AT&T Bell System, often just called “the phone company”. That phrase answers the question “What was the old phone company called?” in much of the United States.

The breakup of AT&T in 1984 splintered the old monopoly into regional “Baby Bells”. In California, Pacific Bell became part of Pacific Telesis. GTE served some pockets as an independent. MCI and Sprint started to appear as long-distance competitors. When people talk about “the past telephone companies” or “some old phone companies”, they usually mean these names:

1. Pacific Bell and its parent Pacific Telesis, which dominated California local service.
2. GTE in select California markets, plus many rural independent telcos.
3. AT&T Long Lines for long distance, later joined by MCI and Sprint.

Later, SBC acquired Pacific Telesis, then AT&T, and rebranded itself as AT&T. Verizon inherited much of GTE’s footprint, then sold its California wireline network to Frontier. That is why, when you try to answer “What companies still offer landline service?” or “Which companies still offer a landline?” in California, you have to mention AT&T and Frontier, plus a long tail of small independent carriers and cable operators that provide VoIP over coax.

If you look for “What is the oldest phone company in America?”, the roots go back to the original Bell Telephone Company founded in the 1870s. Through mergers and antitrust cases it morphed into the Bell System, then into today’s AT&T and its relatives. A lot of the physical plant in California central offices still bears Bell-era design.

## Dial-up ISPs and the bridge to the modern internet

By the early 1990s, the online world started to look more familiar. The question shifted from “What came before AOL?” to “Which internet provider should I use?” and “What are the old dial-up internet companies?”.

In California, three kinds of players mattered.

First, the branded national providers: AOL, CompuServe, Prodigy, and later EarthLink and NetZero. These companies marketed aggressively, mailed installation CDs, and bought magazine ads. If someone asks “What were the internet providers in the 90s?”, those names usually appear in the first breath.

Second, regional ISPs. In the Bay Area and Los Angeles, there were dozens of small companies running modem banks in office parks and colo facilities. They catered to power users who wanted shell accounts, early web hosting, or usenet feeds rather than AOL’s walled garden. Many of these companies have merged, rebranded, or quietly disappeared, falling into the category of “phone companies out of business” in the wider sense, even if they were technically ISPs rather than voice carriers.

Third, the telephone companies themselves got into the game. Pacific Bell Internet Services started offering dial-up under its own brand. That was the first time many California households thought of their local phone company as

both voice and internet provider.

The early dial-up boom also raised an awkward problem: busy signals. Every dial-up customer tied up a line for hours at a time. In apartment buildings and small businesses, it was common for someone to complain that the “phone is always busy” because a teenager was online. This strain is one reason phone companies later embraced DSL. It kept the voice channel clear while data rode a higher frequency over the same copper pair.

## **How those early systems shaped California’s phone infrastructure**

The pre-AOL era left technical and cultural fingerprints that still matter when you start comparing “What are the major telecommunications companies?” or asking which carrier has “the best phone system” for a business.

### **Central office design and copper loops**

The heavy use of dial-up taught carriers that subscribers wanted multiple concurrent calls and stable lines suitable for data. California central offices upgraded their switching equipment and loop plant partly to handle modem traffic. Those investments later made DSL and early business T-1 services more viable.

Even now, when people search for “Do landlines still work without internet?”, the answer in much of California is yes, as long as you still have traditional POTS from a carrier that maintains analog service. That plain copper line is the same basic medium that once carried BBS traffic and early CompuServe sessions.

The catch is that some providers are migrating customers from true POTS to VoIP based dial tone delivered over fiber or cable. In those setups, the “landline” depends on your internet connection and a local power source. It is worth asking a provider directly “Can I just have a landline without internet?” and listening carefully to whether they mean copper POTS or VoIP.

### **Business phone systems: from key systems to IP PBX**

Every time a company asks “What is a business phone system?” they are stepping into a history that stretches back to the same phone network that carried early online services.

In the 1980s and 1990s, most California offices ran key systems or PBXs connected to analog or digital trunks from Pacific Bell. Those trunks might also carry dial-up modem calls or early leased-line data services. The wiring closets of that era were dense: 25-pair cables for voice, coax for early LANs, and sometimes CSU/DSUs for T-1 data.

Today, a modern business phone system in California is more likely an IP PBX or a hosted UCaaS platform, often running over fiber or cable broadband. Despite the new technology, the underlying questions feel familiar:

Who has the best phone system for a given business size, call volume, and budget?

What is the best business phone system if you prioritize reliability over features, or vice versa?

The answer depends less on glossy marketing and more on how well your provider controls last-mile connectivity, power backup, and quality of service. The ghosts of dial-up are still there. If your broadband link fails, your cloud phone system goes down just like a BBS did when someone picked up the wrong extension.

## **Landlines in California: still here, but changing**

A lot of Californians are surprised to learn that traditional landlines still exist, even as mobile phones and VoIP dominate. The more specific questions sound like:

Which companies still offer a landline?

What companies now support original landlines? Will I lose my landline in 2027?

There is no single cutoff year in the United States similar to the UK's announced 2025 PSTN shutdown. In California, AT&T has signaled [Phone Systems Company California](#) its desire to transition away from legacy copper in favor of IP based services, particularly in rural and hard-to-maintain areas. Frontier and smaller carriers face similar economics. The regulatory environment, however, slows any immediate shutdown, especially where there is no adequate alternative.

So if you ask "What year will landlines be phased out?" the honest answer is that it will happen gradually and unevenly, often region by region, and often with regulatory hearings in the middle. You will not wake up one morning in 2027 to find every copper line in California cut. You are more likely to receive notices that your current POTS line is reaching "end of support" and being migrated to digital service.

For many households and businesses, especially those in wildfire-prone areas or with unreliable power, the distinction matters. True POTS lines supplied power from the central office, so they often stayed up during local outages. VoIP lines rely on your on-site power and broadband.

## **Landlines for seniors: simplicity, price, and reliability**

A recurring theme in client conversations is how to support older family members. People ask:

What is the best landline service for senior citizens?

Which is the best landline phone provider for seniors? What is the simplest landline phone for seniors?

The answer starts with simplicity and clarity. For seniors with cognitive or vision challenges, a basic corded or large button cordless phone is often better than a smartphone, no matter "What is the top 1 phone in the world" by sales or which device "most billionaires use". The phone that gets answered is the best one.

California residents looking for senior-friendly landlines should pay attention to:

1. Whether the service is true POTS or VoIP, because that affects operation during power failures.
2. The availability of Lifeline or senior discount programs, which can reduce monthly bills.
3. The cost of features like caller ID, call blocking, and long distance, which should be predictable and easy to read on a bill.
4. Whether the provider supports useful star codes like \*77 for anonymous call rejection.

As of 2024, AT&T still offers some regulated landline services in its California territory, but availability can vary by address. Frontier and small independent carriers do as well. Cable companies typically offer VoIP based "digital phone" bundles. If someone asks "How much is an AT&T landline per month for seniors?" the only honest response is to say it varies by region, tariff, and eligibility for programs, so checking AT&T's current California tariff pages or calling sales is necessary.

For pure price shoppers who want "the cheapest landline provider" or specifically ask "What is the cheapest landline phone service without internet?", the lowest tariffs are often in regulated POTS or Lifeline plans, not VoIP, but they may lack advanced call screening that could protect seniors from spam.

## **Star codes, caller ID, and the legacy of the PSTN**

Those old online days also shaped the feature layer of the phone system. The same switches that routed dial-up calls learned tricks like caller ID, call return, and call screening. These survive as star codes.

If you have ever wondered “What does \*82 do on a landline?”, it unblocks your caller ID on a per-call basis if you normally have it hidden. Its counterpart, \*67, blocks caller ID for an individual call. These features descend from the era when caller ID was a premium add-on, and privacy rules required a simple way to override it.

Two other codes still matter:

\*77 enables anonymous call rejection on many landline systems. If a caller with blocked ID tries to reach you, the network plays a message telling them to unblock or hang up. This can be invaluable for seniors tired of spam calls, or for businesses that want to reduce anonymous harassment.

\*#69 (or in some systems simply \*69) is call return. It dials back the last incoming number, even if you did not answer it. It is one of those small conveniences that date back to when answering machines were tape based, and “recent call lists” did not exist.

These codes live on in IP based systems because people expect them. They are part of the cultural vocabulary of the PSTN, carried through every technical refresh.

## From early telcos to today’s major providers

Against that historical backdrop, modern questions like “What are all the major phone companies?” or “Who is the #1 phone company?” start to sound slightly different. It is no longer a story of one monopoly, but of overlapping ecosystems: mobile, cable, fiber, and legacy copper.

In the United States, the big names in wireless are AT&T, Verizon, and T-Mobile. All three operate in California and compete hard for subscribers. Depending on which analyst you believe, Verizon or AT&T usually tops revenue charts, while T-Mobile has led in customer growth. When someone asks “What are the top 3 phone service providers?” or wants “an alternative to Verizon”, the conversation usually revolves around these three and a growing number of MVNOs that ride their networks.

On the fixed side, AT&T and Frontier are the main traditional telcos in California. Cable companies like Comcast’s Xfinity and Spectrum provide broadband and VoIP phone. A range of over-the-top providers layer cloud PBX services on top of any broadband, [Phone Systems Company California](#) which is where many modern business phone systems live.

Globally, if you widen the lens to software and devices and ask “What are the 7 big tech companies?” or “What are the major telecommunications companies?”, you start to include Apple, Google, Microsoft, Meta, Amazon, and others that do not own much last-mile fiber but dominate the services running over it.

For end users, the more practical questions are:

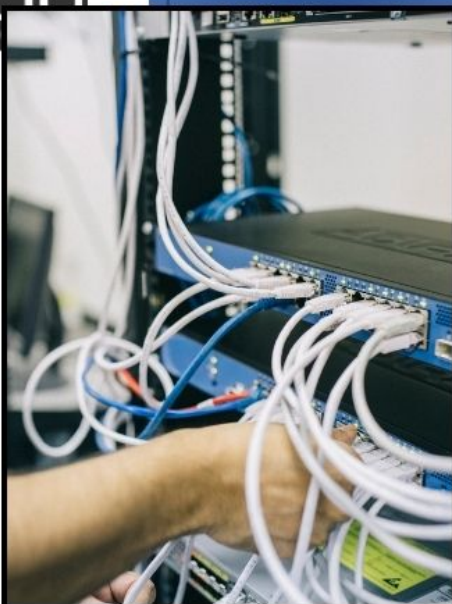
Who has the best phone system for my specific needs: a home office, a multi-site retail chain, a medical office that must meet regulatory standards?



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Which phone is least likely to be hacked for my threat model and level of discipline?

Most billionaires, celebrities, and public figures use flagships like iPhones or high-end Android phones because of ecosystem, not security alone. Answers to “What phone does Elon Musk use?” or “What phone does Donald Trump use?” change over time and often mix rumor with fact. For security, what matters more is whether you keep the device updated, avoid sideloaded apps, use strong authentication, and separate work from personal data.

## Practical implications for California businesses and households

When you zoom out, the story of what came before AOL is really a story about how Californians learned to treat the telephone network as more than a voice system. That mindset still matters when you design or buy communications services today.

For a small business choosing a phone system in California, it is worth remembering that every “cloud” solution ultimately depends on physical loops, conduit, and central office gear that trace back to Pacific Bell and its peers. You should evaluate providers on their control over that last mile, their power backup, and their track record of handling regional disasters such as wildfires and grid failures.

For a family deciding whether to keep a landline for an older relative, the tradeoff is between the resilience and simplicity of POTS, the feature richness of VoIP, and the mobility of wireless. California’s terrain and fire risk make that calculation different in the Sierra foothills than in downtown San Diego.

And for anyone nostalgic about dial-up days, the next time you hear someone ask “What came before AOL?” or “What were the old internet dial-up providers?”, remember that the deepest answer is under your feet. It is the twisted pair cable leaving your house, the distribution frame in a neighborhood pedestal, the cross-connects in a central office built in the Bell era, and the long history of people using those wires for more than voice.

That is the infrastructure that made California's early online services possible, and it is still at work every time a modern smartphone hands a call off to the legacy network that started it all.