

If you grew up in California before the smartphone era, you probably remember a time when there was simply “the phone company”. You did not shop among dozens of providers. You called a single number, wrote a check to a single name, and a technician in a tan truck took care of everything from your kitchen wall phone to the wires on the pole.

That “old phone company” went through several names: Bell Telephone, Pacific Telephone, Pacific Bell, PacBell, and AT&T. The story behind those names tells you a lot about how we got from black rotary sets and operator-assisted calls to fiber internet and 5G.

This is a walk through that history, with a California focus, and some practical answers to modern questions about landlines, phone companies, and the old dial-up days.

The original “phone company”: Bell, AT&T, and Pacific Telephone

The short answer to “What was the old phone company called?” is usually AT&T. But in California, the picture is a bit more layered.

From Bell to AT&T

The oldest phone company in America traces back to Alexander Graham Bell in the 1870s. The Bell Telephone Company, formed in 1877, evolved into what most people simply called “the Bell System”. By the early 1900s, AT&T (American Telephone and Telegraph) had become the parent company that controlled local Bell companies across the country.

For much of the 20th century, AT&T and the Bell System were effectively a regulated monopoly. They were the single answer to most of these questions:

- Who is the number one phone company?
- Who has the best phone system?
- What are the major telecommunications companies?

For a long stretch, the answer was just “Bell / AT&T”, because there really were no competitors on the wired side.

The California piece: Pacific Telephone and Telegraph

In California and much of the West Coast, the local Bell operating company was Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company, usually shortened to “Pacific Telephone” or “Pac Tel” in conversation. Your grandmother in San Francisco probably did not say she had AT&T. She said “the phone company” or “Pacific Telephone”.

By the mid 20th century, Pacific Telephone covered most of California, parts of Nevada, and a few other western territories. Long distance, especially coast-to-coast, was branded under the AT&T name, but your bill and your lineman came from Pacific Telephone.

In the 1980s, the Bell System’s breakup forced a renaming and restructuring, and that is when Californians started seeing “Pacific Bell” and eventually “PacBell” on their bills and phone booths.

The breakup: 1980s phone companies and the birth of PacBell

If you ask “What were the telephone companies in the 1980s?” the most important event is the 1984 divestiture: the breakup of AT&T’s regulated monopoly into long-distance AT&T and a set of regional “Baby Bells”.

In everyday life, this landed on your kitchen table as a very confusing letter explaining that local and long-distance were now separate, and that “competition” was coming.

The seven Baby Bells and where California fit

After the breakup, seven regional companies inherited the local Bell networks. Californians mainly dealt with Pacific Telesis, which owned Pacific Bell.

Here is a quick, simplified snapshot of the Baby Bells and how they related to California:

1. Pacific Telesis Group - Owned Pacific Bell and Nevada Bell. This was the primary “old phone company” for California after 1984.
2. Ameritech - Midwest states, far from California, but you would see the name on some national telecom lists.
3. Bell Atlantic - Mid-Atlantic region, later part of what became Verizon.
4. BellSouth - Southeast U.S.
5. NYNEX - New York and New England.
6. Southwestern Bell (SBC) - Texas and nearby states, later merged with Pacific Telesis.
7. US West - Mountain West and Northwest.

When older Californians recall “PacBell” as the old phone company, they are remembering the Pacific Bell brand that operated under Pacific Telesis, and later under SBC, and finally under the resurrected AT&T brand.



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What was the name of the telephone company in the 80s?

If you lived in California in the mid to late 1980s, your local telephone company name on the bill was usually “Pacific Bell”. People shortened it naturally to “PacBell”. AT&T remained as a separate company handling long-

distance service. You might remember dialing a carrier access code to choose AT&T or an alternative long-distance provider on a call.

Elsewhere in the country, your local bill might have come from NYNEX, Ameritech, Bell Atlantic, BellSouth, Southwestern Bell, or US West. Together, those were the “big 5 phone companies” only if you focus on a specific region and time, but nationally the set of major regional phone companies and long-distance carriers was larger.

From PacBell back to AT&T: the brand merry-go-round

The 1990s and 2000s introduced a lot of confusing mergers. The end result is that PacBell effectively became AT&T again, just through a side door.

The rough sequence in California looked like this:

First, Pacific Bell operates under Pacific Telesis after the breakup. Second, Southwestern Bell Corporation, rebranded as SBC Communications, buys Pacific Telesis in the late 1990s. So Pacific Bell becomes part of SBC. SBC then buys the much smaller “new AT&T” in 2005, but keeps the stronger AT&T brand. SBC rebrands itself as AT&T Inc., and the Pacific Bell identity fades out.

So if you feel like AT&T disappeared, came back, and somehow swallowed PacBell, that intuition is accurate. The legal structures under the hood are complex, but from a customer point of view: the old California phone company you knew as PacBell eventually became the AT&T you see on fiber and wireless ads today.

The landline question: who still offers them, and for how long?

Many Californians now ask a very practical cluster of questions:

- Which companies still offer a landline?
- Can I just have a landline without internet?
- What companies now support original landlines?
- What year will landlines be phased out?
- Will I lose my landline in 2027?

The answers depend on what you mean by “landline” and where you live.

Original copper vs. Modern voice services

When people say “original landlines”, they usually mean traditional analog phone service over copper pairs, also called POTS (Plain Old Telephone Service). This is the service that still works during most power outages, that fed dial-up modems in the 1990s, and that older alarm systems used to call monitoring centers.

In California, traditional copper voice lines are now a shrinking product, but they have not vanished. Companies that either still offer POTS in some form, or offer a close replacement, include:

- AT&T, as the incumbent local exchange carrier in most of the state.
- Frontier, in territories it inherited from Verizon and other regional providers.
- Smaller rural carriers and cooperatives, often in more remote counties.

However, the trend is steadily away from POTS and toward digital voice over fiber or coax. Regulators at both the state and federal level have been letting carriers retire copper plant where they can show that alternatives exist. So the question “What year will landlines be phased out?” does not have a single nationwide date, but 2027 is often

mentioned in discussions because several carriers have internal timelines or proposals that target the second half of the 2020s to stop maintaining large chunks of copper.

The practical takeaway: if you still rely on a true copper line, especially in California, you should plan for eventual transition, even if it is a few years out.

Landlines without internet and cheapest options

You can still have a landline without internet in many areas, but there are caveats.

Traditional copper POTS lines can often still be ordered as “voice only”. In some AT&T territories, for example, you can request a basic measured or flat-rate residential line without bundling broadband. The monthly price will depend on city, taxes, and features, but you are not getting a 1980s bill. Before taxes and surcharges, it is common to see baseline voice-only prices in the 30 to 50 dollar per month range, sometimes more in high-cost areas. If you ask “How much is an AT&T landline per month for seniors?”, you will find that while some states once pushed for special senior tariffs, many of those have narrowed. What you often get now is a small discount or optional low-cost measured service, not a dramatic price cut.

If you are strictly chasing “the cheapest landline phone service without internet”, the answer often is not POTS at all. Instead it is:

- VoIP service bundled with a low-tier internet plan from a cable provider.
- An independent VoIP service like Ooma or VoIP.ms, using a basic broadband line.
- A wireless “home phone” box that uses the cellular network but lets you plug in a regular phone.

Who is the cheapest landline provider will vary by market. In some California suburbs, a Comcast or Spectrum voice bundle plus basic internet may undercut an AT&T copper line. In a rural area where cable never came, the AT&T or local carrier copper line might still be the only realistic choice.

For seniors, the “best landline service for senior citizens” is often the one that prioritizes reliability and simplicity over absolute price. That might still be a POTS line, if it exists, or it might be digital voice with battery backup and a very simple handset.

Simple phones and secure phones: choosing the right device

When people ask about the “simplest landline phone for seniors” or “What’s the easiest phone for an elderly person?”, the answer is less about the network and more about the physical design.

For landline-style service, look for a corded or cordless base with:

- Large, high-contrast buttons and clear labeling.
- Loud ringer with tone adjustment and visual flash options.
- Simple speed-dial memory keys for key contacts.

Models from companies like VTech, AT&T-branded home phones (a separate hardware business), and Panasonic have long catered to this market. The best landline phone provider for seniors in this sense is often the one that pairs a stable line with equipment the person can actually use without fear of “breaking something”.

On the mobile side, any assessment of the “top 20 phone brands” or “top 10 most popular phones” will usually include Apple, Samsung, Xiaomi, Oppo, Vivo, and a few others, but for seniors the popular giants are not always the most suitable. Some older users prefer the iPhone because the accessibility features (larger text, voice control,

hearing aid compatibility) are polished. Others gravitate toward simple feature phones with physical keypads sold through carriers' "basic phone" lines.

If you are asking "Which phone is least likely to be hacked?", the safest practical recommendation is usually a recent iPhone or a fully updated Android from a major vendor like Google or Samsung, used with sensible habits. Security is less about brand mystique and more about software update support, default encryption, and not sideloading questionable apps. When people ask "What phone do most billionaires use?" or "What phone does Elon Musk use?" or "What phone does Donald Trump use?", the rumored answers often point toward iPhones or tightly managed Android devices, but the bigger lesson is that high-profile users rely on locked-down configurations and staff to manage risk, not just a magic model.

On the operating system side, "Which is the most popular smartphone operating system?" is straightforward: Android by market share worldwide, with iOS second but dominant in certain markets like the United States. If you zoom out to "What are the top 10 most popular operating systems?" across all devices, you end up counting Windows, macOS, iOS, Android, ChromeOS, several Linux distributions, and specialized embedded systems, but for phones the realistic "big 5" mobile operating systems still in broad use are mainly Android and iOS, with legacy or niche systems like KaiOS and remnants of others trailing far behind.

Star codes and old-school landline tricks

Before smartphones, a lot of "smart" behavior lived directly in the network. Those cryptic star codes did real work, and some still do.

Common questions include:

- What does *82 do on a landline?
- What is *77 on your phone?
- What is the *#69 code used for?

Not all codes are universal, and some features have been retired or changed, but in many traditional North American systems:

1. *82 lets you unblock your caller ID on a per-call basis if you normally have it blocked.
2. *77 activates anonymous call rejection in some regions, blocking callers who withhold their number.
3. *69 is a call return feature that dials back the last incoming number, sometimes with a fee per use.
4. *67 blocks your caller ID on a per-call basis, the opposite of *82.
5. *72 and *73 have often been used to activate and deactivate call forwarding.

These codes came from the era when the phone company controlled almost everything and your telephone was a simple terminal. In some digital voice and mobile systems, the codes still work. In others, they are implemented differently or replaced with app-based controls. It is worth checking your specific provider's documentation before relying on them.

Dial-up days: early internet providers and what came before AOL

For anyone who can still hear the screech of a 56k modem, the question "What were the old internet dial-up providers?" probably triggers a flood of brand names.

In the 1990s, especially in California, you might have dialed in through:

- AOL, of course, but also CompuServe, Prodigy, and EarthLink.

- Netcom, one of the early San Jose based ISPs, important in tech circles.
- MindSpring (later merged with EarthLink).
- Local university or community bulletin board systems that added TCP/IP access.

So “What came before AOL?” depends on what you mean by internet access. If you are talking about commercial online services, CompuServe and The Source predated AOL as large, national, proprietary dial-up services. If you mean genuine internet connectivity, ARPANET and university networks provided remote access well before consumer ISPs emerged.

What was the internet called in 1973?

In 1973, the word “internet” in the everyday sense did not exist yet. The main packet-switched network was ARPANET, funded by the U.S. Department of Defense’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). Researchers were already using the term “internetworking” to describe connecting multiple networks together, and by the late 1970s and early 1980s, “the internet” as a technical term for the interconnected TCP/IP networks began to take hold.

There was no “first website ever” in 1973 because the World Wide Web came much later. The first website, constructed by Tim Berners-Lee at CERN, went live in 1991. Before that, people on ARPANET and early internet systems used protocols like telnet, FTP, and email to share information.

What were the internet providers in the 90s?

By the mid 1990s, the roster of internet providers in California and across the U.S. Included:

National brands like AOL, CompuServe, Prodigy, EarthLink, and MSN dial-up. Regional ISPs like Netcom, Best Internet, and many university-affiliated or city-focused providers. Telcos and cable companies entering the market with early DSL and cable modem services.

The “dark side of the internet” that people talk about now, involving scams, malware, and harmful content, developed in parallel with that expansion. Even in the 1990s, questionable dialers, phishing-style emails, and unregulated forums existed. The arrival of consumer broadband and the web simply amplified scale and speed.

The big players now: from Baby Bells to telecom giants

If you ask today, “What are all the major phone companies?” or “What are the major telecommunications companies?” in the United States, the list looks very different from the 1980s Baby Bells.

For mobile and wired consumer service, the top 3 phone service providers by national presence are typically:

AT&T, Verizon, and T-Mobile in the mobile space. If you expand to include cable and broadband, Comcast (Xfinity) and Charter (Spectrum) join the group as essential telecom **Phone Systems Company California** giants. So a modern “big 5 phone companies” perspective in the United States might reasonably include AT&T, Verizon, T-Mobile, Comcast, and Charter, depending on the exact metric.

If you widen the lens globally and include tech, “What are the 7 big tech companies?” often points to a set like Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Meta (Facebook), Tesla, and Nvidia, or some similar grouping. Several of those companies control major mobile ecosystems even if they do not run phone lines in the traditional sense. When you ask “Which is the most popular smartphone operating system?” and the answer is Android, remember that Google sits at the center of that infrastructure, just as AT&T once sat at the center of the old phone network.

Alternatives to the big carriers

People often want an “alternative to Verizon” or to AT&T on the wireless side. They might not realize that many alternatives are mobile virtual network operators (MVNOs) that ride on the big three networks while offering different prices or features.

For example, in the United States you have MVNO brands on AT&T, Verizon, and T-Mobile that let you escape the flagship pricing while still using the same towers. The catch is usually in deprioritization under heavy load or different customer support standards.

On the wired side, fiber competitors, municipal networks, and fixed wireless options are emerging, but those are very local. In California, some cities see active competition among AT&T fiber, cable, and independent fiber providers. Rural areas often rely on a single incumbent plus satellite or fixed wireless.

Business phone systems: from key systems to cloud PBX

The question “What is a business phone system?” used to have a simple answer: a box in the telecom closet that fed handsets on every desk. That box might have been a PBX (Private Branch Exchange) or a key system, and your local PacBell or AT&T rep happily sold or leased it to you.

Today, a business phone system is typically a mix of features: direct-inward-dial numbers for staff, auto attendants, voicemail to email, conferencing, and integration with software like CRM platforms. Most of that lives in the cloud now.

If you ask “What is the best business phone system?” there is no single right answer. Small offices in California frequently choose cloud-based providers that run over existing internet service. Larger enterprises still buy from established telecom vendors or run private UC platforms.

The tradeoff is straightforward. On-premise systems give you control and sometimes better survivability during connectivity outages, but at higher upfront cost and maintenance burden. Cloud systems reduce capital expense and simplify scaling, at the cost of depending on your internet connection and the provider’s uptime.

Do landlines still work without internet?

This question hides an important distinction.

Traditional copper POTS lines work entirely without internet. They carry analog voice over the same twisted pair that has been used for decades. Power is supplied from the central office, not your home outlet, so in many cases the line still works during a local power failure, which is critical for emergencies.

However, if your “landline” is actually digital voice from a cable modem or fiber terminal, it relies on your local equipment and power. You can add a battery backup, and some California providers are required to offer options for backup power, but if the internet or power fail long enough, the phone line goes down with it.

So yes, some landlines still work without internet. Others only look like landlines but ride on top of internet-style infrastructure. When comparing options, especially for seniors or outlying areas, this distinction matters more than the marketing label.

Looking back at the “old phone company”

When you pull all of this together, the phrase “the old phone company” in California usually means a blend of:

Bell Telephone and its local arm, Pacific Telephone, that wired the state and ran it as a regulated utility through much of the 20th century. Pacific Bell, or PacBell, the familiar brand after the 1984 breakup that carried most local service. AT&T in its several incarnations, first as monopoly, then as long-distance specialist, and finally as today's combined telecom and media giant.

In the 1980s, you might have seen Pacific Bell trucks on your street while long-distance commercials shouted about AT&T versus MCI and Sprint. In the 1990s, you heard the screech of a 56k modem grabbing a line that the Bell System had originally built for voice. Today, your phone service might come from AT&T again, but over fiber, while your "landline" is an app on a smartphone that runs Android or iOS.

The names changed, merged, and came back around, but the throughline is clear. A single, regulated system gave way to a complex web of carriers, operating systems, and brands. Whether you are choosing a secure smartphone, hunting for the cheapest landline provider for a parent, or simply trying to remember what that old logo on the side of the truck said, you are tracing the same history: the long California story of Bell, PacBell, and AT&T.