

If you grew up in California in the 1990s, you can probably still hear that sound: the rising hiss of a 56k modem, the screech of handshaking, and then the sudden quiet when the connection finally stuck. For a few years, that sound was the doorway to a very different kind of internet, one that did not revolve around AOL CDs and glossy national brands.

California had its own ecosystem, shaped by local phone companies, scrappy independent ISPs, and a strange overlap of academic networks, hobbyist bulletin boards, and early commercial services. Before AOL really saturated the market, the experience varied dramatically from neighborhood to neighborhood, and even from one phone exchange to the next.

This is a look back at that world, with a particular focus on how the telephone companies, dial up providers, and early backbone networks fit together.

Before the web: what “the internet” meant in the 1970s and 80s

You cannot understand 90s internet in California without going back to ARPANET. In 1973, when someone asked “What was the internet called in 1973?”, the accurate answer is that there was no single word “internet” in public use. Technically minded people talked about ARPANET, the packet switched network funded by the U.S. Department of Defense’s ARPA.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, ARPANET nodes at UCLA, Stanford, UC Santa Barbara, and other California institutions tied universities into a research network. TCP/IP was adopted on ARPANET in 1983, which is often treated as the birth of the modern internet. Outside those circles, almost nobody in the general public had direct access. People were far more likely to know about “online services” like CompuServe or The Source than any thing called “internet”.

The old telephone companies that made it possible

Everything ran over telephone lines. To understand early internet providers, you have to understand who controlled those lines.

Until the breakup of AT&T in 1984, “the old phone company” in most of America really was just one entity: the Bell System. In California, that typically meant Pacific Telephone, which was part of the Bell System and later became Pacific Bell. Alongside it was GTE in certain regions, a big non Bell independent that served parts of Southern California and various pockets around the state.

If you ask, “What were the telephone companies in the 1980s?” in California, a simplified answer is:

- AT&T Long Lines for long distance, with Pacific Bell as the local Bell Operating Company in much of the state, and GTE providing local service in its territories.

There were other independents, but Pac Bell and GTE defined what a phone line meant for most homes and small businesses. Those lines were the future lifeline for dial up.

The breakup of AT&T created the Baby Bells and opened the door for competition in long distance and, eventually, data services. It did not immediately give Californians fast internet, but it did allow independent companies to start experimenting with modem based access without needing the blessing of one national monopoly.

Dial up before AOL: local ISPs, BBS culture, and big national brands

By the early 1990s, getting online in California usually meant one of three paths:

1. National proprietary services like CompuServe, Prodigy, or GEnie.
2. Local bulletin board systems (BBSes) run by hobbyists, often within the same area code.
3. Early “true internet” dial up providers that gave you a SLIP or PPP connection over a standard phone line.

The big pre AOL online services

When people ask “What came before AOL?” they are usually thinking about those proprietary services. These were not the open internet as we know it, but they functioned like self contained universes with forums, email, downloads, and news.

Phone Systems Company California

The most prominent were:

- CompuServe, which started in the 1960s as a time sharing company and, by the 80s, offered consumer dial up access with its own command driven interface.
- Prodigy, which appeared at the end of the 1980s as a graphics heavy, consumer friendly service.
- GEnie, run by General Electric, particularly popular among certain tech and gaming communities.

In California, you could reach these using national access numbers. For heavy users, long distance charges could be more painful than the actual service subscription. Savvy subscribers watched closely for new local numbers in their city to avoid surprise bills.

Strictly speaking, these were not “internet providers” at first. They had some limited email gateways and Usenet access over time, but you were on their network, with their rules. When AOL rose, it followed this same pattern, only with marketing that buried everyone else.

Local BBSes and regional networks

Alongside those national services, California had an enormous BBS scene. If you lived around Los Angeles, the Bay Area, or even mid sized cities like Fresno or Sacramento, you could buy a modem, grab a list of local BBS phone numbers from a friend or magazine, and be online, in a sense, without ever touching “the internet”.

The experience was raw but intimate. Sysops, often just teenagers or twenty somethings, configured single or multi line systems in their bedrooms or offices. Message boards, file sections with shareware games, and crude multi user chats were the norm. Many BBSes in California were tied together via networks like FidoNet, which gave users the illusion of a larger connected world, even though messages might take a day or more to propagate.

Those BBSes mattered for two reasons. First, they cultivated the habit of dialing into something to talk, share, and explore. Second, they trained a generation of Californians to think of their phone line as a data line as much as a voice line.

The rise of real internet dial up providers in California

The question “What were the internet providers in the 90s?” has a different answer depending on where in California you lived and whether you were closer to universities or business hubs. Before AOL blanketed everything with its CDs, a set of providers defined the scene.

Netcom: a Bay Area pioneer

Netcom Online Communication Services, founded in 1988 in San Jose, was one of the first major commercial ISPs to offer full internet access to individuals. It started as a local dial in service with shell accounts, then evolved into nationwide dial up with PPP and SLIP.

If you lived in the South Bay and were even moderately technical in the early 90s, there is a good chance you had, or knew someone who had, a Netcom account. For many, that was the first time the internet meant something beyond a university lab.

Netcom's model was simple: you paid a monthly subscription for a certain number of hours, you logged in with a modem over a local phone number, and you got access to email, Usenet, FTP, and, eventually, the World Wide Web when browsers like Mosaic and Netscape appeared. It was not glamorous, but it worked.

EarthLink and the Los Angeles scene

EarthLink started in Pasadena in 1994 and became the archetype of a user friendly ISP on the West Coast. In Southern California, if you asked around about "old dial up internet companies", EarthLink was near the top of the list, especially in the mid to late 90s.

EarthLink's strength was its ability to bridge the gap between techies and regular households. It shipped software that made setup manageable, offered decent support, and aggressively expanded its dial up number footprint. Later, it partnered with Sprint for network infrastructure, but in the 90s it felt very much like a California company helping Californians get online.

Regional ISPs: the invisible backbone of 90s California

Beyond the big names, hundreds of smaller ISPs sprang up across the state. You had mom and pop providers serving single counties, city focused outfits that marketed to small law firms and design shops, and campus area ISPs that catered specifically to students who did not have on campus connectivity.

In the Bay Area, you could find providers offering shell accounts, UUCP feeds, or full PPP. In Orange County and San Diego, a number of tiny outfits ran racks of modems in strip mall offices, sometimes literally cooled by a household fan. Many of those are the "old dial up internet companies" that no longer exist, acquired or simply shut down when DSL and cable took over.

These local providers often resold connectivity from larger backbone companies. UUNET, PSINet, and others handled the long haul traffic, while the local ISP managed modems, phone trunks, and customer service. The separation between "backbone provider" and "ISP" was fuzzy to customers, but technically important.

Telecom plumbing: how the phone companies shaped the experience

Every one of those connections rode on copper pairs originally installed for voice. The same infrastructure that once belonged to "Ma Bell" now quietly underpinned the commercial internet.

From Baby Bells to broadband

In California, Pacific Bell (later SBC, then AT&T) and GTE provided most of the last mile. Business customers in cities could lease T1 lines for digital connectivity, which many early ISPs did in order to aggregate modem banks. Residential users relied on plain old telephone service, often still marketed as landlines.

The question "Do landlines still work without internet?" would have seemed strange at the time. The internet depended on landlines. You ordered a line from Pac Bell or GTE, then used that physical connection to reach your ISP. The very notion of a phone line that needed internet to work would have looked like science fiction.

California's deregulated long distance market meant companies like MCI and Sprint were happy to sell you calling plans, but for dial up, the real trick was making sure your ISP had a local access number. Otherwise, you were effectively paying for online time twice: once to the ISP, and once in long distance charges to your phone company.

Feature codes and the culture of landlines

Some of the odd little features of landlines mattered when you were dialing in. For example, *82, which still exists in many areas, is used to unblock caller ID on a per call basis. Conversely, *67 blocks your caller ID. For analogy, *69 is the "last call return" code, which redials the last incoming number. *77, where available, is related to anonymous call rejection.

You did not use *82 to connect to most ISPs, but you learned quickly that certain custom calling features could interfere with long modem sessions. Call waiting clicks could drop your connection. So a lot of people prefixed their dial up number with *70 to disable call waiting for that call.

The phone system in California during this period still felt like an independent utility. When you ask "What companies still offer landline service?" or "Which companies still offer a landline?" today, the list is shrinking and often hidden under "voice over internet" branding. In the early 90s, landline service was the starting point, not the optional extra.

What the web looked like: from ARPANET to Mosaic

The question "What was the first website ever?" points to CERN in 1991, where Tim Berners Lee put up a page describing the World Wide Web project. Most Californians did not see that or anything like it until a couple of years later.

In the early 90s, even among those who had dial up access via Netcom, EarthLink, or a university, a large share of "internet use" meant email, Usenet newsgroups, FTP, and perhaps [Phone Systems Company California](#) Gopher menus. The web was there, but primitive and sparse.

Around 1993 to 1994, Mosaic started appearing on machines in labs at UC campuses and in Silicon Valley offices. Suddenly the internet had pictures. By the time Netscape Navigator came out in late 1994, you could feel the center of gravity shifting. California, with its dense cluster of universities, startups, and media companies, moved rapidly.

People sometimes romanticize that early web as pure and innocent. That is only half right. The "dark side of the internet" was present in different form: poorly moderated newsgroups, early fraud schemes, pirated software trading on BBSes, and harassment that was hard to trace given the tools of the time. The stakes were lower only because the scale was smaller, not because human behavior was better.

AOL arrives: how it changed California's internet landscape

AOL did not invent dial up, but it normalized it for the mainstream. In California, that meant your neighbors who never touched a BBS, never paid Netcom, and never walked into a local ISP suddenly had email addresses and chat rooms.

From a technical perspective, AOL was just another national provider with a big access network, much like CompuServe or Prodigy had been. But its marketing dwarfed everyone else. The phrase "before AOL took over" is not about protocol changes, it is about mindshare.

Where local ISPs and BBSes knew you by name, AOL treated you like an account number. For many users, that trade was acceptable. AOL bundled everything: software, support, a walled garden of content, and, eventually, a gateway to the wider web. The cost was that smaller California ISPs, and many old dial up internet companies, either pivoted to business services, sold out, or collapsed.

If you talk to people who ran dial up banks in the state during that period, most will tell you the same story. First, growth was fast and organic. Then, rates got squeezed as big players undercut them. Finally, DSL and cable arrived, turning dial up into a commodity. For a tiny regional ISP, that was a hard game to win.



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Where the phone and internet worlds diverged

The prompts people ask today about phone companies, landlines, and modern mobile brands highlight how far we have come from that 90s California landscape.

When someone asks “What are some old phone companies?” or “What phone companies do not exist anymore?”, the list includes names that were once printed on every phone bill in the state: Pacific Bell, GTE (in its original form), MCI, WorldCom, and many independents. A lot of these were merged under AT&T or Verizon, or quietly disappeared into bankruptcy and asset sales.

Questions such as “What is the oldest phone company in America?” point back to AT&T’s historical role, but for practical purposes, the “old phone company” that most Californians knew was Pac Bell. It handled the copper pairs that now seem quaint next to 5G and fiber.

Similarly, when people compare “What are the major telecommunications companies?” or ask “Who is the number 1 phone company?” in a modern context, they are usually talking about the big national mobile carriers and

integrated operators: AT&T, Verizon, T Mobile, sometimes Comcast or Charter. In the 90s, the center of gravity was on plain landline voice and early data, not smartphones or 5G spectrums.

The flood of questions about smartphone brands, operating systems, and even “What phone do most billionaires use?” or “Which phone is least likely to be hacked?” would have made no sense in the dial up era. The answer to “Which is the most popular smartphone operating system?” today is some flavor of Android globally, with iOS dominating affluent markets. In the 90s, if you had a “mobile operating system” at all, it lived in a pager, an early PDA, or a brick like cellular phone, totally separate from your home internet connection.

Landlines, then and now: echoes of the dial up era

Because 90s internet in California relied so heavily on landlines, many contemporary questions about fixed line service have an unintentional link back to that period.

People now ask:

- Can I just have a landline without internet?
- Which companies still offer a landline?
- What is the cheapest landline phone service without internet?

In the 90s, the situation was reversed. You essentially had to have a landline to get internet. Some serious users ordered a second line just for dial up, specifically so that family members could make calls while they stayed online. Pac Bell and GTE were quite happy to sell those extra lines.

There was no meaningful concept of “landline for seniors” as a special product line. Today, questions like “What is the best landline service for senior citizens?” or “Which is the best landline phone provider for seniors?” reflect a later stage of the market where voice is an add on and seniors are a specific marketing segment. Back then, the landline was a basic utility, not a niche solution.

When people ask “Will I lose my landline in 2027?” they are usually referring to regulatory or carrier plans to phase out traditional copper based service. In California during the 90s, the opposite trend was happening: phone companies upgraded central offices and expanded digital switching to handle more lines and custom features, all while ISPs stacked modems on shelves to keep up with demand. The notion of phasing out landlines would have seemed fanciful.

As for cost, the perennial “Who is the cheapest landline provider?” or “How much is an AT&T landline per month for seniors?” now depends heavily on bundling, VoIP, or cable phone packages. In the 90s, you paid your local telco a regulated rate for a line, plus optional features, and then paid your ISP on top. It was not cheap in inflation adjusted terms, but it was straightforward.

What survived from that California era

A surprising amount of 90s infrastructure and culture still lives under the surface.

Many of the regional providers were acquired, but the people who ran them went on to build hosting companies, data centers, and fiber networks. Some of the backbone players that helped those tiny ISPs connect to the world either merged into the big carriers or form part of the global internet’s routing fabric even now.

On the cultural side, the expectations that grew out of BBSes and early ISPs linger on. If you were used to a local BBS sysop who answered your message personally, or an ISP whose office you could walk into, modern mega

carriers can feel remote and indifferent. That tension between local, human service and massive scale is not new, it simply took a different form.

There is also a technical echo. Plain old telephone service, what some call “original landlines”, still exists in spots. The question “What companies now support original landlines?” is harder to answer by the year, since many carriers quietly convert copper lines to VoIP in the background. Yet the copper itself, installed by companies that predate the internet by a century, still runs along streets in California towns that also have fiber to the curb.

Even the concept of a “business phone system” grew directly out of the intersection of voice and data in the 90s. Back then, a business phone system meant PBXs, key systems, and perhaps a few analog lines given over to dial up modems or early leased data circuits. When people now ask “What is the best business phone system?” they are usually looking at cloud hosted VoIP platforms. The architecture changed, but the goal is the same: connect people efficiently using the network of the day.

Remembering what came before the always connected world

If you strip away the nostalgia, 90s internet in California was a rough, noisy, unreliable patchwork built on top of a legacy telephone network. It was slow, it dropped connections, it tied up your line, and it punished you with busy signals at peak hours.

Yet for those who lived through it, it also felt intensely local and human. You dialed a number that belonged to a place, often not far from where you sat. The phone companies, for all their bureaucracy, installed and maintained the copper that carried your first web page or your first email. The ISPs, especially the small ones, were often literally in your neighborhood.

Before AOL took over the collective imagination, the internet in California was something you had to seek out. You did not get it by default with your computer or your phone. You heard about a local dial up internet company from a friend, or saw an ad taped to a bulletin board at a community college, or noticed a strange new line item on the flyer at a computer shop in Sunnyvale or Torrance.

That era is gone, but its fingerprints are on every broadband connection in the state. Underneath the fiber and the wifi routers, you can still hear faintly, if you listen hard enough, the squeal of a modem grabbing a line from Pacific Bell at midnight and opening a door to a much smaller, yet somehow larger, online world.