National Capital Radio & Television Museum

Artifact of the Week:

1949 Magnetone Wire Recorder



Prior to World War II radio stations used phonograph records for non-live content. Sound effects might be stored on standard size 78-rpm record discs. Programs and perhaps commercials would have been pre-recorded on larger 33⅓ rpm transcription discs. Announcers would solemnly intone, "The program you are about to hear is coming to you transcribed."

In the 1950s, tape recording became the preferred technique, first with audio tape for radio, and later, video tape for television. But there was a brief period just after the war when radio stations extensively used wire recorders. A thin steel wire received varying magnetization as it passed through the recording head. Wire spools could be reused; as with a tape recorder, new content could be recorded over existing material. The sound quality of wire recorders was quite good, comparable to the tape recorders that would replace them, but tape units were lighter in weight and easier to use. An accidentally dropped wire spool usually produced a tangled mess certain to evoke audible cursing.

This museum artifact is a Magnetone Model BK-303 portable reel-to-reel type wire recorder used at DC radio station WMAL. Magnetone was a small firm that had to compete with larger equipment makers such as RCA, but its equipment performed well. To cope with anticipated rough handling this model is housed in a rugged suitcase sized steel case, and weighs an amazing 52 pounds. News reporters covering a big story would no doubt have taken this instrument into the field. They would not have needed to join a gym to exercise their muscles.

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!