National Capital Radio & Television Museum

Artifact of the Week:

Coin-Operated Hotel Radio



This week's artifact is a late 1940s Model 6A coin-operated radio made by the Hotel Radio Corporation, an obscure Detroit-based enterprise. Some models bore a "Frawley" decal, for one of the company's founders. The firm had close ties to Detrola, another Detroit radio manufacturer. Detrola's Model 576 chassis is essentially the same as the Model 6A's chassis.

Two problems plagued hotel radio reception: Hotels' steel inner structures absorbed radio signals, and electrical noise emanated from sources such as elevator motors and passing streetcars. The Model 6A's design included a stage of radio frequency amplification, which helped bring in weak signals. The cabinet housed a special rotatable loop antenna. The large knob on top was labeled "Adjust for best reception," and turning it allowed orienting the antenna for maximum signal strength. A thin electrostatic shield around the antenna served to reduce electrical noise. According to restorers, these radios perform better than the average radio.

From the late 1930s until the mid-1950s coin-operated radios were common in hotel and motel rooms, with a floor model like this one placed next to the bed or a chair. (The museum also exhibits a circa 1950 table model coin-operated hotel radio.) Typically, the cost was 25 cents per hour. If a hotel chose to offer free radio, the same model could be purchased without the coin box mechanism.

Usually the lodging manager would own these radios and collect the quarters every few days. In some cases, an independent entrepreneur would work out an agreement to purchase and install the radios, offering the proprietor a share of the proceeds.

Television, booming by the mid-1950s, quickly began to replace radio as people's preferred entertainment medium. By the late 1950s, traveling families looking for a place to stay, might see a prominent sign boasting "Free TV in Every Room!" and the kids would shout out, "PLEASE can we stay at that motel!" While there were coin-operated TV sets, most hotel/motel chains opted for free in-room television to keep up with the competition.

Today hotel radios in good condition like this one are rare and we are pleased to be able to exhibit it.

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!