THE CALIFORNIA JOB CASE

A California Job Case is a kind of type case: a compartmentalized wooden box used to store movable type used in letterpress printing. It was the most popular and accepted of the job case designs in America. The California Job Case took its name from the Pacific coast location of the foundries that made the case popular.

The defining characteristic of the California Job case is the layout, documented by Ringwalt as used by San Francisco printers. This modification of the Italic layout was claimed to reduce the compositor’s hand travel by more than half a mile per day. Traditionally, upper and lower case type were each kept in a separate case (or tray); this is why capital letters are called “upper case” characters while the non-capitals are “lower case”. As printers became more mobile, a combined case became preferred as it was easier to transport. The combined case became very popular during the western expansion of the United States in the 19th century.

LAYOUT

This typecase consists of 89 compartments, most of which are assigned to specific letters. Variations on the layout will add additional symbols to the unassigned compartments toward the top.

Numerals and symbols are at the top, lower case, punctuation and various width spaces on the left, and capitals are on the right. Lower case compartment position and size varies according to the frequency of occurrence of the letter contained. Uppercase compartments are uniform size, ordered A to Z. (J & U were not used by early English printers, so they are assigned compartments following Z.) This organization keeps larger quantities of the more frequently used letters in convenient reach of the typesetter. Ligatures and several widths of spaces to improve efficiency.
A typecase with every character and space in its proper place is ‘clean’, while a ‘dirty’ case has characters mixed up, generally by careless distribution as they were returned. A spilled case is ‘pied.’

Each size and style of typeface is kept in its own tray (case), and trays are kept in a cabinet with slots making each tray a removable drawer. The cabinet may offer the typesetter a work surface at a convenient height, often a composer’s work stand.

Regardless of who actually invented the case, in order to make his typesetting more efficient, the inventor arranged the compartments according to the letters’ frequency of use. The more frequent letters (t, n, e, i, o, r) are arranged in a rough circle directly in front of the typesetter, while the less-frequently used letters and characters are farther away. The arrangement of the letters in the California Job Case became so popular and commonly adopted that a skilled typesetter could “read” the text set by another typesetter, just by watching the positions of the compartments where the typesetter reached for his letters.

In addition to placing the most commonly used letters in setting text in a given language in the easiest positions for the typesetter to get to, the characters’ boxes varied in size according to the frequency of usage of the character. Thus for English the “e” box is the largest while the “j”, “k”, “q”, “x”, and “z” boxes are the smallest.

Other large compartments in the California Job Case held spaces, which are blocks of blank type used to separate words and fill out a line of type, such as em and en spaces. An emspace was the width of the pint-size of the type in the drawer – as wide as it was high – while an en space referred to a space half the width of its height (usually the dimension of a numeral to provide for easy alignment of financial data which is typically right-aligned). Typically, a 3/em space is used between words. Three of these placed side by side are the same width as an emspace (the pointsize of the type).

The complete article can be found here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California_Job_Case