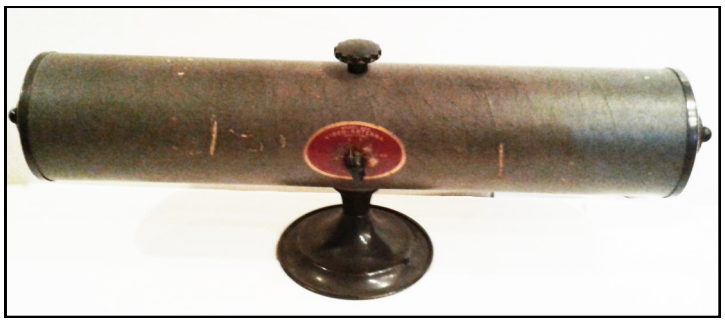
National Capital Radio & Television Museum

Artifact of the Week:

Tricraft Model 600 Indoor TV Antenna

This week's artifact is a 1950s vintage VHF indoor TV antenna made by Tricraft (left photo)—an alternative to the more familiar "rabbit-ears" antenna (right).





Television sets of the 1950s did not have built-in antennas. Broadcast signals came over the air from a station's transmitter, rather than via the cable-TV service providers most families rely on today. In urban areas with strong signals from near-by transmitters, a "rabbit-ears" antenna atop the TV set would deliver signals sufficiently strong for a good picture. To optimize reception, the rabbit-ears unit could be rotated, the angle between the rods adjusted, and with most rabbit-ears, the telescoping rods could be shortened or lengthened. Some people tried affixing pieces of aluminum foil to the rods to further improve the picture. By the late 1950s, portable TVs often came with a set of rabbit-ears built into the top of the set.

In a fringe or rural area a large outdoor directional antenna on the roof, or on a crank-up steel tower, was needed. Viewers wanting to watch stations in different directions, living say, halfway between Baltimore and Washington, might install a motorized rotator on the antenna. A control box on top of the TV enabled pointing the antenna towards the desired station.

This approximately two-foot long Tricraft tubular antenna was more expensive and bulkier than a typical set of rabbit-ears, but was said to perform better. Inside the cardboard tube is a "folded dipole" antenna connected to a tapped wire coil that served to better tune the antenna to the frequency of the channel. The switch on the front of the unit was labelled for the various VHF channels. A viewer switching channels also had to remember to turn the switch on the antenna unit.

Some of us are old enough to recall the black and white TV sets of the 1950s, with their images sometimes degraded by "snow" or "ghosts," despite fiddling with our antennas. What a vast difference from our modern flat-panel high-definition TVs with their incredibly sharp color pictures!

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!