

Dial M for Memory

Clark Kent peels, job seekers plead, lovers plot. What's to become of us without all those phone booths?

BY RALPH KEYES



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The silence in the booth was intense, reminding him of boyhood moments waiting in a confessional.

—Gay Talese,
Honor Thy Father

he first Superman movie contains a brief but memorable scene. Clark Kent is about to make his debut as the Man of Steel. He looks about for a phone booth in which to change. All the mild-mannered reporter can find is an open-air pay phone. He settles for a rapidly revolving door and emerges as Superman.

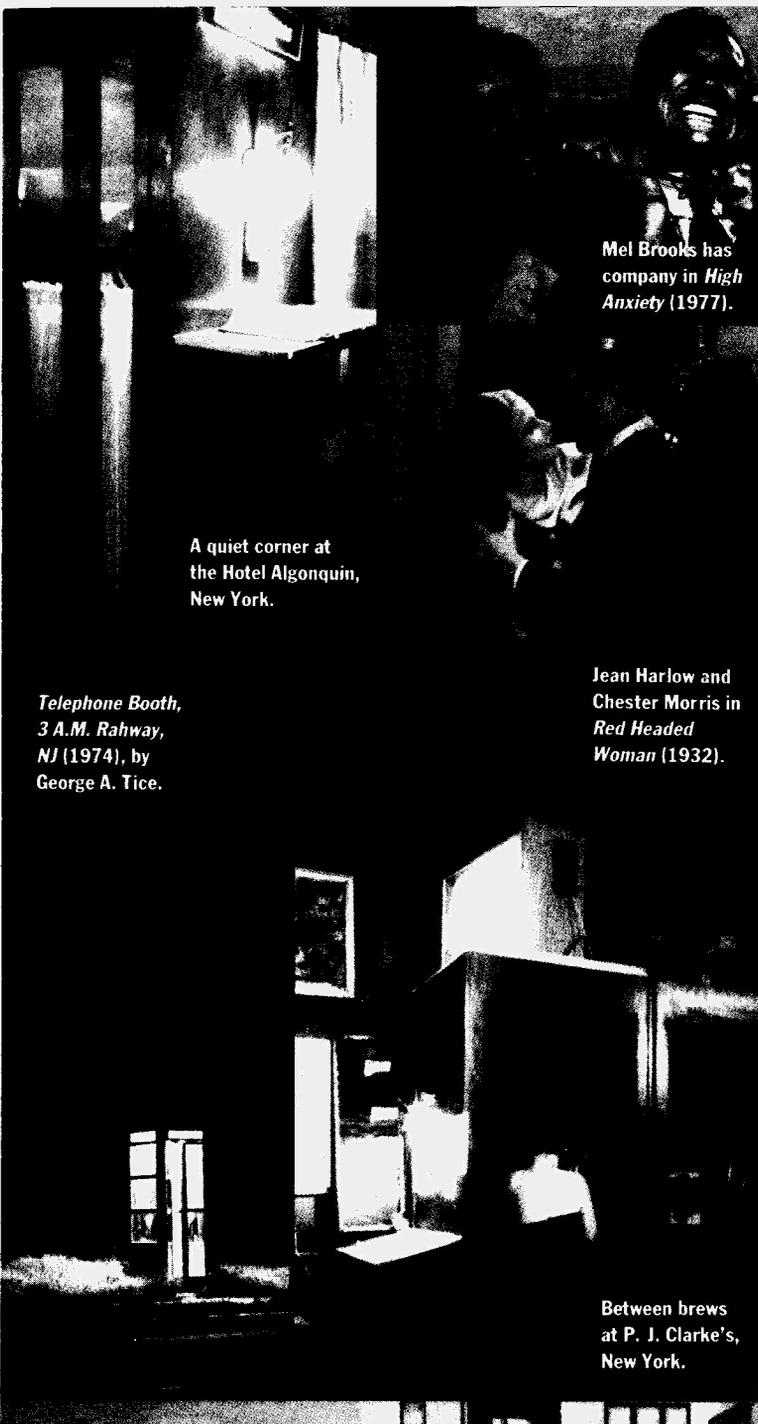
What makes this scene so convincing is the shock of recognition. Phone booths—those private boxes that reek of romance and intrigue—are giving way to open-air phones, which convey little more than anxiety about being overheard.

Seven years ago, *The New York Times* published a list of notable Manhattan phone booths. Anyone using that guide today would be doomed to frustration. Few of them remain. In New York, as in the country as a whole, only 17 per-

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Solitude at Riverside Church in New York.

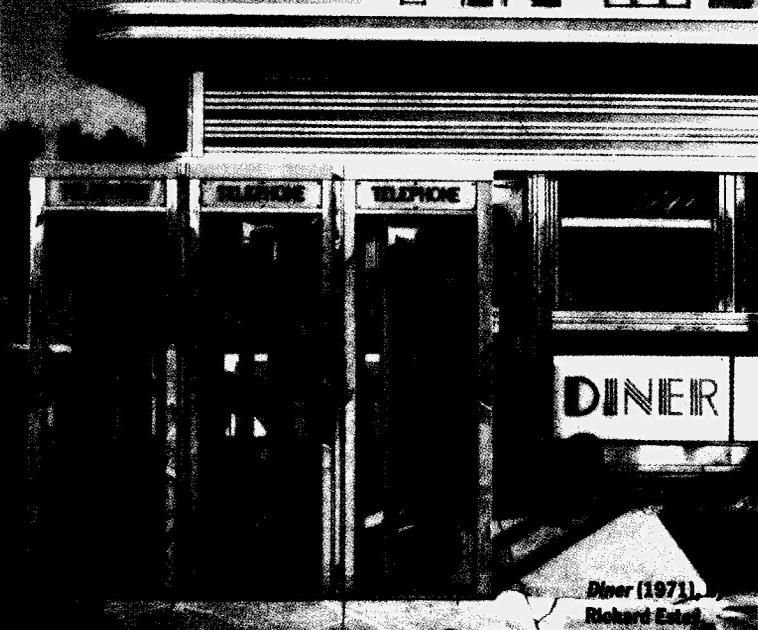


Mel Brooks has company in *High Anxiety* (1977).

A quiet corner at the Hotel Algonquin, New York.

Telephone Booth, 3 A.M. Rahway, NJ (1974), by George A. Tice.

Jean Harlow and Chester Morris in *Red Headed Woman* (1932).



Between brews at P. J. Clarke's, New York.

Diner (1971), Richard Estel.

cent of all public phones are still in booths. Less than two decades ago nearly three quarters were.

If phone booths were just a vanishing amenity, their loss would rate little more concern than that of penny scales or twice-a-day mail deliveries. But this shelter has done far more than protect us from the elements. A classic phone booth with its door tightly closed is a setting in which we can seal out the world for a few minutes and speak our piece. Trysts are conducted from phone booths. Some get conducted in them. Soldiers called home from booths. Bookies made them their offices. Members of the press developed such elaborate strategies for calls and counter-calls between public phones that some became known as "three-booth" reporters. In their century of existence, phone booths have inspired song lyrics, paintings and at least one dance routine, such as the one rendered by a performance artist within a glass-walled telephone booth in downtown Seattle.

Songwriter Craig Carnelia, 35, says one of his happiest childhood memories involves a telephone booth. Walking home from school with three sixth-grade classmates, Carnelia and his friends—a boy and two girls—decided to see if they could squeeze into a phone booth outside the Bellerose, New York, train station. "Our bodies were *pressed* together," recalls Carnelia. "It's one of those things you do when you're very young which seems harmless, but it's really sex. It was a *hot* moment."

For many Americans, hanging out in phone booths was a rite of passage. Calls that felt grown-up were made from this setting. At a time when we began to express our passions, a phone booth felt like a safe place to do so. Nights spent cruising streets in '57 Chevies were filled with visits to booths to call for company to cruise with us. Jokes were cracked: "If we can't do it anyplace else, we'll do it in a phone booth. (Don't get too close, you guys; it's liable to fall over.)" In cities this wasn't always a joke. Like rooftops and elevators deliberately stopped between floors, phone booths were one of the few places courting couples could be by themselves.

After moving to New York from her native Georgia, Carson McCullers sought solace in this setting. McCullers was terrified by New York's street life. But she was reluctant to hide out in her apartment. The young writer's solution was to take refuge in phone booths. At Macy's, especially, she would pick a booth and spend hours inside it—out in the world yet protected from it. As her biographer, Virginia Spencer Carr, writes, this haven provided McCullers with a "womblike niche in which she could hide away, pull up her knees and hug them to her chest, feel the vibrations of a pounding heart, and then gradually enjoy relaxed breathing."

Like a well-tended bar, phone booths have a blend of seclusion and exposure that gives them their special character. Albert Camus once used the image of a man speaking into a telephone behind a glass barrier—visible but unhearable—to illustrate the absurd walls that separate people. Yet it's their very absurdity, their paradoxical combination of the public and private, that make phone booths so appealing. Within them we feel part of society, able to see and be seen, yet with a right to privacy symbolized by the seal of an accordion door.

Nearly two decades ago a landmark Supreme Court decision confirmed that a "reasonable expectation of privacy" could be assumed by anyone using a phone booth. As Jus-

tice Potter Stewart explained for the majority in *Katz v. United States* (throwing out evidence wiretapped from a phone booth), "One who occupies it, shuts the door behind him, and pays the toll that permits him to place a call is surely entitled to assume that the words he utters into the mouthpiece will not be broadcast to the world."

This is why so many calls that could more easily have been made from home were made from booths. In most homes there is nothing like a "reasonable expectation of privacy." Wives calling lovers, husbands placing bets and teenagers calling one another have fled to the booths as long as there were booths to flee to. As 43-year-old book editor William Phillips recalls, without the help of a phone booth down the street from the cramped New York apartment he shared with his mother, he would not have been able to call for his first date at age 15. Only inside this booth on 113th Street did Phillips feel "the sense of privacy, the anonymity and the protection of four walls" that was necessary to make this most delicate of calls.

Particular booths stand out in many memories. Social worker Rosalie Minkin, 47, can still picture the bumpy tin walls of the phone booth in the Brooklyn candy store where she hung out as a child when her parents shooed her out of their tailor's shop. John Dommers, 43, the Humane Society's New England regional director, remembers the smells of a Massachusetts drugstore phone booth he frequented, the blend of tobacco and perfume that hinted at interesting earlier parties. Private investigator and writer Douglass Lea, 43, likes to recall the phone booth by a Houston drive-in to which he and his buddies constantly paraded, seeking company and attention. When he uses booths today, lawyer Robert Ellis Smith, 45, still lifts his knee up, puts his toe on the glass door and braces his back against the rear panel, just as he did three decades ago in the phone booth of the Narragansett Inn on Block Island, where he spent summers as a teenager. Whenever he assumes this position today, adds Smith, "I immediately hark back to when I was getting ready to go to college and calling home for things I left behind."

Psychologist Robert Sommer, the author of *Personal Space*, suggests that such phone-booth nostalgia is a result of "place learning." Especially during a developmental stage such as adolescence, explains Sommer, when we're engaged in activities that feel arousing, any setting in which such activities took place will be locked in our memories. All it takes to revive them is reentering that place. As Sommer puts it, "Say you're having an illicit relationship with someone, and the phone booth is the only place in which you can talk to that person. This will be a setting with powerful associations. And every time you go into a phone booth those associations will come back."

Moviemakers have long recognized how evocative telephone booths can be. Fifty years before Brian De Palma used booths as a backdrop for sex and mayhem in *Blow Out*, Jean Harlow pressed closer to Chester Morris in a phone booth in *Red Headed Woman*, and James Cagney pulled two guns on a rival gangster in one in *Angels With Dirty Faces*. From *The Ipcress File* to *Eye of the Needle*, phone booths have been integral to movies about spies, with all of their furtive calls. In *The Rose*, Bette Midler did a bravura turn breaking down and shooting up in a phone booth. Temple University Cinematheque director David Grossman thinks one of the most powerful movie phone-booth scenes ever is

in the 1970 movie *Adam at 6 A.M.*, which portrays a young man standing alone in an isolated Missouri phone booth calling his girlfriend. Slowly the camera pans back to make the booth smaller and smaller until it's just a dot on the landscape, vividly evoking the loneliness of the long-distance caller.

No moviemaker used phone booths to greater effect than Alfred Hitchcock. In such films as *North by Northwest*, *Rebecca* and *Foreign Correspondent*, Hitchcock imbued this everyday setting with an aura of menace. Perhaps the most famous phone-booth scene of all is the one in *The Birds*, in which Tippi Hedren is attacked by avian swarms while cowering inside. Hitchcock said this scene was meant to symbolize the end of her life in a gilded cage. (For his Hitchcock spoof, *High Anxiety*, Mel Brooks had himself garroted in a phone booth.)

Phone booths lend themselves to allegory. They have overtones of the confessional; protected by their four walls, we feel freer to reveal ourselves. In a Sam Spade mood, we can picture the booth as our own little office for making furtive, staccato calls. Or feeling like Doctor Who, we can imagine the booth is about to transport us through time. And when we feel beleaguered, the phone booth can become a sanctuary, much like churches of old. As the wife of New York Yankees pitcher Tommy John discovered after being told that a complicated arm operation might end her husband's career, a hospital phone booth was the only place in which she felt free to cry.

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uch uses are surely not what telephone companies had in mind when they began providing booths for public phones late in the last century. Probably the first such shelters were built around 1878 by Connecticut's Thomas B. Doolittle to protect indoor pay phones he'd installed between Bridgeport and Black Rock. During the next several years, these structures proliferated. Most were large, ornate booths with double walls for added privacy, leaded-glass windows, lace curtains, domes overhead and carpeting underfoot. Attendants timed calls and collected fees from users. (To make sure callers didn't welsh, some attendants locked them in.) Swing-out doors that knocked passersby off their feet were a constant problem. This was solved in 1910 with the development of folding doors for more compact booths.

Nearly all booths were built of hardwoods to a standard design and placed in such settings as hotel lobbies and corner drugstores. At a time when private phones were a rarity, single booths sometimes served entire neighborhoods. Long lines of those waiting to make calls were not uncommon. In some cities, clusters of children would gather outside booths, answer the phones, then seek out whomever had been called in return for a tip.

At busy locations, long banks of booths became necessary. For a time, booth No. 17 at Grand Central Terminal in New York housed the world's most frequently used pay phone. Later, this honor passed to a booth in Chicago's Greyhound station. In 1939, (continued on page 178)

(continued from page 165) several dozen booths were installed outdoors as a novelty item at the Golden Gate Exposition in San Francisco. During World War II, outdoor booths became common at isolated military bases. And at some point in the early 1940s, Clark Kent first entered a phone booth and emerged as Superman. This was not part of the early Superman comic books. The phone booth as changing room originated in the Superman radio series to create a clear visual image of the timid reporter becoming the Man of Steel. ("This looks like a job for Superman. I'll change in this phone booth.") The image proved so captivating that it quickly became central to Superman's lore.

Not only crime fighters but crime perpetrators found phone booths helpful in their work. As wiretapping of private phones grew more prevalent after the war, criminals took to booths. Among organized-crime figures, a pocketful of change for protected calls became standard equipment. (One mob lawyer acquired the nickname "Dimes" because he carried so many of them around for calls from booths.) Like reporters, mafiosi developed maps of booths considered safe for untapped conversations. So did revolutionaries. When she was apprehended after eighteen months with the Symbionese Liberation Army, Patty Hearst had a coded list of Bay Area phone booths in her purse. The Weathermen spent so much time in booths during the late Sixties and early Seventies that they decided a chronicle of their life underground should be titled *Meet Me in the Phone Booth*.

From the 1960s on, vandalism began to take its toll on this amenity. In Philadelphia, one outdoor booth was reduced to pieces no larger than six inches. Urban phone booths began to double as urinals and homes for the homeless. Assaults on phone-booth users partly inspired a mostly glass design (forcing Clark Kent to fog up the glass with his superbreath before changing into Superman in one latter-day comic-book episode). Handicapped activists protested the booths' inaccessibility to those in wheelchairs. Ultimately, Bell Telephone found it expedient to replace booths altogether with semi-enclosed phones that were cheaper, easier to maintain and harder to vandalize.

All this alternative lacks is character. It is unlikely that any interesting memories will be set in "enclosures." Moviemakers in droves have ignored them. Only the most meager erotic fantasies can be inspired by an open-air phone. Joan Baez once sang, "Where are you calling from?/A booth in the midwest." Updating that line to "An enclosure in the Midwest" does little for the cadence. Today's pay phones just aren't suited to romance. They don't encourage whispered sweet nothings. What they do encourage is mumbled half-sentences of a patois heavy with code words that reduce the risk of being overheard or an ear sore from the intrusion of a finger to shut out the din of passing traffic.

Could the spread of open-air pay phones have anything to do with the decline in our conversational skills and powers of imagination? Psychologist Layne Longfellow thinks so. Longfellow, formerly with Topeka's Menninger Foundation, says the vanishing phone booth is symptomatic of changes in our society that he groups broadly under the heading "Loss of Romance." Other artifacts Longfellow puts in this category are cars of distinctive shapes, elevators with gates, corner stores of all kinds and newsstands with grizzled proprietors rather than coin-in-the-slot boxes. "It's a real price we're paying," he concludes. "We're leaving behind things that are evocative. Telephone booths are evocative. Exposed pay phones aren't. You could have feelings about the old phone booths, develop fantasies about them. They had a character. They stimulated a reaction."

Phoenix doctor Charles Matlin, 32, finds the wooden telephone booth in his living room is invariably the first thing visitors comment upon. This is not just because the phone booth is a novelty and has a Superman outfit hanging inside it but because it inspires so many memories and associations. Matlin acquired the booth from a soon-to-be demolished hotel in Chicago about ten years ago. Fully equipped with an altered pay phone, a seat, a shelf, a fan and a light, this booth has accompanied Matlin and his family on several moves around the country. Since phone booths weigh around 300 pounds and take up so much space, owning one is not a commitment to be undertaken lightly. When they look over a new house, one of the first things Matlin and his wife must consider is where their booth will go.

But telephone booths are increasingly in demand as home furnishings. When the public-television station in Dayton, Ohio, auctioned off four booths last year, they commanded prices up to \$700. Pennsylvania's phone company has a long waiting list of private parties who want to buy booths—at \$150 to \$300—that need refurbishing. For those who can't wait, cabinetmaker Tommy Dinkins of Sanford, North Carolina, custom-builds phone booths of red oak that retail for \$1,200. Some collectors of antique phones also deal in booths on the side. In El Paso, Texas, John Coons, a phone buff since childhood, has seven old booths in his garage and backyard. These include an outdoor booth with a gabled roof from an Indian reservation and an indoor model from the Eastern New Mexico State Fair that Coons himself had used as a child. In Madison, Connecticut, John Dommers keeps the jewel of his phone-booth collection—a palatial double-walled booth with hand-blown glass panels, circa 1905—in his dining room. Dommers, the author of *The Telephone Connection*, a self-published history of telephones, finds a steady market for the booths he picks up around New England, restores and keeps in his two-car garage. His customers have in-

cluded not only individuals looking for novel home furnishings but the owners of restaurants, an old-time ice-cream parlor and a small chain of Victorian-style drugstores.

Like vintage jukeboxes and weathered barn siding, phone booths have moved steadily up the demographic ladder. Their privacy and comfort increasingly are restricted to customers of establishments that can afford the extra space and necessary maintenance. T.G.I. Friday's equips all of its 120 restaurants with phone booths made of oak and stained glass. At the Black Horse Tavern in Washington, D.C., a phone booth finished in plush velvet sits beneath showcase lighting. Unique examples include a booth made of clear, flexible plastic that stands outside the building at 747 Third Avenue in Manhattan; the converted confessional that is used as a phone booth in the lobby of St. Louis's Cheshire Inn and Lodge; and the pagoda-like booths in many Chinatowns, most notably San Francisco's.

A dwindling number of classic phone booths, complete with lovers' etchings, scarred walls and the smell of tobacco and intrigue, can still be found. The Yankee Pedlar Inn in Holyoke, Massachusetts, has a turn-of-the-century booth with a swing-out door. Two wooden booths with white curtains, providing a kind of veil for seated callers, remain in the lobby of the Hotel Algonquin in New York. Two more—though without curtains—can be found in O'Sullivan's Public House at Halsted, Grand and Milwaukee in Chicago. Philadelphia's mammoth Free Library has several old booths with folding doors, fans and lights. So does the New York Public Library. There are banks of them in the House and Senate press galleries in Washington, D.C., and within the Mayflower Truck Plaza in Milford, Connecticut. (John Dommers says truck stops in general are a good place to find old phone booths.)

And here's a hopeful note: Bell Telephone of Pennsylvania has recently discovered that pay phones in booths receive more business than those in "enclosures." They attribute this to the protection booths offer from noise and eavesdropping. Therefore, on a selective basis, Pennsylvania Bell has begun an innovative program of tearing out some enclosures and replacing them with—booths. ■

Ralph Keyes is the author of *Changing It: Why We Take Risks* (Little, Brown).