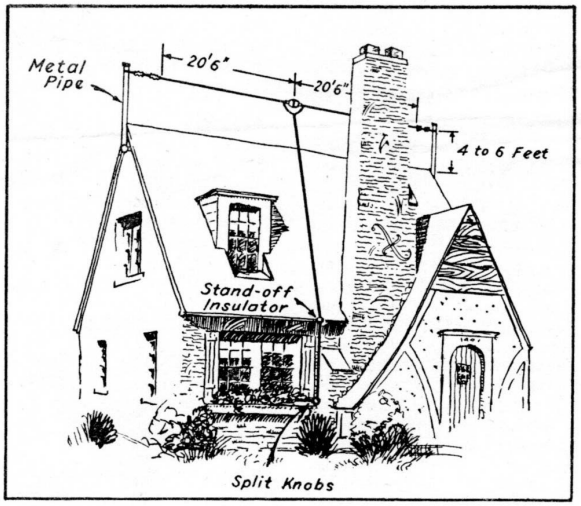
National Capital Radio & Television Museum

Artifact of the Week:

1937 Philco Aerial Kit



While a few early radios came with built-in aerials (soon to be called antennas) to pick up the signals, prior to the late 1930s most home radios required an outdoor wire aerial plus a ground connection. (The latter to improve reception, and, in conjunction with a lightning arrestor, to minimize chances of a lightning bolt entering the home.) The back of a pre-1940 radio typically had terminals marked "A," for antenna, and "G," for ground. It was up to the consumer (or the radio dealer) to rig up a suitable aerial, perhaps using a kit like this week's featured artifact.



The diagram here describes a dipole or doublet type antenna, with the connection to the radio coming from the horizontal wire's center. An even more common style was a long wire connected from the house to a tree or pole, perhaps 100 feet away, with the antenna lead-in to the radio coming off the near end of the wire. Sometimes a connection to a copper cold water pipe served as the ground connection. Often the ground wire from the radio was connected to a long copper rod driven into the ground near the foundation.

By 1939 most home radios came with factory-installed loop antennas in their cabinets. This Philco kit, therefore, came at the end of the outside antenna era.

The kit box contained the antenna and lead-in wires, two black egg-shaped insulators to isolate each end of the antenna from its supports, and two white cylindrical stand-off insulators (with protruding nails) to be pounded into the exterior wall to carry the lead-in from the antenna down to the entrance window. The slender white porcelain tube, into which the antenna lead-in wire was threaded, would be inserted into a hole drilled into the window frame, then caulked to keep water out.

We can be thankful that today we can listen to our radios without having to climb onto our roofs to string antenna wires!

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!