National Capital Radio & Television Museum

Artifact of the Week:

WKIE Microphone Radio



This week's featured artifact resembles a classic 1940s RCA microphone but it is a fixed-tuned transistor radio. It was a radio station promotional item, probably circa 1990.

Radio stations change call letters now and then, especially when a new owner takes over or when there is a format change. Over the years, the call letters WKIE have been used by several different AM and FM stations. Most likely this radio came from WKIE in the Richmond, Virginia, area, which operated for several years at 1540 kHz on the AM dial.

We have come across other microphone radios identical to his one except for different call letters. When turned out in large quantities a radio as simple as this one can be produced at very low cost. It has fewer parts than a normal radio because it is fixed tuned—it receives only that one station. It has just an on-off switch/volume control—no tuning dial.

Its obscure manufacturer probably made hundreds of these radios, stamping on them the call letters and dial frequency of the particular station ordering a batch, and setting the radios to that frequency. The station might choose to give one to each of its advertisers. And/or, an announcer might say. "Good morning, Richmonders. The first twenty people who call in will receive absolutely free a wonderful WKIE radio!" The winners then would be limited to WKIE when listening to their new conversation piece radio. That's one way to retain an audience!

The museum also has on exhibit a bulkier AM vacuum tube type fixed-tuned station promotional radio. Interestingly, it has 980 kHz stamped on it, but no call letters.

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!