

Collector Profile

Tune in, turn on

Old behemoth TVs have a loyal following

BY RICK KELSEY
FOR ANTIQUE TRADER

It was a chance to see what might have been — to view a television with long forgotten and disregarded technology, a television once designated as the standard for every American home.

All eyes at the 2004 Early Television Convention in Hillard, Ohio, were on the 1951 CBS mechanical color TV system. It was a set that would ultimately determine history.

With black-and-white sets the norm in the 1950s, the Federal Communications Commission was charged with determining the standard for color TVs. The choices were two of the industry's leaders — the electronic color TV by Radio Corporation of America (RCA) or the mechanical color TV by Columbia Broadcast System (CBS).

Originally, the FCC picked CBS' color TV as the standard. But its mechanical components proved too impractical, and it wasn't compatible with current black-and-white broadcasting systems. So in 1953, the FCC adopted RCA's system as the standard.

CBS' TV became little more than a long-lost bit of technology and a trivia question. Today, avid collectors and historians are the only ones interested in it.

But at this year's Early Television Convention, collector and convention host Steve McVoy wanted to

demonstrate what the old CBS TV could do. He used an original model and a homemade converter — which allowed today's broadcast signal to be fed into the old TV. The crowd of collectors and the curious saw exactly what the FCC saw more than 50 years ago. The results were astounding.

"The pictures on the 1951 CBS mechanical system are superb. It's amazing to watch them," McVoy said.

Reliving history, seeing obsolete technology, and discovering how good old televisions were are moments that excite antique-television collectors like McVoy.

He has a collection of more than 150 televisions dating from the 1930s to the 1950s displayed at his Early Television Museum in Hillard.

In a sense, McVoy, 61, has become the unofficial crown prince of the antique-television collecting world. He owns and operates the museum, which opened in 2000, founded the annual convention, maintains a Web site (www.earlytelevision.org), and is pretty sure that he has met, talked to, traded with, bought from, sold to, or heard of practically every collector around. What sparked his interest?

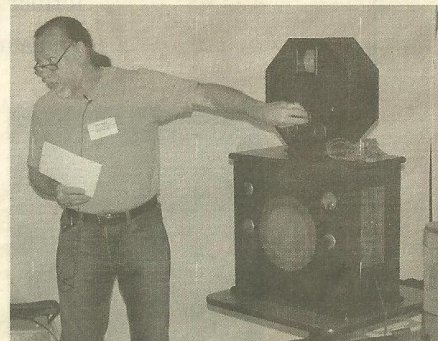
"Who knows?" McVoy laughed. "Nobody else in my family had any interest in electronics. My father was an architect, which I guess is somewhat close. But I just loved electronics. I just loved to take apart electronic things from the time I was a couple of years old."

McVoy's interest led to a job in a TV repair shop in the 1950s. Every day after school, he helped technicians fix TVs, sometimes performing the diagnostics and repairs on his own. At home, he spent his time tinkering with some sets he "scrounged up." Later, he owned a TV repair shop and advanced into building cable systems. He sold that business in 1999.

"That's when I retired," McVoy said, "and I needed something intellectually challenging to do with my time. I couldn't see myself sitting around and doing nothing all day.

"So I thought collecting would be a challenge. It would have a lot of aspects of the business, such as finding the sets to buy, negotiating for them, learning their history, learning how to restore them, finding parts — use my brain a little bit."

He still remembers the first vintage TV he bought, a 12-inch 1939 RCA.



Collector Steve McVoy shows off a GE Octagon mechanical television from the late 1920s.

"I thought that TVs started in 1946," he said. "So I quickly started reading up and learning whatever I could, and I learned, that sure enough, there was TV before World War II, but there weren't very many sets made."

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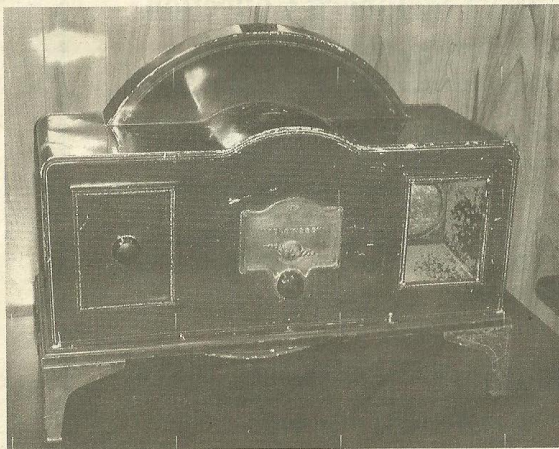
Those things are heavy!

High prices may discourage new collectors, but the bigger impediment is the average set's size and weight.

"Oh man, these things are animals!" said collector Darryl Hock, who owns 20 pre-1950 models.

"You look at something like a TT-5 or the GE HM-171, which are little 5-inch tabletop sets, and they're 80 pounds. You get up into these consoles like a TRK-12, you are pushing 200 pounds. And the prototype sets like the 359 from RCA are about 275 pounds.

"The problem is the amount of power the TVs took, and the only way they knew to do power supplies at that time was add iron to them. So they end up with these monster power supplies on these things that are just huge chunks of iron."



This circa 1930 Baird Televisor features a mechanical scanning disk set. It is valued at \$15,000. Photos courtesy of Steve McVoy.

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TVs

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That fact is what makes pre-World War II sets a big prize for collectors. They are the scarcest; McVoy estimates that 7,000 television sets were produced in the United States before World War II and that fewer than 300 exist today.

But aside from holy grails such as those, most collectors seek TVs made before 1950.

McVoy said there are six basic categories for the television market — mechanical TVs from the 1920s and 1930s, electronic TVs made prior to the war, American sets from 1946 to 1950, British sets from 1946-1950, European sets from 1949 to 1952, and early color televisions from 1954 to 1955.

Brands range from the familiar — GE, Philco, RCA and Zenith — to the obscure — Ouimet, Farnsworth, Garod, Meissner, Hazeltine, Baird, Sparton, and Air King.

Today's generation of HDTV and plasma screen watchers may not realize that these old models are TVs. At first glance, they might be mistaken for old radios or stereos.

A frequent style is a 5-inch screen in a 2- or 3-foot wooden cabinet. On some models, the screen doesn't even face the viewer. It lies flat like a table, and a lid with mirror reflects the screen image.

According to McVoy, it wasn't until the mid-1950s that TV sets became square boxes.

"There are all kinds of different shapes and sizes, especially in the early days," he said. "The manufacturers were experimenting to see what the public would like. So you found a lot of different styles of cabinets. A good example of that is a set made by Hallicrafters ... They made a set that is all metal and very industrial looking."

So what will it cost to own an early TV? Prewar mechanical and electronic sets can be worth \$6,000 to \$20,000. Values drop for postwar sets; most clock in at \$400 to

\$2,000. The more common models can run \$200 or less.

"There's a market out there for antique televisions, but it's a very erratic market," McVoy said. "There are so few buyers that the prices vary just dramatically depending on how many and what kind of sets

have come up for sale in the last couple of years and what collectors are looking for."

John Folsom has antique TVs scattered all over his Florida house. He got hooked as a teenager in the early 1960s when he was given a late 1940s 7-inch Motorola TV to "fiddle with." In the 1970s, he began serious collecting but found the pickings slim.

"Florida didn't have a lot of TVs back in the 1940s," Folsom said, "and we have no attics and basements to speak of, so there's not a lot of antique TVs down here. Most of my stuff came from somewhere else."

"Somewhere else" often means travel time for collectors.

"A friend of mine and I rented a van and went up to White Plains, N.Y., to pick up one of my all-time favorite TVs, an early color set," Folsom said. "I was able to corral a friend who was crazy enough to want to take a week of his life and

drive up there and drive back and get it. My house is just about full, so when something comes home, something else has to go away. So my acquisition rate has slowed way down."

Lack of space is a common problem. That's one reason McVoy started his museum.

"I thought, 'Boy, it would be nice if there was some place where the public could see this stuff because it is so rare and so much a part of our history,'" McVoy said. "So the idea struck me that I could solve both problems by buying a warehouse building and then renovate part of it as a display area and put the collec-

tion on display."

Compared to some collecting fields, TV collectors are a small but close community. McVoy estimated there are around 200 serious collectors.

"It's definitely not as big as some other hobbies ... we're just a little blip compared to the radio guys," said Michigan collector Darryl Hock.

"Back in the mid 1970s, there was very little interest in collecting TVs," Hock said. "TVs were disposable things, and nobody gave them a second thought. Radios have kind of always been thought of as more of a nice collecting hobby. But TVs never were.

"It's starting to come into its own now, so I think there are more and more people becoming aware of the television collecting."

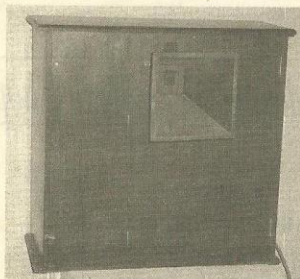
Steve McVoy and the Early Television Museum can be reached at (614) 771-0510, via e-mail at eff@columbus.rr.com, or online at www.earlytelevision.org. The 2005 Early Television Convention will be held April 29-May 1 at the museum in Hilliard, Ohio. Rick Kelsey is a freelance writer from Texas.



This RCA TRK-9 electronic set is valued at \$12,000.



This 7-inch Viewtone set is valued at \$3,000.



Before TVs were TVs, there was this circa 1928 Daven Tristandard mechanical scanning disk set. McVoy places its value at \$4,000.

A fishy topic

You may not want to ask collector Steve McVoy about aquariums. He's likely to cringe.

According to McVoy, one problem plaguing the hobby of antique TV collecting is remodelers and decorators turning old TVs into aquariums.

The large wooden cabinets that house the old TVs catch the eye of some who envision the sets for other purposes such as book cabinets, bars, stereos, and aquariums.

"There was a guy on eBay for some time who used to buy sets, and then you see the same set appear on eBay six months later as an aquarium," McVoy said. "That is very frowned upon by the television collectors."

Collector John Folsom is a little more direct.

"We hear such stories and we shudder, and we have nightmares thinking about such things," Folsom said. "I have never participated in such vile activities. Why not take some 1960s TVs and turn those into aquariums? We're not collecting those, and those are more common."