National Capital Radio & Television Museum

Artifact of the Week:

Philco Model 39-116 With "Mystery Control"





This week we feature the world's first radio with a ***wireless*** remote control. Museum visitors can see it demonstrated.

During the 1930s a number of companies developed radios with remote controls, typically consisting of a wooden box with push buttons, connected to the radio by a long flat cable that could be routed under a rug. But for its 1939 model line, Philco introduced what it proudly called the Philco "Mystery Control." Ads touted it as "the greatest miracle since radio itself." (The radio had shortwave coverage but the remote could be used only on the regular AM band.)

The remote control box contained a one-tube transmitter. Including batteries, it weighed several pounds and was bulky enough not to fall between sofa cushions. Using the telephone–type dial, users could select one of eight stations and turn the volume up or down from anywhere within a typical house. (Dealers would set up the customer's favorite radio stations.) The remote sent a string of pulses, transmitting on an adjustable frequency in the range 355 to 395 kHz, just below the AM broadcast band, that were picked up by a special receiver section in the radio. Dealers received complaints when an apartment dweller's mystery control changed not only their radio station, but also the station on the Philco 39-116 in a neighbor's apartment! A service technician would then have to adjust one family's radio to operate on the low end of this range and the other on the high end.

This Philco sold for $198 (about $3700 in today's dollars) and proved to be popular with consumers.

Curator Brian Belanger acquired this radio when someone eerily followed his Mid-Atlantic Antique Radio Club bumper sticker right into his driveway. The friendly driver announced that he had "an old radio to sell." Brian purchased, restored, and later donated it to the museum. Luckily he found an exact replacement for the grille cloth that a cat had used as a scratching post. The first station he heard on the restored Philco (on shortwave) was Istanbul, Turkey!

We appreciate your support of the museum so that historical artifacts like this one, and the stories that go with them, can be preserved for future generations. THANKS!