

Tune in to vintage television

BY RICK KELSEY

Having to maneuver appliances and other objects aside in order to look at other people's collections of old and rare televisions got Steve McVoy wondering about better ways to display and show such antiques.

"I started meeting many of the antique television collectors in the U.S. and Britain. I noticed that they were very nice people and you could make arrangements to go see their collections. But you had to paw through their basements, move a washing machine out of the way to get to them. 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 recalled.

So he found and bought a warehouse-type building in Hilliard, Ohio, where he lives, and started the Early Television Museum in 2000.

Now, 10 years later, McVoy still has both his museum and collection of antique televisions going stronger than ever. He has more than 150 televisions, related accessories and other items dating from the 1920s to the 1950s on display in his museum. And he also has another 150 more televisions (extras

and duplicates) stored away. You can see old sets in familiar and well-known brands like GE, RCA and Zenith and a lot of models from long-gone makers like Meissner, Bird, Sparton, Garod and Farnsworth in all sorts of

Left:

Westinghouse WRT-703 with a 12in screen with the mirror-in-lid (1939). Value \$12,000.



Above: Motorola 9T1 with an 8in screen (1948). Value \$150

styles and makes in the museum.

And just looking at these old TVs may surprise you. Because when compared to today's LCDs and HDs, you may not realize at first that they're televisions.

"There are all kinds of different shapes and sizes, especially from the early days. 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. My guess is that the marketing people at that company assumed that the man was going to be making the buying decisions about the television sets. Of course, they were dead wrong," McVoy said.

One predominant style was the cabinet. Many old models have a small 5in screen in a 2ft or larger wooden fixture that looks more cabinet than TV. And on some, the TV screen seems hidden as it lies flat like a tabletop and a lid with a mirror lifts up and reflects what's on the screen for viewing. But no matter what style, you can count on two things with every antique television: heavy weight and large size.

"Oh God, some of them are 400 pounds. A typical one is probably a couple of hundred pounds. The picture tube itself was quite heavy. And then the chassis was heavy. The transformers were essentially chunks of iron. Everything was heavy. They were basically built like pieces of furniture," McVoy said.

Such weight and space issues can discourage some from collecting antique televisions. But even with that McVoy has



SEE TELEVISION ON PAGE 26

Television

FROM FRONT PAGE

noticed interest in old TVs increasing every year. Since he started his museum in 2000, attendance has grown annually. The museum, open every Saturday and Sunday, has a lot of regulars and groups visiting, including people from the radio and television industry and church and children's groups.

"Attendance has increased fairly gradually. I would say that it has increased about 10 percent a year," McVoy said.

And three years after he opened his museum, he started the Early Television Convention, an annual show and gathering of TV collectors. At the first con, about 60 collectors and visitors came. Last year's event had 100 participants.

"A lot of them are radio collectors too and television is just an extension of it. A lot of people just like television and have never collected anything but televisions. Some used to be TV repairmen at one time or something. There are all kinds of reasons people collect televisions," he said.

McVoy's interest in antique TVs came about from a lifelong interest in electronics. At an early age, he loved taking apart electronic things. He worked in a TV repair shop as a teenager in the mid-1950s. Later, he opened up his own TV repair shop and then his own cable TV company. He retired in 1999 after selling that company.

"And I needed something intellectually challenging to do with my time. I couldn't see myself sitting around and doing nothing all day. And I really loved the cable TV business. It was a lot of fun. 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 said.

And what he discovered in collecting old televisions both fascinated and surprised him. The history of television itself is both fascinating and surprising because you can't credit its invention to one person or a single invention or moment. It evolved from different people

in different countries and different inventions dating as far back as the 1800s.

The concept of scanning lines, the basis of television, came from Paul Nipkow in the 1880s. He proposed mechanical television, but couldn't make it work since there weren't vacuum tubes then. In 1925, John Logie Baird produced the first television images using a mechanical disk (just like Nipkow's). In the late 1920s and early 1930s the first electronic camera tubes were developed by Phil Farnsworth and Vladimir Zworykin. There is dispute as to who actually produced a working tube first. However, it was Zworykin who made the tube, and therefore electronic television, practical.

RCA spent more than \$50 million in the early 1930s developing television. By 1936 they had a practical system. The British BBC began the first regular television broadcasts in 1936 using RCA technology. The U.S. began in 1939 as RCA began broadcasting regular programs and the company, along with GE, Dumont and others, made and sold TV sets. While World War II put television development on hold, when the war ended the industry boomed. By the early 1950s, it is believed that half of all U.S. homes had a television.

McVoy thought at first that TVs started in the 1940s. He found out differently when he spotted a 1939 RCA 12in TV on eBay. He bid on and won that auction which turned out to be parts from two different sets and missing the picture tube and several other things.

So why bid on a partial and incomplete TV?

"Well, these things are so rare. There were only 7,000 sets made in the U.S. before the war. I think our last count from our databases was something like 260 have survived. So a set like that in any condition, if there is enough of it there so that eventually you can put it together into a complete set, is worth getting," he explained.

Those televisions, electronic TVs made prior to World War II, along with mechanical TVs from the 1920s to the 1930s, American sets from 1946 to 1950, British sets from 1946 to 1950, European sets from 1949 to 1952 and early color TVs from 1954 to 1955, have the greatest



Above: Belmont 21A21 with a 7in screen (1946). Value \$1,000.

value and collectability.

According to McVoy, value on almost any sets in those six categories can range anywhere from a couple of hundred dollars to as much as \$25,000. And one of the most valuable and hardest-to-find are pre-World War-II sets made by Philco. Right now, McVoy knows of only two of those sets that exist. Later sets, especially those made from the 1960s and on have almost no value or interest for collectors because so many were manufactured.

And generally, condition of the TV cabinet and whether the set is complete affect value for most buyers. Not whether or not the TV works. "That is correct for most buyers. There are some buyers who are not really TV collectors who want something that works to put in their living room. They may be willing to pay more for a working set," McVoy noted. "But no set before 1950 is ever going to work. Well I won't say ever but it's almost impossible. There are parts in them that dry out and there are paper capacitors, about 50 of them in a typical TV set. And they all have to be replaced before you can get them to work."

So, collecting antique televisions also involves fixing them. Most collectors get the TV sets working and then are able to show people what the picture looked like. Usually the old sets can work and receive a broadcast signal. "American prewar and postwar sets work with a converter box, or, as we use at the museum, a DVD player. British prewar sets and all the mechanical sets require a standards converter, which is a custom-made device about the size of a deck of cards that converts NTSC TV to whatever standard the set requires," McVoy said.

The rare and hard-to-find televisions rarely surface nowadays. Often they come up for sale when a collector decides to sell some models or someone discovers an old set stored away. But that doesn't happen a lot.

"On our website, we keep track of new pre-war sets that we learn of and maybe 10 sets a year surface. For example, some guy just emailed me and said that his dad ran the first TV repair shop in Stillwater, Okla., and he had a color set from 1954 that his dad had on the display room floor that he never sold. It had been put in storage and he wanted to know if we were interested in it. When I told him it was Motorola's first color set and worth about \$8,000, he was completely shocked. I got it for my museum," McVoy said.

But sometimes when old TVs get discovered, collectors like McVoy don't get a chance at them. A few years ago, they cringed when they saw eBay auction listings of remodeled antique televisions.

"There are people who take old TV cabinets and put modern chassis and picture tubes in them. And there are people who take old console TV sets and turn them into 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. Sacrilege is how the collectors feel. I haven't seen one of those recently. A couple of years ago is when I saw the last one," he said.

If people want to remodel old televisions, McVoy wishes they'd use the common sets from the 1960s, 1970s and after.

"There are just so many of those. And that would be a good use for them. They have no value. So maybe that's a good way to keep them from going to the dump. But when somebody does that to one from the 1940s, that's really sort of sad," he said.

Through his website (www.earlytelevision.org), where he spreads the word about early television, McVoy gets inquiries every day. And so many of those inquiries involved the common TVs.

But every now and then, a treasure or something unexpected pops up. One recent acquisition for the museum was not a television but a mobile broadcasting system from the late 1940s. Originally, a TV station in Salt Lake City bought it in 1948 from RCA. Then in 1969, WGSF, an educational station in Newark, Ohio, purchased it and used it for years to cover high school football games and other events. In the early 1970s, the station donated it to the Ohio Historical Society which stored it in an air conditioned warehouse.

McVoy learned about the unit and got the historical society to do a "permanent loan" to the museum. The truck, about 25ft long, has most of its original equipment including three TK-30A cameras and a microwave broadcast system.

"Back then there was no video taping. Everything had to be live. Whenever they did a remote pickup, they'd set up the transmitting dish on a platform on the top of the truck and they'd have to find a place where they had a line of sight back to their tower. Then some poor guy would have to climb their tower and aim the dish on that end to the truck. So it was quite a process. It's the only one around. There is another one that a California collector found in Detroit. But it's in really bad shape. This one has all of the original equipment in it as it was in 1948," he said.

Seeing things like that make McVoy glad that he got into collecting antique televisions.

"I think I had a stamp collection when I was a kid but other than that I never collected anything in my life. So TVs were a good thing to collect for me," he said.

The Early Television Museum is located at 5396 Franklin St. in Hilliard, Ohio, and is open Saturdays from 10 am to 6 pm, Sundays from noon to 5 pm, and during the week by appointment.

The 2010 Early Television Convention will be held April 23-25. Details are on McVoy's website.



Left: RCA TRK-12 with a 12in screen (1939). Value \$8,000.