Early Television Museum

Founder fascinated by machines, not the message or the medium

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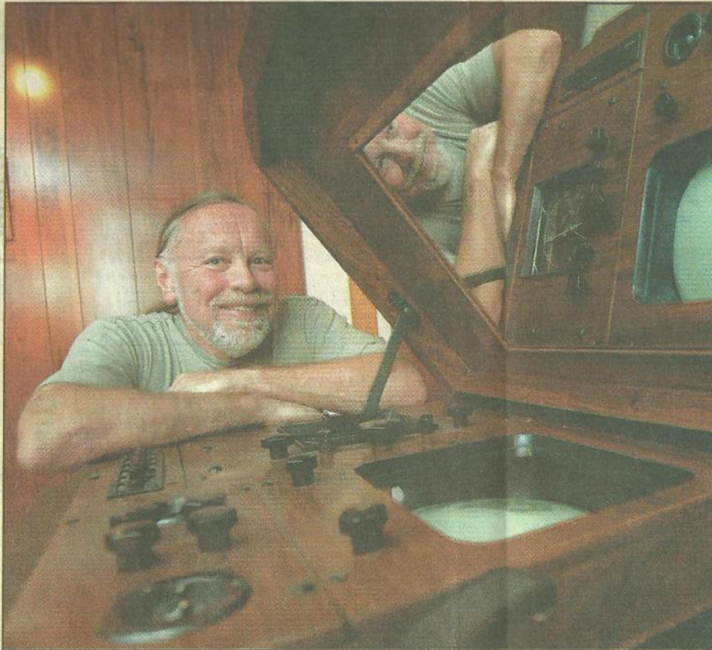


Photos by David Rea/*ThisWeek*

At left, Early Television Museum founder Steve McVoy is shown with a rare model dating from the era when picture tubes were so long they were placed standing up in custom-made cabinets and the images were viewed in a mirror. Above, DuMont was an early innovator.

Steve McVoy doesn't watch a lot of television, although he does watch a lot of televisions.

McVoy is president, not to mention founder, curator, collector and pretty much everything else, of the Early Television Museum in Hilliard.

The late Canadian sociologist Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) is famed for conceiving the phrase, "The medium is the message," which the Britannica Student Encyclopedia describes as "one of the most thought-provoking, as well as memorable, assessments ever made about television."

As far as McVoy is concerned, the medium might be the message or the message might be the medium.

For him, the machines are where it's at.

"I've always been interested in the technology, not the programming," he said.

The Museum of Television and Radio, with locations in New York City and Los Angeles, is "excellent," according to McVoy, in its focus on to the programming on television.

"But there's no place for the hardware, and that's what we are," McVoy said.

When it comes to the history of television, McVoy is in good company in terms of his devotion to devices over drama, his fascination with sets over sitcoms.

In his 1994 book, "Please Stand By: A Prehistory of Television," film director Michael Ritchie ("The Candidate," "Downhill Racer," Fletch," "Bad News Bears," "Semi-Tough") writes:

"Television pioneers came in many different shapes and with different attitudes toward the new medium. Inventors like Philo Farnsworth and Allen DuMont were determined to perfect TV technology, but they thought that putting entertainment programs on their TV sets was a nuisance. At no time did either man talk about the art of television. They were both interested in the technology of TV, and TV photo histories show these men smiling only when they're holding up giant TV picture tubes."

Steve McVoy smiles broadly when gazing at the ghostly black-and-white images on one of his museum's sets, some of which date to a mechanical form that existed in the 1920s.

Much of McVoy's life has been inextricably entwined with television. Growing up in the Gainesville,

chusetts-born McVoy was employed part-time after high school at a TV repair shop. He sometimes worked on sets dating to the 1940s, and they fascinated him.

Later, McVoy went into the cable television business in Florida, when it was absolutely a fledgling enterprise.

"We specialized in the small, rural areas that the big companies were ignoring," he said.

The expertise McVoy gained in the cable business in the Sunshine State led to him being involved with building the first such operation in Columbus in the 1970s. He spent a lot of time in central Ohio and, after meeting his future wife, decided to settle in the area in the mid-1970s.

McVoy sold his interest in the cable company in 1999, which provided him with enough money to travel and to think back to his boyhood days and the tinkering he did in that repair shop back in Florida.

"I knew I needed something that would be an intellectual challenge once the business was gone," he said.

McVoy decided that collecting old television sets would provide that challenge.

about TV history," he said.

McVoy was surprised to learn about the many different kinds of television sets that existed prior to World War II. His research made him aware of other collectors, most of whom had their vintage sets stored in basements or scattered throughout their houses.

No place existed in the country, as far as McVoy could determine, where people could go to see these older televisions.

That included, eventually, his own home.

"It's not great art, and so my wife objected to me having too many in the house," McVoy said.

He bought a building at 5396 Franklin St. in Old Hilliard in 2000 and opened the Early Television Museum the following year. McVoy has had to expand the structure several times as the collection has grown. The oldest TV in the collection dates to 1928, while the newest is the first battery-operated portable set from 1958 or '59.

The Early Television Museum, which is a nonprofit foundation, has regular hours on Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Sundays from

Group tours are available by appointment.

The museum averages roughly 100 visitors a month, McVoy said, about half during the weekend hours. The rest are group tours, often of senior citizens who wax nostalgic over the televisions of their youth, but also of young people, who can't get over what they're seeing.

"The kids are astounded," McVoy said. "They're fascinated by how small the screens are."

Some kids have never before seen television in black and white, the museum president added. Many are absolutely floored that some of the older British models don't have a channel selector; the knob was utterly superfluous in a country that for decades had but a single station.

In a stunning bit of irony, visitors to the museum are shown a localized transmission of a DVD of one of the earliest color movies, "The Wizard of Oz," over black-and-white sets, courtesy of a computer program that translates the signal into a format compatible with the vintage devices.

McVoy is a veritable font of amazing facts and figures about televi-

For example:

- A 1937 set in the museum's collection originally sold for around $2,000. At the time, a new car cost something like $600.
- Early television sets all had high-quality radios built into them. In fact, the radios were the main purpose for the purchase, since so little in the way of television programming existed.
- In 1946, only 20,000 television sets could be found in American homes. A mere six years later, that figure had leaped to 15 million sets, roughly half the country's households.

McVoy is especially intrigued by what early inventors of television were able to accomplish, given the technology they had available to them at the time.

"They really pushed the limits of how much they could do," he said. "The engineers were really clever in the things they did."

Still, even after McVoy's best efforts at refurbishing them, the old sets are, well, something of a pain.

"The picture quality is not good, the reliability is not good. They break down. Probably every 20 or 30 hours

One eye-catching model in the collection is a 1958 Philco "Tandem Predicta," with a futuristic-looking screen attached by a thick cable to the controls and speakers.

"It was probably the worst television set ever made," McVoy said. "It broke down, caught on fire. I'm not even going to attempt to restore it."

In the BBC's earliest television days back in the 1930s, according to the museum founder, it was not possible to transmit pictures and sound at the same time. A typical program might involve 15 silent minutes of a fellow playing the ukelele, followed by 15 minutes of a blank screen while ukelele music is heard.

It's difficult to figure out which would be the more mind-numbing experience.

Speaking of mind-numbing, McVoy finds most modern television programming to be just that. He doesn't watch much TV.

"Not a lot," McVoy admitted. "The only good television now, I think, is on HBO. I watch some of the series on that. I watch PBS sometimes. It's rare that I watch any of the networks.

"I can't stand the commercials, for one."

Although the collection of the Early Television Museum in Hilliard is dominated by sets from Great Britain and the United States, founder Steve McVoy has also obtained models from Italy, France and Holland. "The styling is a little bit different," he said.

Invention question a good one, with no good answer

"But who invented television?"

The question is posed by David E. Fisher, a professor of cosmochemistry at the University of Miami, and his son, Jon Fisher, a writer living in Cambridge, Mass., in their 1996 book "Tube: The Invention of Television."

The Fishers, father and son, not only ask the question, but also have the answer:

"Nobody knows."

Thanks for clearing that up, guys.

The Fishers continue:

"Television did not arise like Venus, springing newborn and whole from an oyster shell. It was not invented like the atomic bomb, which came with a flash of insight followed by massive experimentation and theoretical work by a dedicated group of scientists. There was no sudden moment of victory, as with the Wright brothers' first flight.

"Instead, television sidled up to us from a corner, then receded into the mists that obscure the future, never to return in quite the same form. It came back from a different corner, changed in shape and substance, and once again faded like a Cheshire cat, leaving behind only the grin of its promise. Different men chased into different corners after it, and one by one they failed to find it.

"Finally it was dragged kicking and screaming out of the mists, out of the theoretical uncertainties and technical difficulties that had masked and disguised it, and was made to work."

Steve McVoy, owner/proprietor of the Early Television Museum in Hilliard, tends to agree with this opinion. But many hold on to the romantic notion that in 1921, Philo T. Farnsworth, when he was but a 15-year-old boy living on a farm in tiny Rigby, Idaho, came up all by himself with the basic principles for television, only to have his genius stolen by a ruthless corporate giant, RCA.

It's "perfect for Hollywood," McVoy said, only there's one problem:

"It's not true. But it really makes a good story."

McVoy thinks it is true that Farnsworth came up with something that "sort of worked" in terms of transmitting images.

"The problem was that it always sort of worked," McVoy said. "I'm not even sure he was a major player."

—Kevin Parks

Talking about the tube over time

In the days before "infomercials," before "tabloid TV," before "reality programs," former Federal Communications Commission chairman Newton Minow became famous for describing television as a "vast wasteland."

And he meant it, too. But that's only part of what he said, and only part of what he meant.

Minow's speech to the National Association of Broadcasters on May 9, 1961, one of his first public addresses after being named chairman of the FCC by President John F. Kennedy, was more than 1,400 words long, but it is remembered today for only two of them: vast wasteland.

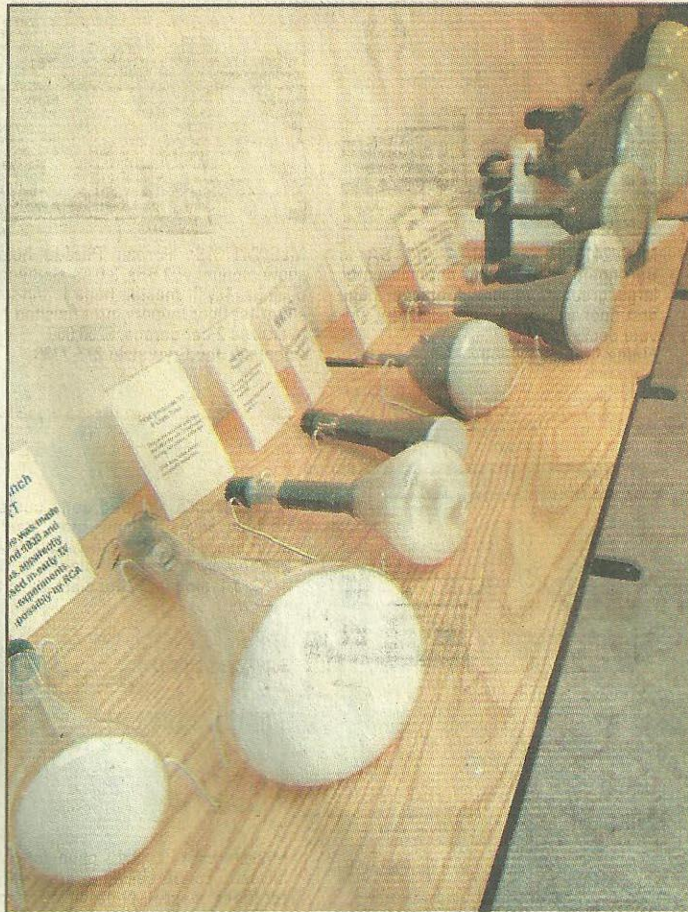
Critics of the medium frequently pounce upon that phrase as a fitting condemnation.

Put more into context, however, those two infamous words are only a portion of Minow's assessment of television. What he said was:

"I am here to uphold and protect the public interest. What do we mean by 'the public interest?' Some say the public interest is merely what interests the public. I disagree.

"When television is good, nothing — not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers, nothing — is better.

"But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there without a book, magazine, newspaper profit-and-loss sheet or rating book to distract you and keep your eye glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland."



One room of Steve McVoy's ever-expanding Early Television Museum at 5396 Franklin St. in Old Hilliard is dominated by a collection of ancient picture tubes. For more information about the museum, call 771-0510 or visit the Web site at www.earlytelevision.org.

Here's what some others have said about the medium, not to mention the message, over the years:

- "Never before have I witnessed compressed into a single device so much ingenuity, so much brain power, so much development, and such phenomenal results." — former RCA chairman and founder of NBC David Sarnoff (1891-1971).
- "Well, gentleman, you have now invented the biggest time-waster of all time. Use it well." — Sir Isaac Shoenberg (1880-1963), principal inventor of the first high-definition television system, used by the British Broadcasting Corp. in 1936, to the others on his development team.
- "The mere mention of Hollywood induces a condition in me like breakbone fever. It was a hideous and untenable place when I dwelt there, populated with few exceptions by yahoos, and now that it has become the chief citadel of television, it's unspeakable." — American humorist and, briefly, motion picture writer S.J. Perelman (1904-1979).
- "Unless we get off our fat surpluses and recognize that television in the main is being used to distract, delude, amuse and insulate us, then television and those who finance it, who look at it and those who work at it may see a totally different picture too late." — radio and television broadcaster Edward R. Murrow (1908-1965), the most influential and esteemed figure in American broadcast journalism during its formative years.
- "When will I learn? The answers to life's problems aren't at the bottom of a bottle. They're on TV!" — Homer Simpson (1987-present), television's favorite animated dad.

— Kevin Parks