National Capital Radio & Television Museum

Artifact of the Week:

Philco Neon Sign



This week's eye-catching art deco gem, probably dating from the late 1930s, is the most often-photographed item in the museum. Philco was one of the country's major radio producers at the time, so a Philco sales and service shop with this sign over the door could boast of offering a respected product line. How we acquired the sign is quite a story.

Shortly after the museum opened, then-director Brian Belanger was driving through the Midwest and stopped at a Rockford, Illinois, antique shop. When he inquired about old radios, the proprietor showed him this near-mint-condition Philco sign, still in its original shipping crate. He explained that it had been shipped to a Philco dealer in Michigan, who, for some unknown reason, never got around to installing it. Awestruck as he admired it, Brian did not have $5400 in his pocket to purchase this treasure for the museum. He took photographs and the owner's business card.

Back home, Brian's fellow museum board members all reacted as eagerly as he had. He knew that museum member and generous donor Roger Nye collected and loved Philco radios. When Roger saw the photos he immediately directed Brian to ascertain the minimum acceptable price, using the argument that a lower price was justified because that the sign would be going to a non-profit organization where the pubic could enjoy it. The antique shop owner conceded "I paid $2500 for it, and since you represent a pubic museum, you can have it for that." Roger told Brian, "I will write the museum a $2500 check if you will fetch it. Agreed!

Brian's Dodge minivan would accommodate items up to eight feet long. The shop owner had measured the sign—it was just under eight feet. Good! But he had not included the two steel mounting beams that protruded almost a foot beyond the edge of the sign proper. The back door of the van would not close. Not willing to give up, Brian got a trailer hitch installed on his vehicle and rented a ten-foot trailer.

The sign is big. It is heavy. It took a sign rigging company with a portable crane to get it raised and secured. Once plugged in, it lit right up and has graced the museum's atrium and delighted visitors ever since.

The museum has been featured in articles in *Washingtonian Magazine* and a number of newspapers. Invariably, a photo of this Philco sign heads the article.

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!