

Way We Were
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Park City's Whistle Woes
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In 1902, Park City installed a bell in the tower at City Hall (now the Park City Museum). The bell was meant to function as a fire alarm, but it wasn't long before complaints started rolling in. It had "the soothing effect of putting all to sleep," the Park Record lamented. A new method "that would be reasonable in cost and effective in work" was needed.

In April 1902, a replacement system was installed that used compressed air to power a whistle. The sound was far from soothing. "Of all the unearthly screeches those emitted at [the] trial were the worst...it was absolutely horrible," the Record reported after a test of the system. The siren "would awaken everybody between Gorgoza and the Snake Creek district."

There was one problem, however, and it was a large one: the system froze in cold weather, causing the compressor to malfunction and the siren to remain silent in emergencies. In 1905, this issue was counteracted with the installation of an electric siren controlled by the telephone company.

The electric system was not without its troubles either. The motor sometimes broke, and occasionally the connection between the telephone company and the alarm failed. Additionally, there were two competing telephone exchange companies in town. This caused confusion, such as arose in May 1908. A fire was reported to the Utah Independent Telephone Company, whose operators were experiencing connection problems and could not sound the alarm. They instead forwarded the message to the Rocky Mountain Bell office which, unbeknownst to them, had already received a separate report. The Bell arranged for the siren to be rung in the meantime, and, upon receiving the notice from the Independent "sometime later," declined to sound the siren a second time. There were some in town who believed that, had it been rung again, the house on fire may have been saved.

By 1916, the system needed an upgrade. Shortly after it was replaced in April, Parkites were again expressing dissatisfaction, arguing that the alarm was a "dead and dismal" failure and immediate steps must be taken to fix it. The city council discussed repairing and reinstalling the recently replaced alarm, but in the end decided to order yet another new apparatus. While they waited for parts to arrive, they appointed a night watchman for added protection.

The replacement system was slow in coming. "It seems strange in this age of push and progress," the newspaper stated, "that so much trouble is experienced in getting an electrically controlled fire alarm for Park City." It took over a year, but finally, in May 1917, the last parts of the mechanism arrived and were installed. The whistle itself was "hardly shrill enough," and some advocated for using the old whistle with the new apparatus, but the city made do with what it had.

At 10 o'clock every night, you can still hear the siren test. While the system is no longer used to announce fires and emergencies, the test is carried on in honor of days gone by.



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Credit: Park City Historical Society and Museum, Thomas F. Hansen Collection

Caption: The system that sounded the siren to warn of fire was housed in the bell tower at City Hall, pictured here ca.1911.