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Here's The Deal With The Air Raid Siren Atop Rogers Park Firehouse For Sale



By [Linze Rice](#) | February 10, 2017 5:33am | Updated on February 11, 2017 12:41pm



The decommissioned air raid siren at the former Rogers Park fire station, which is now for sale.
DNAinfo/Linze Rice

ROGERS PARK — In the midst of World War II and the Cold War, Chicago and other major cities all made preparations in fear of an air raid — which never occurred — but those plans did lead to creation of the city's emergency warning system.

Many of the vintage sirens from those days were retired or replaced long ago, though some still remain bolted to the rooftops of schools and firehouses.

One of those — a tall, 10-horsepower yellow Jailbar Thunderbolt — is still attached to the top of a two-story firehouse at Engine Co. 102's former location, 1723 W. Greenleaf Ave. in Rogers Park. The building [is for sale by the city](#).

[RELATED: HISTORIC ROGERS PARK FIREHOUSE FOR SALE FOR \\$315,000](#)

While the nearly 60-year-old relic doesn't have much worth as a collector's item, it is part of a long history in Chicago that many residents might recall even if they never laid eyes on a siren, said Gary Altwasser, a former firefighter with Chicago's Civil Defense Fire and Rescue team who now runs a website dedicated to the city's emergency response history.

That's because when the sirens went off, you could hear them for miles. Altwasser said he remembers the sound of the sirens while attending Solomon elementary school as a boy in Pulaski Park.

"When that siren would go off, you would feel your eardrums vibrating it was so noisy," he said. "You could just feel it, it was so loud, you could feel it inside the building. Just the noise from the vibration itself from the [weekly] tests, that's how loud they were."

A Jailbar Thunderbolt 1000 siren is tested near Midway. [YouTube]

A scare on the ledge of war

The threat of an air attack during World War II, and later nuclear warfare throughout the Cold War era, were cited as major reasons to install the air raid sirens, city documents show.

In 1941, the fire and police departments were told to stop using vehicle sirens and start using gongs, as the city started to buy massive engine-powered sirens that could confuse the public, according to the *Tribune*.

By 1942, massive engine-powered Chrysler Victory Bell sirens had arrived in Chicago — including at the Rogers Park firehouse.

Those sirens weighed nearly 3 tons and used a powerful 180 horsepower V-8 Hemi gasoline engine to generate a wail that could be heard as far as 3 or 4 miles away.

Though impressive, the Victory Bells' excruciating weight and gas engine would soon prove to have problems.

On Oct. 8, 1942, [one of the engines exploded on the roof of Engine Co. 36's](#) firehouse during an air raid drill, setting fire to the roof of the firehouse on North Kedzie Avenue. One firefighter was injured and another died from his injuries when they jumped from the roof while fighting the fire, according to the Illinois Fire Institute.

https://www.fsi.illinois.edu/content/library/IFLODD/search/firefighter_detail.cfm?ff_id=438

Fourteen more smaller sirens were installed throughout the Loop in 1950, and by the next year 50 sirens across Chicago sounded in sync for the first time.

From 1952-58, the Civil Defense Department revamped its war preparedness efforts and ordered replacement sirens as well as additional models.

The huge Chrysler Victory Bell in Rogers Park was replaced by the smaller, still-standing yellow Thunderbolt.

In 1959, longtime Fire Commissioner Robert Quinn ordered a [a five-minute celebratory crank of the air raid sirens](#) after the White Sox won the pennant — an event that scared many Chicagoans.

Similarly, after the Cubs won in Game 7 of the World Series on Nov. 2, Chicago's northern neighbor of suburban Evanston sounded its air raid siren.

By the 1970s, fears over Nazi attacks and the atomic bomb had faded into the distance.

The focus on sirens had turned mostly toward tornadoes after a series of storms had swept through the Midwest.

The Civil Defense Department began its transformation into the Office of Emergency Management and Communications, and its old sirens were starting to malfunction and failing to alarm.

Tornado sirens sound in 2015. [YouTube]

New system in place

Sirens used today, which generally signify bad weather, were [introduced in the 1990s](#) and mounted on tall poles rather than building rooftops.

They can be turned on at individual poles, in districts or citywide and have been known to emit a spooky and somewhat unsettling sound when alerting the public.

"Cool to see a few are still up in view," one person commented about the sirens, calling them "gems."

Another person who found original Civil Defense documents from 1958 outlining the purchase, location and purpose of a second wave of sirens decided to map them out — showing the span of the sirens' distribution, as well as gaps they left behind.