Hilliard man plans museum to share his love and knowledge of antique televisions

By KEVIN CORVO
Hilliard Northwest News Reporter

While most people dream of owning a big-screen television for Super Bowl parties, a Hilliard area man searches tirelessly for televisions with black-and-white screens the size of a palm pilot.

In only two years, Steve McVoy has collected 27 television sets manufactured before World War II and even more postwar sets. His newest acquisition are the first color television sets, produced in the early 1950s.

The collection—which he hopes will soon be housed in a museum in Old Hilliard—arose from idle time on his hands after McVoy sold his interest in Pactiv Cable and Comsat.

But McVoy's interest in television actually can be traced back to his childhood, when he began working at a TV repair shop near Gainesville, Fla.

McVoy was 11 years old when his family got its first television in 1954. It was a 21-inch Admiral black-and-white set. The only channel it could pick up was a CBS station 80 miles away in Jacksonville.

McVoy attended college at Cornell but got sidetracked and opened his own cable business in Florida in 1965. In 1970, he moved to Central Ohio, where he continued to work in cable television until two years ago.

During the past two years, he has collected and rebuilt dozens of television sets, the vast majority of which are older than his family's first set.

"I needed something to do, so I began collecting televisions," McVoy said.

The rarest television in his collection is an English set produced by Baird in 1928. Only three are known to exist.

"A dealer in England told me about it, and an agent bid on it for me," McVoy said.

Known as a mechanical set, it received a signal that is no longer produced. The set was useless until another modern invention—the computer—made it possible to re-create the signal it received in 1928.

Baird televisions based on the old signal were produced in England from 1938 to 1936, when the British Broadcasting System revamped the signal. The BBC signal remained the standard in England until

Steve McVoy wants to open a museum in Old Hilliard that is dedicated to antique televisions. There are currently no museums in the country that focus solely on TV sets, said McVoy, who is seen here surrounded by post-World War II models.
Slow-growing industry

The English TV, which still works, produces an image about the size of a postage stamp.

factures began to tackle the task of color.
Again, RCA set the bar, producing the first color television in 1954. The retail price of the first color television set was about $1,295, McVoy said.

“They couldn’t sell them at that price. They were enormously expensive. Besides, most people preferred a sharp black-and-white picture over a somewhat fuzzy color picture,” McVoy said.

In addition, there were few stations that broadcast in color. In 1954, NBC became the first to do so, but it wasn’t until the network unveiled its Wonderful World of Disney in the mid-1960s that color television sales took off, McVoy said.

Television museum

McVoy has rebuilt to some degree every television in his collection.

“The first one I got was a mirror-in-the-lid television made in 1939. It was literally in pieces. I put the electronic components back together and had a wood shop refurbish the cabinet,” he said.

Making many of his purchases via the Internet, McVoy said he spends about 30 hours a week pursuing leads or rebuilding televisions. His collection has grown to the point that he needs a place to store it.

“I thought about opening a museum even before I started collecting,” said McVoy, who already has a museum site in mind. He has the property formerly known as Lee’s Catering on Franklin Street in Old Hilliard under contract to purchase.

McVoy will petition the Old Hilliard Commission next month to allow him to open the museum.

“If I can do it, I’m shooting for August. It needs some interior work, I’ll decorate each room like the decade in which the television in the room were produced,” McVoy said.

Computer terminals in each room would provide information about the televisions. McVoy has already founded a nonprofit organization called the Early Television Foundation and a Web site, www.earlytelevision.org.

The museum would be open on weekends or by appointment for school groups or out-of-town visitors.

“I’m real excited about being able to do it. It’s fun and a new challenge,” McVoy said.