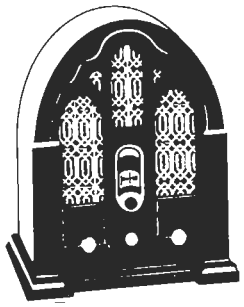


Antique Radio

By Marc Ellis

CABINET REFINISHING

Last month, we completed the restoration of a Zenith Model 7S232 "shutter-dial" chassis that was begun in the August issue. I certainly enjoyed doing the work, and I hope that you all enjoyed reading about it. Unfortunately, the set's cabinet also requires quite a bit of attention. (And cabinet refinishing is my least favorite radio-restoration activity.) The radio was damaged in a small, but violent, gas-furnace explosion while it was possessed by its previous owner—which is the only reason he was willing to sell it!

Besides blowing out the speaker cone (which has since been repaired) and charring the grille cloth, the explosion also completely ruined the finish on the 7S232's cabinet. It looked as if it had been almost vaporized, exposing a rough, light-colored, wood surface. The wood seemed virtually grainless, suggesting that the grain had been a photographic one—as was common in sets of that era—and was lost along with the finish.

Down to Basics. That was discouraging, but obviously the only thing to do was to strip off the remains of the old finish and reassess the situation. I hoped that, once cleaned up, the cabinet would take stain nicely so that a presentable replacement finish could be applied. Being grainless, it would lack the beauty of the old one. But it would at least be fresh and new, providing an attractive setting in which to install the restored chassis.

I used a methylene-chloride-based chemical stripper—the kind that applies as a heavy gel so that it will stick to the wood surface and do its work without dripping off. That stuff takes off old paint or varnish coatings as quickly as anything I know. And it's pretty nasty if you get it on your hands. It's not caustic like lye or acid, but will definitely sting, burn, and redden the skin.

I find it difficult to strip furniture while wearing gloves, so I try to work near a water tap. By rinsing my hands frequently, I can avoid most of the ill effects. It's also wise to use that type of stripper outside or in a well-ventilated area. While not noxious, the fumes are definitely not good for you—and can leave you with an unpleasant, hangover-like feeling the next morning.

Under the Sludge. That type of chemical stripper turns the old finish to a kind of gummy sludge. The idea is to remove as much as possible with a broad putty knife, being careful not to scratch the wood surface as you work. The remains of the sludge are then mopped up with a cloth moistened in solvent—leaving behind a clean-as-a-whistle surface.

As soon as I began the first mop-up operation, I received a very pleasant surprise. A beautiful wood-grain pattern was being exposed; the grain was real after all! What had looked—prior to stripping—like an almost-bare grainless, wood surface was really a layer of old varnish, decomposed and whitened in some way by the effects of the explosion.

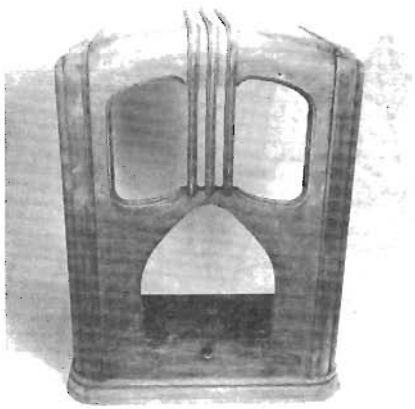
Working a little more enthusiastically, now, I quickly removed the rest of the old finish. Stripping may be a smelly, messy job, but it really doesn't take long to complete even for a large cabinet like this one.

I had noticed too late, by the way, that the recommended "mop-up" solvent for the particular stripper I was using was lacquer thinner. I didn't have any handy, but made do with mineral spirits instead. That worked fairly well, but tended to leave behind little grains of solid sludge. Those remaining grains were easily brushed off once the cabinet had dried, but I assume that they would have been dissolved and removed during mop-up had I used the correct solvent.

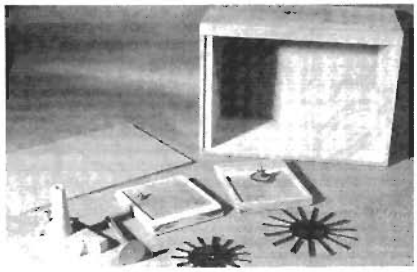
When I had finished, with the cabinet still damp from stripper and solvent, it looked almost as if I could apply the new finish without re-staining. But after overnight drying, the picture looked quite a bit different. The stripper had definitely removed quite a bit of the old stain, resulting in a pale, splotchy appearance. A new coat of stain would definitely be required, possibly with a preliminary bleach to even out the variations in color intensity. I'll report on my progress next month.

Several readers have written me interesting letters during the course of the Zenith restoration, and this seems like a good time to catch up with them. So let's open the mailbag!

7S232 Clones. One of the first communications I received was from John W. White, II, who says he has a Zenith 6S233 set that's very similar to my 7S232. The cabinet on his was warped, so he had to discard most of it. But he enjoys the set so much that he keeps the bare chassis on a bedside table for evening listening. John doesn't miss the cabinet too much, because he likes to



Shown here is the 7S232 now stripped of its finish. Much to my surprise and delight, the grain was not photographic, but really in the wood—just waiting to be brought out by an application of stain.



This is the preliminary stage in the construction of Dan Damrow's Crosley 50 replica. The fabricated parts for the coils and "book" condenser are in the foreground.