

ANTIQU RADIOS

Collecting antique radios

COLLECTING OBJECTS FROM A BYGONE era is as old as time itself. Such objects are often referred to as either *antiques* or *junk*—depending, of course, on whether you're buying or selling. Since World War II, all kinds of collectables have come into their own—coins and stamps, for instance, are old favorites. But that's not what we're going to talk about—after all, this is an *electronics* magazine!

The antique-radio hobby is different from other "collecting" hobbies. With radios, unlike other collectables, you are not as likely to get ripped off by unscrupulous characters who deal in "fakes." While making an authentic-looking reproduction of an antique-radio cabinet is possible, the same does not hold true for the tubes and other chassis components!

American antiques are objects considered by knowledgeable collectors to be over a hundred years old. Clearly, if that time frame were applied to old radios, there would be slim pickings for collectors. Even the set used by Marconi in 1888 won't be considered a true antique for a few years!

Many antiquaries—those who deal in or study antiques—divide the items into categories: *antiques*, *semi-antiques* and *collectables*. (Although there are no hundred year-old radios in my limited collection, there are a few that can be called semi-antiques!)

A look at early radios

It wasn't until the mid-1920's that complete radios, like the Crosley *Model 51* shown in Fig. 1, became available to the general public. Corporate contention seemed to

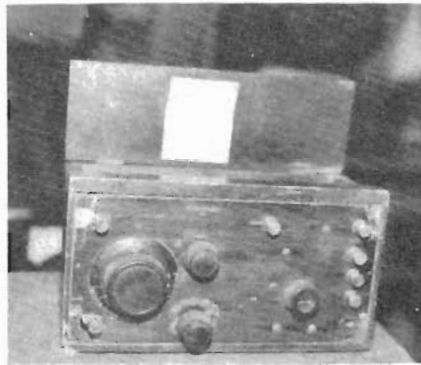


FIG. 1

hamper the growth of the industry. Designs, innovations, and patents were not generously shared by the early radio manufacturers—huge lawsuits, which tied up production for months, were not uncommon in the early days of radio.

Improvements and new inventions came fast in those early pioneer days. Back then, the average person had a better working knowledge of radios than now. Those people who got in at the beginning were able to follow advances in the industry. Any radio receiver was pretty much a do-it-yourself project; anyone interested in radio could read a schematic in those developing days.

The early enthusiast knew if he wanted to hear what was "on the air," he would have to build his own set. Therefore, what he wound up with was a custom-built set. A wealth of information and parts was available in early radio publications. And as radio progressed, complete information and schematics were offered.

In the early 1900's there was little commercial interest in radio—despite the development of the two- and three-element tubes (diodes



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and triodes).

After World War I, there were a number of production portables on the market that came complete with cabinet and tubes (two WD11 tubes). While those sets appeared to be small portables, their portability was certainly limited. The aerial, ground, as well as batteries and earphones, were connected to terminals on the front panel. The Crosley *Model 51*, (shown in Fig. 1) was one such set. That boxy-looking radio (with a cabinet that measured about ten inches across) contained 1.5-volt DC tubes and was battery-operated. Even at that time, only about a quarter of the homes in America were "wired." So the need for battery operated sets prevailed through most of the late 1920's and well into the 1930's!

The stock market crash and great depression of that era had little effect on the evolution of radio. By 1929, most new homes and many old ones were being wired. And with the licensing of more and more broadcast stations, the sale of commercially-built radios began to grow. The big corporations settled many of their differences (Some went all the way to the Supreme Court.)

By 1920, Grigsby Grunow, for example, sold 1,000,000 *Majestics* (see Fig. 2). Most old radios, as well as other manufactured products, had character right through the 1930's. (Civilian radio-production was reduced during the early 1940's—the years of World War II).

There were small AC-powered models with cabinets less than a foot wide that could fit on top of a bread box (fine collectors' items or



FIG. 2

conversation pieces). Those small antique radios, called “midget receivers” are much in demand—the small cabinets are relatively easy to restore.

During the 1930’s the midget radio was the industry’s answer to

the depression. While fidelity may have been sacrificed in those models (with their smaller speakers), by today’s standards, their sound quality is above average. The midget radio is the forerunner of the modern table models.

The radio industry in the early 1930’s hoped the midget radio would replace the millions of “antique” radios of that era. (But with its cost of around \$100.00, listeners were holding on to their older models.) Those custom mail-order

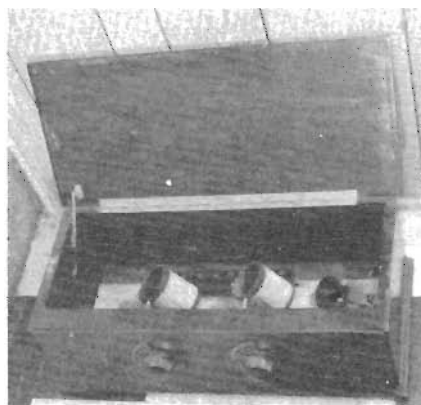


FIG. 3

or kit radios that were considered antiques in the early thirties will be hard to come by today. The set shown in Fig. 3 is an early antique radio. However, unlike the set in Fig. 1, its terminals for connecting the batteries, earphones, etc. are inside the box.

The radio industry hoped to induce those not enjoying modern radio to discard their obsolete equipment, and join the listeners of modern radio. For radio dealers, the big profit was in the console. At least half of the market still wanted, or could afford the big-console radios. The massive cabinet with huge dynamic speakers and two shortwave bands was a prestigious addition to the home in the thirties. (How many tubes you had in your radio became as important as how many cylinders you had in your car!)

Buying antique radios

Old radios that can be called antiques can be bought for as little as \$5.00! You might even find a free

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one if you're in the right place at the right time. (The right place at the right time is when someone is cleaning out old junk.) The price you pay depends on how much you want to pay, how badly do you want the set, and the radio's age, condition, and classic value.

Antique-radio collectors will have more in common with each other than most other collectors. Many (or most) will have some formal electronics training. Besides being able to repair and restore the chassis, they will have to learn how to restore cabinets. (Some radio and TV servicemen may have at least some ability in this area. Repairing minor scratches or marks often went with being able to repair a chassis.)

Bringing back the deep rich tone of an antique radio will be a satisfying experience. While everything has its price, a collector will find it difficult to part with a set that he has spent many tedious hours restoring. That's true even with a handsome profit in sight. And those who do a good professional restoring job can ask their own prices.

If you are going to have only one antique radio, the console is the only way to go. Of course it will take up some room. But like expensive cars, most of those large sets had better care and less misuse than their cheaper counterparts of the same era.

There is a market developing for antique radios for those other than collectors. Homeowners who want to decorate their houses in a 1930's motif need all the furnishings from that era. Restoring an antique radio is not something the average home decorator can do. An expertly restored antique radio is a fine addition to the rest of the decor.

There is really no age bracket for antique-radio collectors. I have often seen antique radios go to young persons who get to a sale before me. And older folks, of course, will feel nostalgic about having an antique radio that they might have owned or had at a younger age.

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