National Capital Radio & Television Museum

Artifact of the Week:

RCA "Radiogram" Call Switch



The Radio Corporation of America, RCA, did not begin as the consumer electronics company most people think of today.

Concerned that our country had had to rely on a foreign-owned source for critical communication links during World War I, the US Navy in 1919 persuaded the General Electric Corporation to purchase the American Marconi Company, a British firm that had been providing ship-to-shore and trans-Atlantic radio communications. Thus created, the renamed RCA began as a quasi-government entity. A Navy representative served on its board of directors.

As entertainment broadcasting took off, consumer electronics quickly became RCA's principal business, but it continued to provide overseas communication services throughout much of the 20th century via "radiograms." These were the wireless equivalent of telegrams, which offered fast domestic communication using the services of a company such as Western Union (the largest such firm) to deliver a brief message via strung wires.

Radiograms were messages transmitted abroad or to a ship at sea by radio with high-speed Morse Code. A sender would contact RCA, which maintained "Radio Central," a huge facility on the tip of Long Island, with transmitters, receivers, and antennas dedicated to trans-Atlantic communication. A similar RCA facility on the West Coast provided links to Asia.

This radiogram call switch, pictured here nearly actual size, had been installed on the desk of a Wall Street executive, probably about 1940, and would have been connected to RCA's office in Manhattan. When the financial enterprise wished to send a radiogram, an employee would turn the switch. The RCA office, receiving the signal, would dispatch a messenger, perhaps on a bicycle, to pick up the prepared radiogram. RCA would then telegraph the message to Radio Central for re-transmission via radio to its overseas destination.

Thanks to the Internet, satellite links, and fiber optic undersea cables, communication with Europe or other parts of the World today is nearly instantaneous, and cheap.

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!