



Exploding The Phone

db255

www.explodingthephone.com

Bibliographic Cover Sheet

Title **blue box bust**

Publication *Telenews*

Date 1981-07-11

Author(s) Schmidt, Libby

V/I/P p. 14

Abstract The story behind Illinois Bell's first federal conviction for phone fraud. They had previously had more than 50 state convictions. Two doctors are convicted of using a blue box.

Keywords Illinois Bell (IB); blue box; John Connolly (security, IB); Elaine Bell (security, IB); Bob Kitzinger (district manager, security, IB)

The following pages may contain copyrighted material. We believe that our use of this material for non-commercial educational and research purposes constitutes "fair use" under Section 107 of U.S. Copyright Law. If you wish to use this material for purposes that go beyond "fair use," you must obtain permission from the copyright owner, if any. While it will make us slightly sad to do so, we will nonetheless comply with requests from copyright owners who want their material removed from our web site.

blue box bust



The infamous "blue box," when held to a telephone mouthpiece, can send signals that fool our switching equipment, letting cheaters use our lines toll-free.

Illinois Bell has had more than 50 state convictions for electronic toll fraud. Recently, a "blue box" fraud case went to U.S. District Court. The story behind our first federal conviction went like this:

Two doctors move toward the pay phone in a Chicago medical clinic's hallway as future fathers pace in an adjacent waiting room. One dials quickly while the other stands guard.

The first raises a small box to the transmitter, presses a red button, and sends a high pitched squeal through the telephone line.

He presses 12 other numbered and marked buttons in a prearranged pattern. Each touch brings corresponding chirps and beeps from the hand-sized set.

The hookup is complete. He hands the phone to his friend, who begins talking—toll free—to rela-

tives in Sri Lanka, an island off India. The first doctor leaves quietly with his "blue box."

As the second doctor's voice travels half way around the world, a machine only a mile away at Illinois Bell's headquarters notices the illegal call. It pinpoints the phone in the clinic and prints out the number the doctors have reached.

It fits the pattern. For five weeks, John Connolly, an Illinois Bell Security representative, has been monitoring more than 50 intercontinental calls from this source. He's ready to catch the callers today.

It's Wednesday. Most of the 26 other calls placed from the clinic

came on Wednesdays. One call came earlier today. Connolly waits in the clinic's lobby with a police officer.

Connolly's assistant, Elaine Bell, watches the printer at headquarters report the call. She checks the location of the pay phone and contacts Connolly on his pager. In minutes, the doctor is apprehended. He tells Connolly about his friend with the blue box.

Connolly's boss Bob Kitzinger, district manager-Security, is elated. He's been following the case and examines the evidence with Connolly. They decide they have a strong federal case so they meet with the FBI and the Assistant United States Attorney. Federal prosecution begins.

On June 19, 20 months after their last call, both doctors plead guilty

to international fraud by wire in U. S. District Court.

In court, the judge fined them \$1,000 each and placed them on two years probation. They also both must donate at least five hours per week for one year in service to the community.

So how do we catch blue box users? The blue box that got the doctors into trouble generates tones that open long-distance lines by fooling our automatic equipment. Every toll switching office has thousands of long-distance lines constantly whistling and beeping to lines in far-off toll switching offices.

When a line is vacant and waiting for a call, it whistles at 2600 hertz. The red button on the box mimics the sound of a vacant line by sending the same tone.

The toll cheater placed the illegal free call by calling a legitimate toll-free 800 service number. Before the number answered, he pressed his red button.

The 2600 hertz tone from his blue box made the line appear vacant. This allowed him to beep-in new routing instructions that sent his call to Sri Lanka. Our billing equipment thought he was just talking to the 800 service number.

Before beeping in the routing code, he must sound a tone used for interoffice signaling. A monitor in TSPS offices listens for network signaling irregularities.

When the 2600 hertz tone is followed by this signaling sound, the monitor has a printer report the call to Security as a possible blue box call.

Connolly watched a pattern emerge from the reports of blue box calls in Illinois. After comparing caller locations and call destinations, he felt as if he knew the doctors.

"You have to be one step ahead of such callers," says Connolly. All he had to do was catch them in the act.

On a Wednesday in October, outside of the fathers' waiting room in a Chicago clinic, he did.

—Libby Schmidt



The compact blue box, so called because of the color of the first one recovered, may have its days numbered. Our equipment soon won't respond to its tones.



John Connolly checks a printer in Security's headquarters office as he watches for signs of an illegal blue box long distance telephone call.

Photos: Dick Williams