

Origin of the term “Jake” for firefighters

New England affectionate slang for Firefighter. This word was first used as a reference to firemen in the early 20th century in the Greater Boston area, and its origins are recognized as officially unknown by several authors. While it is now a widely accepted term in the fire service, it is almost exclusively used in New England, and almost exclusively used to bestow great praise and the highest levels of respect. To be called a "Good Jake" is the highest form of praise a Boston area firefighter can possibly receive from a peer.

The term "Jake" is most probably derived from the term "J-Key". The first street-corner fire alarm box system was invented and constructed in the city of Boston, and was based on a telegraph system, novel in its day. Inside each box, next to the automatic alarm mechanism that tripped when someone pulled the hook, there was a small telegraph tapper, called a telegraph key that firemen could use to communicate back to headquarters once they arrived on scene. As time passed, many World War One veterans had become Boston firefighters, and the telegraphs that these men were familiar with were the U.S. Army issue J-3 portable telegraph key (known as the WWI "trench key"), as well as other military J-Series telegraph keys, which were all known commonly as "J-Keys". These veterans probably used this as a common slang for the keys they used inside their fire alarm boxes.

Being a "Good J-Key" probably meant a fireman who was cool under the pressure and could send clear Morse code. "J-Key" was eventually shortened to "Jake", and when spread to the public, "Jake" came to be a common term for firemen in general.