



## **Alarm Gongs**

As the Gamewell alarm system progressed, a second part of the telegraphic circuit became necessary: the firehouse gong. In some cases, alarm boxes were originally wired directly to a bell tower, such as Denver's Central Station, which would ring whenever a box was pulled. The bell would ring in a series of taps which corresponded to the number of the alarm box. The firefighters listened for this sequence and, based on the number, responded to the appropriate location. As technology improved, the tower bell gave way to individual gongs located inside each fire station. When a box was pulled, the alarm would first be transmitted to a central location, such as a dispatch or alarm office, and then be re-routed to the stations. Originally this meant that every station's gongs would sound whenever a box was pulled, alerting every on duty firefighter throughout the city. To determine who should actually respond, the firefighters would have to listen to the series of taps sounding on the gong and then compare the number to a board on which they had written the alarm box numbers to which their station was assigned. If the box was theirs, they would then proceed to respond to the fire. Fortunately, as technology improved, dispatchers gained the ability to only transmit the signal to the appropriate firehouse.

In 1881, the alarm equipment in Denver was updated to include the city's first ten gongs, a dispatcher, and 35 miles of galvanized wire on poles to connect it all. These gongs resembled the one shown here, which is an electro-mechanical gong with a large brass bell in a simple wooden case. The mechanisms that operate the gong are visible through the glass at the top. The key

protruding from the mechanisms served to rewind the gong if it needed to be reset. Gongs were also added gradually to individual fire stations so that by the time the Central Station bell tower collapsed in 1901, every fire station in Denver had a gong and there was no need to rebuild the tower. As with the alarm box however, the improvement of technology and the advent of computers and two way radios have rendered the old electro-mechanical gongs obsolete.

The featured podcast is an interview with retired Denver firefighter Jerry Michals, who explains how gongs worked and how the firefighters, and often also their animals, responded.