



Exploding The Phone

db273

www.explodingthephone.com

Bibliographic Cover Sheet

Title **'Blue Box', Other Devices Plague Ma Bell**

Publication *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Date 1972-11-06

Author(s) McGuire, John M.

V/I/P p. 14A

Abstract A brief overview of the current state of phone fraud in Southwestern Bell's territory. Includes mention of the raids in September, 1972 in Texas, and also describes the code word scheme used to give information without incurring charges on person to person calls.

Keywords Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT); blue box; Southwestern Bell Telephone Company (SBTCO); T. Edward Umphries (sec. mgr. SBTCO St. Louis region); Washington University; St. Louis University; The Outlaw (underground newspaper); credit card fraud; Dallas; Houston; code word fraud

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', Other Devices Plague Ma Bell

By JOHN M. McGUIRE

Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

Eight years ago, out of the halls of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, came an insidious device known as the "blue box."

The electronic gadget got its name from the rather ornate ("beautiful", in the opinion of one security man) carrying case used by the inventor.

It was invented by an MIT electrical engineering student, since prosecuted, and has found its way—through sub rosa channels—into business offices, households and student dormitories. The "blue box" is used to cheat on long-distance telephone calls.

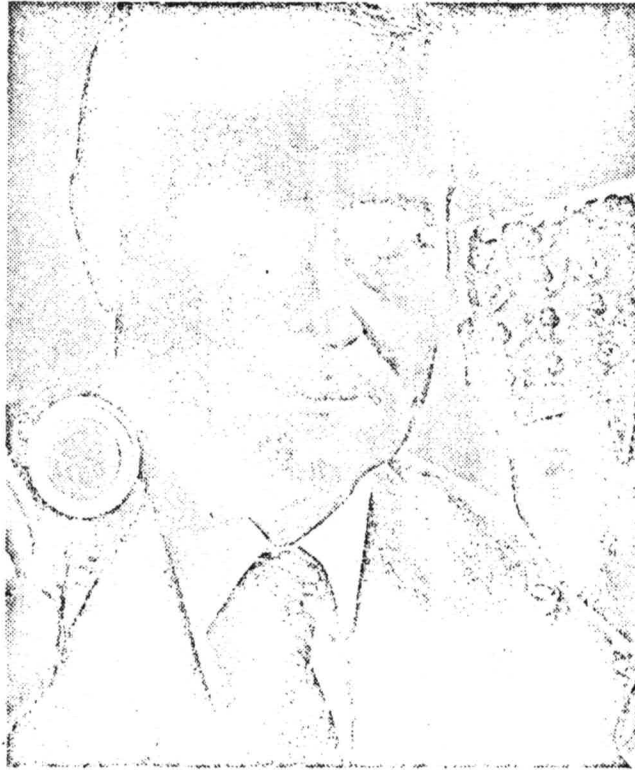
Of course, Ma Bell is mad about the boxes. The telephone system, including security men with Southwestern Bell Telephone Co. here, are stepping up investigations into the use of the illegal device.

A "blue box" has an extension which attaches to the speaker of a telephone and emits an electronic tone that prevents the phone company's billing mechanisms from working.

The entire piece of equipment, including batteries, little black buttons and solid state circuitry, can fit into a plastic playing card case.

T. Edward Umphries, resplendent in his red shirt and matching tie, is the man most responsible for keeping "blue boxes" off of telephones in this area. He has had some success. Umphries is security manager for Southwestern Bell in the St. Louis region.

Southwestern Bell operates in Missouri, Arkansas, Kansas,



A "BLUE BOX" confiscated by Southwestern Bell Telephone Co. is held by T. Edward Umphries, security manager for the utility here. The small electronic device is used to cheat on long-distance telephone calls. (Post-Dispatch Photo)

Texas, Oklahoma and a section of the Illinois side of the St. Louis metropolitan area.

Recently, Umphries and his three men caught a culprit here, an electrical engineer who works for a large firm in St. Louis County.

He was using his "blue box" device at home. And most of the illegal long-distance calls were made by his wife.

The errant electrical engineer learned how to assemble the "blue box" from a library book, Umphries said. He was not prosecuted, despite a new telephone company policy to the contrary, because he made full restitution and cooperated by turning in his box.

(The man had a secret government clearance and would have lost his job if the company had pressed the matter, says Umphries).

But he is quick to emphasize that Ma Bell is no longer a maternalistic mother when it comes to defrauding the company, either through "blue box"

Wrongdoers have usually tinkered with the long-distance telephone system in the false belief that the big, cumbersome Bell company would forgive and forget, explained the security manager.

Now the company is vigorously prosecuting those caught making illegal long-distance calls, a growing phenomenon that has cost the company millions of dollars.

There have been about 15 arrests at Washington and St. Louis Universities this school year involving fraudulent credit card use, said Umphries. Last year, illegal long-distance calls at Washington University alone cost the company \$25,000, he said.

(The Outlaw, an underground newspaper, periodically publishes a how-to-do-it article on phony credit cards systems, usually under the heading of "Tapping Ma Bell.")

The company has had little success in stopping the publication of such articles, but has tried to counter this by running notices in student newspapers warning of increased vigilance by the phone company. There have been a few suspected cases of "blue boxes" being used at universities here.

Southwestern Bell employs a variety of technical methods in its efforts to uncover "blue boxes." Most of these involve what the phone company calls electronic surveillance, a form of snooping condoned by the Federal Communications Commission.

The specifics of these various methods are a closely-kept company secret. But Southwestern Bell's "blue box" crack-down has met with notable success.

Fourteen business executives in Dallas and Houston were arrested for conspiracy to defraud the phone company in September after a "blue box" manufacturing ring was uncovered.

Federal authorities said the "blue boxes" were assembled for less than \$100 each and were being sold for \$3000, with an assurance to the buyer that authorities had no way of detecting the equipment.

Southwestern Bell engineers discovered the operation after finding out that a long-distance circuit was being used with no record made of the billing.

Probably the most commonplace form of long-distance shenanigans is the fictitious name code, a system frequently used by businessmen, said a Bell official.

Traveling salesmen, in particular, use code words to call their home office person-to-person and relay essential information without incurring a charge. The code is the name of a non-existent person.

"They may say, 'Is Hiram Jones there?' And the home office will say, 'I'm sorry we don't have a Hiram Jones.' But the code word Hiram Jones actually means that the salesman made the sale in Omaha and is moving on to Des Moines," explained the utility company executive.

Some salesmen carry little notebooks with code words for all types of situations, he said.

Umphries sent a plume of smoke from his pipe toward the ceiling and said something about the attitudes of people toward the phone company.

It can all be put under the heading of beating the system, he said. The same guy who would use a "blue box" would never think of stealing something off a retailer's rack, he said.

"That would be dishonest," he added, with a chuckle loaded with irony.