



RETRO TECH

THE RISE OF CATHEDRALS

THE "BABY GRANDS" OF THE 1930s



ALSO THIS MONTH:

- *TV GOES SOLID
STATE AND
PORTABLE - THE
PHILCO SAFARI**
- *WHEN THE BAR
WAS YOUR
HOME THEATER**

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THE TEXAS BROADCAST MUSEUM

Phil Patterson is a Board member and invaluable multi-talented contributor to the Museum who has been involved since before it opened to the public over 9 years ago. A University of Texas graduate who grew up in University Park with family roots in Kilgore, Phil's extraordinary troubleshooting and repair abilities emerged early—he rewired a neighbor's lamp at age 6 and fixed a broken TV he received as payment, making him the only kid in his class with a television in his bedroom.

His professional career includes serving as chief engineer of a TV station, working in cable TV, and spending significant time in the consumer electronics sales and service business in the Dallas-Plano area before his business partner bought him out, prompting his move to Kilgore. Beyond his technical wizardry—exemplified by his patient restoration of the challenging DuMont Royal Sovereign that was missing essential parts and had been incorrectly modified—Phil handles everything from unloading trucks and rearranging equipment to giving tours and changing light bulbs, bringing both exceptional repair skills and solid business sense to every task.

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* Retro Tech copy editor - Mike Shannon



RISE OF CATHEDRAL RADIOS

How Gothic-Inspired Radios Captured Depression-Era America, Then Vanished Within a Decade

In 1930, Philco introduced a compact tabletop radio with a distinctive rounded top resembling Gothic cathedral arches. The Model 20—called the "Baby Grand"—was an instant sensation, selling hundreds of thousands of units. Within months, every major manufacturer rushed cathedral-styled radios to market. For the next seven years, these Gothic-inspired sets dominated American living rooms, becoming the iconic radio style of the Depression era.

Then, almost as quickly as they appeared, cathedral radios vanished. By 1938, manufacturers had largely stopped producing them, swept aside by streamlined horizontal designs, colorful plastics, and sophisticated consoles. Today, pristine examples command hundreds or thousands of dollars—testament to a style that captured its moment perfectly, then passed into history.

THE BIRTH: PHILCO'S REVOLUTIONARY "BABY GRAND"

By 1930, radio had become enormously popular, but most sets were expensive console models costing \$100-300 (roughly \$1,800-5,400 today)—major investments during the Depression's early years. Philco's Model 20 changed everything, offering console

performance in a compact, affordable package at just \$49.95.

The distinctive Gothic arch wasn't primarily aesthetic—it was functional, accommodating the large round speaker while creating a compact footprint. But Philco cleverly called it the "Baby Grand," evoking piano terminology and suggesting scaled-down grandeur while maintaining quality.



✿ 1931 Philco Baby Grand Cathedral Radio

Most revolutionary: the Model 20 was the first tabletop radio integrating speaker, chassis, and controls in a single attractive cabinet. Previous "midget" radios required separate speakers, making them awkward and unattractive. The timing was perfect—Depression families needed affordable radios, and the Baby Grand's success made Philco famous and established the cathedral style as the new standard.



 *Philco Model 20 Baby Grand*

WHY CATHEDRAL RADIOS CAPTURED AMERICA (1930-1937)

Cathedral radios' explosive popularity wasn't accidental—they met multiple needs simultaneously.

Economic Accessibility: At \$25-75 versus \$100-300 for consoles, cathedrals democratized radio ownership during the Depression when every dollar mattered enormously.

Compact Size: Typically 12-18 inches tall, they fit on mantles or tables without dominating rooms—crucial for families in smaller apartments or modest houses.

Emotional Resonance: Gothic arches evoked churches—institutions providing comfort and community. During the Depression's darkest years, families gathered around cathedral radios for

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Fireside Chats" with almost religious devotion. The cathedral styling reinforced radio as something sacred.

Design Excellence: Inspired by nineteenth-century English "Lancet Clock" styles, cathedrals featured beautiful woodworking—some with smooth curves, others with ornate fluting, columns, and relief panels. Each manufacturer created distinctive variations.

All Manufacturers Copied It: Following Philco's success, RCA, Atwater Kent, Zenith, Crosley, Colonial, and dozens of others rushed their own cathedral designs to market.

THE GOLDEN AGE ICONS

Following Philco's success, every major manufacturer rushed to produce cathedral radios. All the other radio manufacturers copied this style, creating an explosion of Gothic-inspired designs.

The Major Players:

Philco remained the cathedral leader with iconic models:

- Model 20 (1930) - The original Baby Grand
- Model 70 (1931) - One of the best-selling cathedrals of all time
- Model 90 (1931) - Designed by Edward Combs, considered by many collectors as the most desired cathedral radio of all time, with classic lines that epitomize the cathedral style
- Model 21, 35, 46 - Smaller look-alikes to the iconic Model 90

RCA produced numerous cathedral models, most featuring tuned RF amplifier stages for superior performance. RCA's cathedrals emphasized technical quality, positioning them as premium offerings.



 *RCA Model 128*

Atwater Kent, Zenith, Crosley, Colonial, and dozens of other manufacturers all introduced their own cathedral designs, each with distinctive details—different arch shapes, grille patterns, wood finishes, and decorative elements.

DESIGN VARIATIONS

Cathedral radios came in an enormous variety of designs:



*1930's Crosley
Repwood
Cathedral Radio
Model 59*



True Cathedrals: Sets where the general shape is a full, complete arch, with no exceptions—smooth Gothic curves from top to bottom.

Modified Cathedrals: Sets with rounded tops but less dramatic arches—the curved portion might be only 2 inches higher than the straight sides, creating debate among collectors about whether they're "true" cathedrals or something else.

Ornate vs. Simple: Some cathedrals featured elaborate detailing—fluted columns, relief panels, carved decorations reminiscent of actual Gothic architecture. Others emphasized clean, simple curves with minimal ornamentation.

Materials: While wood dominated (walnut, mahogany, oak), the introduction of bakelite in the early 1930s enabled some cathedral radios in molded plastic, though these were less common than the classic wooden models.



*Crosley Walnut Cathedral
Style - CR31-WA*

THE SWIFT DECLINE: WHY CATHEDRALS DISAPPEARED AFTER 1937

Despite immense popularity, cathedral radios largely disappeared from production by 1937-1938. The decline was swift and comprehensive—within two years, a style that dominated the market for seven years became obsolete.

Improving Economy: As Depression conditions eased, consumers could afford larger, more impressive sets. The cathedral's primary advantage—affordable compactness—mattered less.

Style Evolution: Art Deco's streamlined aesthetics favored horizontal lines, chrome accents, and machine-age styling over vertical Gothic arches. Cabinet designs became plainer, with ornate details falling out of favor as modernist principles emphasizing simplicity gained prominence.

Technological Progress: Better circuits and improved speakers enabled excellent performance in even more compact horizontal table models, undermining the cathedral's original advantage.

The Horizontal Shift: Radio design fundamentally shifted from vertical to horizontal orientation. Speakers and dials arranged side-by-side enabled wider, lower radios that looked more modern. The vertical cathedral now seemed awkward.

Tombstone Transition: By 1935-1936, many manufacturers introduced "tombstone" radios—tall, narrow, rectangular boxes with flat tops rather than Gothic arches. These maintained vertical compactness with more modern aesthetics. Tombstones generally lasted until 1938 before horizontal designs replaced them, too.

Bakelite Revolution: Moldable plastics enabled colorful, compact table radios produced more cheaply than wooden cathedrals with greater design flexibility.

Console Evolution: Consoles became shorter, wider, less expensive, and more sophisticated—narrowing the gap between cathedral and console pricing and features.

Market Saturation: By 1937, most families already owned radios. The market shifted from first-time buyers (needing affordable entry models) to replacement buyers (wanting something newer and more modern). Cathedrals looked old-fashioned.

By 1938, most manufacturers had stopped producing true cathedrals. Philco continued using "Baby Grand" terminology through 1940, but subsequent models bore little resemblance to classic cathedral forms. The Gothic arch had given way to streamlined modernity.

WHAT COLLECTORS SEEK TODAY

Cathedral radios' brief production span (primarily 1930-1937) means limited survival numbers. Their ornate woodworking and Gothic styling embody Depression-era aesthetics uniquely. Their cultural significance—families gathered around these during America's most challenging years—adds emotional resonance.

Collectors particularly prize:

- Philco Model 90: The cathedral's epitome
- Early models (1930-1932): Representing the style at its purest
- Ornate designs: Showcasing woodworking craftsmanship
- Rare manufacturers: Limited production runs
- Original condition: Unrestored sets with intact finish, correct components
- Working examples: Though valued primarily for aesthetics and history



 *Philco Model 90*

LEGACY: MORE THAN RADIOS

Cathedral radios weren't just entertainment devices—they were lifelines during the Depression, sources of comfort during uncertainty, and gathering points for families seeking connection and hope. The Gothic arch suggested radio itself deserved reverence and attention.

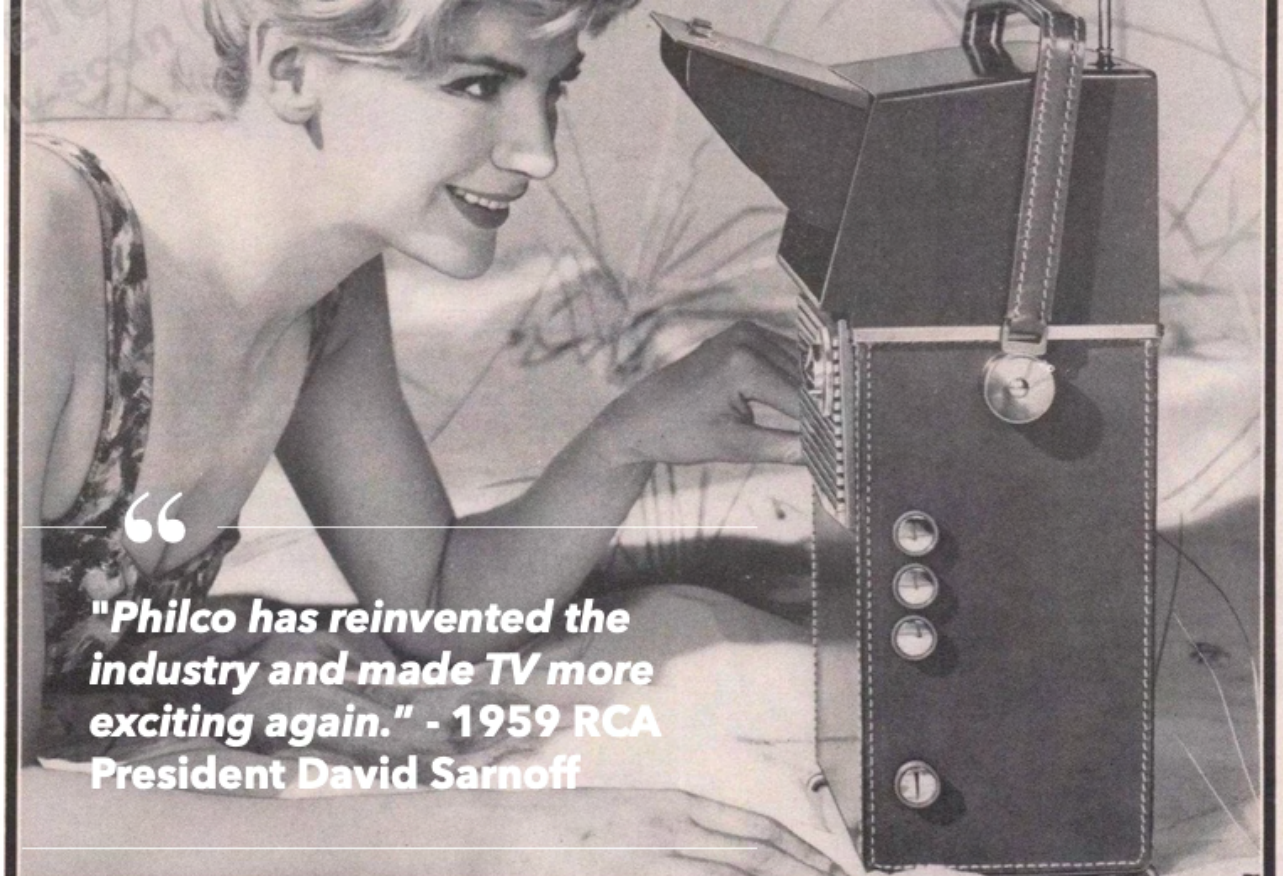
CONCLUSION: A BRIEF, BRILLIANT MOMENT

From Philco's Model 20 in 1930 to final production around 1937-1938, cathedral radios dominated American living rooms for less than a decade. In that brief span, these Gothic-inspired sets became iconic symbols of an era—Depression hardship and hope, family togetherness, FDR's fireside chats, and radio's emergence as the dominant medium of American culture.

Then they vanished, swept aside by changing economics, evolving aesthetics, and technological progress. Within two years, cathedral radios went from market dominance to obsolescence.

Today, these sets survive in collectors' hands and museums—beautiful artifacts from a time when radio inspired wonder; when gathering around a glowing wooden box felt ceremonial, and when a compact Gothic-arched cabinet could hold both cutting-edge technology and comforting tradition.

Cathedral radios were more than receivers—they were monuments to an era, capturing in their Gothic arches both the comfort of tradition and the promise of technological modernity. For seven brief years, they were everywhere. Then they were gone, replaced by designs better suited to changing times. But in those seven years, cathedral radios defined an era!



“
"Philco has reinvented the industry and made TV more exciting again." - 1959 RCA President David Sarnoff

TELEVISION GOES SOLID-STATE

THE PHILCO SAFARI: THE FIRST ALL-TRANSISTOR TV THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

On April 28, 1959, Philco Corporation unveiled the world's first all-transistor portable television. The Philco Safari(model 1000) wasn't just another portable TV—it represented a fundamental technological shift from vacuum tubes to transistors that would eventually transform all of consumer electronics.

The Safari was revolutionary: genuinely portable, lightweight, battery-powered, requiring no warm-up time. It promised television anywhere, anytime.

It was also deeply flawed: mediocre picture quality, poor reception, short battery life, high price, and reliability issues frustrated early adopters. Critics questioned whether solid-state television was ready.

Yet despite its problems, the Philco Safari proved all-transistor television was possible and practical. It established the template for portable television that would dominate for four decades, influenced every portable TV that followed, and accelerated the transistor revolution, making vacuum tubes obsolete.





WHY TRANSISTORS MATTERED

Pre-1959 "portable" televisions used vacuum tubes with fundamental problems:

Size/Weight: Even "portable" tube TVs were heavy (20-40 pounds) and bulky—portable only in that they had handles.

Power Consumption: Tubes required high voltages and substantial power. Battery operation was impractical—tube portables required AC power.

Heat/Warm-Up: Tubes ran hot and needed 30-60 seconds to heat up before displaying a picture.

Fragility: Delicate glass tubes broke easily from physical shock.

Cost: Tubes required substantial supporting components, adding cost and complexity.

THE TRANSISTOR PROMISE

Transistors offered revolutionary advantages: tiny size, low power consumption (enabling battery

operation), no heat, instant-on, durability, and superior reliability.

By the late 1950s, transistors had revolutionized portable radios. The logical next step was television.

THE PHILCO SAFARI: FIRST TO MARKET

Philco raced to be first with an all-transistor TV, introducing the Safari in April 1959.

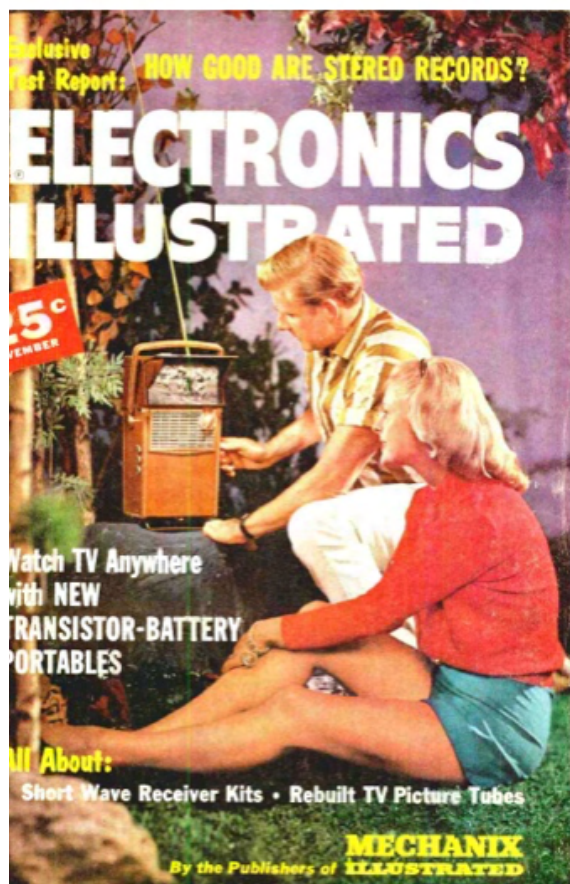
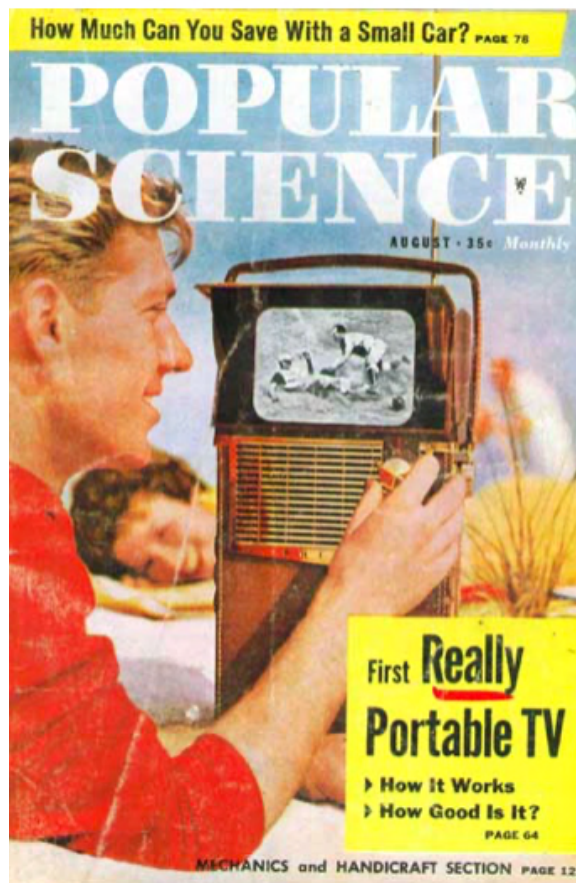
THE DESIGN

Form Factor: Rectangular case, roughly 12" x 9" x 6" with a handle that was designed to be carried like a small suitcase.

Screen: 9-inch diagonal CRT—the screen itself remained a vacuum tube (no practical solid-state display technology existed). Transistors replaced all receiver circuitry.

Case: Two-tone plastic housing (typically white/cream with contrasting panels) provided a modern, space-age aesthetic.

Weight: At approximately 15lbs, it was remarkably light compared to 25-35 pound tube portables.



Power: A Revolutionary feature, the unit operated on AC power or battery power (9-12 large batteries or rechargeable packs).

Price: \$250 at launch (1959 dollars, equivalent to roughly \$2,600 today)

The technical achievement was genuine—Philco had successfully designed a television receiver using transistors, solving numerous engineering challenges.

THE PROBLEMS: REALITY vs. PROMISE

Picture Quality Issues

The Safari's picture quality was mediocre compared to tube portables:

- Limited resolution—softer, less sharp picture than tube sets
- Dimmer screen, particularly problematic in bright environments
- Washed-out appearance with less contrast

Contemporary reviews consistently noted picture quality was the Safari's weakest aspect.

Reception Challenges

- Weak tuner less sensitive than tube tuners, requiring stronger signals
- Small antenna insufficient in many locations, requiring external antennas
- Temperature-sensitive circuitry caused tuning drift during use
- More prone to electrical interference than tube sets

Battery Life and Cost

- 3-5 hours sounds reasonable until considering cost—9-12 large D-cell batteries were expensive
- Batteries added 3-4 pounds, partially negating weight advantage
- Rechargeable packs were expensive (\$50+) with limited charge cycles
- Most Safari owners used AC power primarily, rendering battery capability an expensive rarely-used feature

Price Barrier

At \$250, the Safari was expensive. Comparable tube portables cost \$150-\$200 with arguably better picture quality and reception. For \$250-\$300, consumers could buy small console TVs with larger screens and superior performance.

The Safari's advantages (lighter weight, battery operation, instant-on) didn't justify the premium price given the performance compromises.

Reliability Issues

- Early transistor quality control was inconsistent—some units experienced transistor failures
- Component characteristics changed with temperature and aging, causing picture degradation
- Few TV repair technicians understood transistor circuits—servicing required specialized knowledge

These issues damaged the Safari's reputation and made consumers wary of transistor television.

MARKET RECEPTION: LIMITED SUCCESS

Sales Reality

Despite initial interest, sales were disappointing. Industry estimates suggest perhaps 10,000-30,000 Safari units sold in the first year—respectable but not the blockbuster Philco hoped for:

Market Resistance: Consumers hesitated to pay premium prices for performance inferior to tube sets in most respects.

Dealer Skepticism: TV retailers were lukewarm due to service concerns and customer complaints about picture quality.

Competition: By late 1959-1960, other manufacturers introduced competing transistor portables, fragmenting the market and creating price pressure.

Consumer Feedback

Positive: Genuine portability, light weight, battery operation, instant-on feature, novelty of transistor technology

Negative: Picture quality inferior to tube sets, reception problems, battery costs, price too high for performance delivered

The consensus: impressive technical achievement but not yet a better product than tube portables for most users.

Evolution and Improvements

Philco released improved Safari models (1960-1962) addressing early issues:

- Better picture quality through improved transistor designs
- Enhanced reception with better tuner designs
- Larger screens (11-inch, 13-inch)
- Reduced prices (\$200, then \$150)
- Improved reliability through better quality control

By 1961-1962, transistor portables from Philco and competitors had addressed most shortcomings, offering performance approaching tube sets while retaining solid-state advantages.



INFLUENCE ON FUTURE PORTABLE TELEVISION

Despite commercial limitations, the Safari's influence was profound:

Established the Template

The Safari proved all-transistor portable television was viable. Every successful portable TV for the next 40 years followed the Safari's template:

- Compact size optimized for portability
- Battery operation enabling true portability
- Lightweight construction
- Instant-on operation
- Simplified internal design

Accelerated Transistor Adoption

By 1965, virtually all portable TVs were transistorized. Tube portables became obsolete. The success encouraged development of hybrid and eventually all-solid-state console TVs by the 1970s.

Demonstrated Battery Operation Viability

The Safari proved battery-operated television was practical, encouraging investment in better batteries, power-efficient designs, and portable entertainment culture that laid groundwork for later portable DVD players, smartphones, and tablets.

Technical Lessons

The Safari's problems drove research producing:

- Transistor tuners eventually superior to tube designs
- Sophisticated portable power supply design
- Better thermal management solutions
- Recognition that CRT screens remained the limiting factor, driving alternative display research

The Safari Today

Philco Safaris have modest collectibility:

- Non-Working, Fair Condition: \$50-\$150;
- Working, Good Condition: \$150-\$400
- Excellent Condition, Complete: \$400-\$800
- Mint in Box: \$800-\$1,500+ (extremely rare)

Collectors value historical significance (first all-transistor TV), design aesthetic, functionality, completeness, and condition.



THE LEGACY

The Philco Safari didn't succeed commercially as Philco hoped, but it succeeded in ways that mattered more:

Proved Transistor TV Was Possible: Before the Safari, skeptics questioned viability. The Safari proved it could work.

Established Portable TV Standards: Every portable TV for the next 40 years followed the Safari's basic template—compact, battery-powered, transistorized.

Accelerated Technology Transition: By demonstrating viability despite flaws, the Safari encouraged competitors to invest in transistor TV development.

Influenced Design Thinking: Showed portability and convenience could be selling points even when performance compromises were necessary.

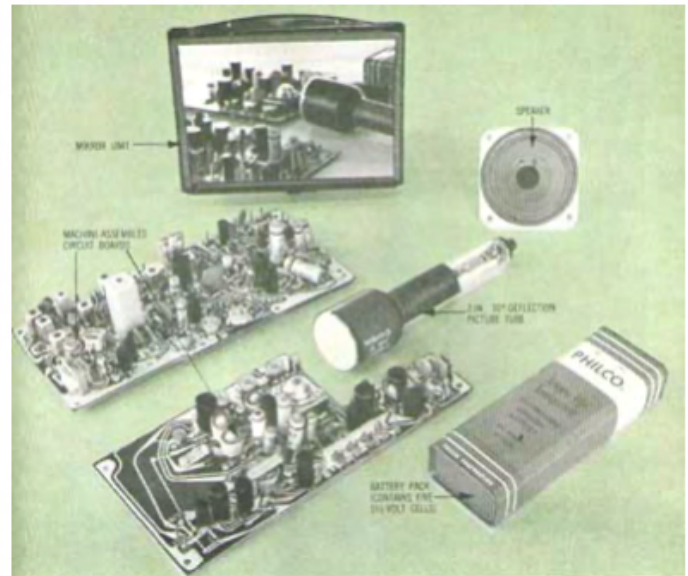
THE VERDICT

Was the Philco Safari a good television? **Not really.** Picture quality was mediocre, reception problematic, battery operation expensive, price too high.

Was it eagerly accepted? **No.** Sales were modest; most consumers chose tube portables offering better performance at lower prices.

Did it have negative aspects? **Absolutely.** The Safari's flaws were significant and well-documented.

Did it influence future portables? **Profoundly.** Every successful portable TV that followed, was built on the Safari's foundation, refined its approach, and validated its core concept.



The Philco Safari was a flawed pioneer—a first attempt that struggled commercially but succeeded in proving a new approach was viable. Within years, improved designs addressed the Safari's shortcomings, and transistor portables became standard.

That's the Safari's true legacy: not commercial success, but technological validation that changed television.

THE FIRST STEP

Somewhere in a collection, a Philco Safari sits—transistor circuits silent, 9-inch screen dark, once-revolutionary technology is now a historical curiosity.

For a brief moment in 1959, it represented the future—television liberated from wall outlets, light enough to carry anywhere, operating on batteries. That the picture wasn't quite as good, that reception was sometimes problematic, that batteries didn't last long enough—these were teething problems that would be resolved.

Within a decade, transistor portables equaled then surpassed tube portables. Within two decades, vacuum tubes were obsolete in consumer electronics. The Philco Safari was not the best portable television, but the first all-transistor one, and in technology, being first matters—even when first is flawed because someone has to take that imperfect first step so others can refine it into something better.

That's what the Philco Safari did. It stepped first, stumbled a bit, but kept going—and changed television forever.



When the Neighborhood Bar Was Your Home Theater

HOW TAVERNS BECAME AMERICA'S FIRST BIG-SCREEN VENUES

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, if you wanted to watch television on a truly impressive screen, you didn't go to an electronics store showroom or a wealthy neighbor's mansion. You went to your local bar.

Across America, taverns and neighborhood saloons became unlikely pioneers of large-screen entertainment, installing television sets with screens that dwarfed anything the average family could afford or accommodate. These weren't just TVs behind the bar—they were destination attractions, drawing crowds for boxing matches, baseball games, and evening programming in an era when home television ownership was still climbing toward ubiquity.

The marriage between bars and big-screen televisions was practical, profitable, and transformative. It changed drinking culture, accelerated television's popularity, gave working-class Americans access to technology they couldn't afford, and established patterns of social viewing that persist

today in sports bars across the country. For roughly a decade, the neighborhood tavern was America's living room—only with better screens and cold beer on tap.



THE ECONOMICS OF EARLY TELEVISION

To understand why bars dominated large-screen television, you need to understand the economics of early TV sets. When commercial television broadcasting began in earnest after World War II, television receivers were expensive luxury items, typically costing \$200-\$600 for small-screen models with 7-10 inch displays—equivalent to \$2,500-\$7,500 today.



* Christmas Fireside Chat - Franklin D. Roosevelt

Large-screen sets with 15-inch, 19-inch, or projection screens could cost \$1,000-\$3,000 or more—the price of a new automobile. For the average American family earning \$3,000-\$4,000 annually in the late 1940s, these were impossible purchases. Even families who could afford a television typically bought the smallest, cheapest model available.

But for bar owners, the calculation was different. A large-screen television was a business investment that could pay for itself in increased traffic and higher drink sales. A \$2,000 television that drew twenty extra customers per night, each spending \$3-\$5 on drinks, would generate thousands of dollars in additional monthly revenue. The math made sense in ways it never could for home viewing.

THE SPECTACLE FACTOR

Early television wasn't just about watching programs—it was about the novelty of the technology itself. In 1947 and 1948, television was still

magical, almost science fiction coming to life. People would gather just to see moving pictures transmitted through the air, regardless of what was being shown.

Bar owners recognized this immediately. A large-screen television became a powerful draw, something to brag about and advertise. Taverns placed signs in windows: "Television Here!" or "See the Fights on Our Giant Screen TV!" These weren't just amenities—they were the main attraction.

The larger the screen, the more impressive the spectacle. A 7-inch home set was a curiosity for the family that owned it. A 15-inch bar set was a neighborhood gathering point. A projection television with a 20-inch or larger image was a legitimate sensation, something people would travel across town to experience.

THE SPORTS CONNECTION

Sports programming drove bar television adoption more than any other factor. Boxing was particularly crucial—the Friday Night Fights became appointment viewing across America, and bars were packed with crowds watching matches on television.

Baseball also drew substantial audiences, particularly for World Series games and local team broadcasts. These weren't polite gatherings—they were raucous crowds, cheering and arguing, buying rounds, staying for hours. Bar owners quickly realized that sports on television transformed slow nights into profitable ones.

**BIG
SCREEN IN
THE 1950's
PALED
COMPARED
TO FUTURE
DECADES**

The communal aspect mattered. Watching boxing or baseball alone at home on a tiny screen was interesting. Watching with fifty other passionate fans on a large screen with drinks flowing was an experience—something you'd pay for and return to repeatedly.

THE TECHNOLOGY: WHAT SETS DID BARS USE?

Several manufacturers recognized the bar market and created sets specifically designed for commercial installation. These weren't just enlarged home models—they were ruggedized, designed for continuous operation, and built to impress.

RCA 630-TS and Large Console Models (1946-1949)

RCA's 630-TS series, featuring 10-inch screens in substantial wooden cabinets, became extremely popular in bars despite the relatively small screen size. These were among the most reliable early sets, and their Art Deco cabinetry made them attractive installations. RCA also produced limited quantities of 15-inch and 16-inch console models specifically marketed to commercial establishments. These massive cabinets, standing nearly five feet tall, looked impressive even when the screen was off.

DuMont Royal Sovereign and Chatham (1949-1952)

DuMont, a manufacturer that would eventually exit the television business, produced some of the finest



DuMont Royal Sovereign on display at the Texas Broadcast Museum

large-screen sets of the era. The Royal Sovereign featured a 30-inch direct-view picture tube—the largest commercially available at the time—housed in an enormous cabinet that required reinforced flooring. These sets cost upwards of \$3,000 and were almost exclusively purchased by bars, hotels, and other commercial venues.

The **DuMont Chatham**, with its distinctive round 20-inch screen, also became popular in upscale bars. The round screen was less practical than rectangular ones, but it looked futuristic and distinctive—perfect for establishments wanting to stand out.

Emerson Projection Television (1948-1950)

Emerson produced one of the first affordable projection television systems, using mirrors and lenses to project a television image onto a large translucent screen. These systems could produce images 20 inches or larger, though brightness and clarity suffered compared to direct-view tubes.

Bars loved projection sets despite their limitations because size mattered more than perfect picture quality. When fifty people are watching from various distances, a large dim image works better than a small bright one. Emerson's projection systems were particularly popular in working-class taverns that couldn't afford DuMont's premium direct-view sets.



1949 Emerson 609 Projection TV

Projection Systems

Several manufacturers experimented with projection television, recognizing that bars represented a substantial market. Pilot, Sonora, and

Crosley all produced projection systems in the late 1940s, with varying degrees of success.

These systems typically used a 7-inch or 9-inch high-brightness cathode ray tube positioned face-up, with the image reflected off a mirror and projected through a lens onto a ground-glass screen. The results were often disappointing by home standards—dim, sometimes fuzzy images—but in a darkened bar with an engaged crowd, they were perfectly adequate.

Philco and Admiral Large-Screen Consoles (1949-1952)

Philco's Transitone series and Admiral's large console models, featuring 16-inch and 19-inch screens, found homes in thousands of bars. These were built like furniture—solid wood cabinets with elaborate veneers, designed to look impressive and withstand the rigors of commercial use.

The **Philco 1950 "Big Picture" models** were particularly popular, featuring 16-inch screens in cabinets designed to be viewed from across a room. These weren't the largest screens available, but they offered excellent reliability at prices bar owners could justify.

INSTALLATION AND VIEWING ARRANGEMENTS

Bars didn't just set a television on the counter and call it done. Installation was carefully considered to maximize viewing and create the right atmosphere.

Most bars mounted large-screen televisions high on walls or in specially built alcoves, ensuring sightlines from throughout the establishment. The television became the room's focal point, with seating arranged to face the screen. Some bars built elevated platforms or corner installations to improve visibility.

Lighting was crucial. Too much ambient light washed out the image on early screens, which were far less bright than modern displays. Bars often dimmed lights during popular programs, creating a theater-like atmosphere. Some installed curtains or shades that could be closed during daytime broadcasts.

Sound presented challenges. Early television audio was thin and weak, inadequate for noisy bar

environments. Many establishments installed additional speakers or amplification systems, running audio lines from the television to speakers positioned throughout the room. This required technical expertise that some bar owners lacked, leading to a cottage industry of television installation specialists.

THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS

Television transformed bar culture in unexpected ways. Bars had always been social spaces, but television created focused, shared experiences that drew diverse crowds.



During major events—championship boxing matches, World Series games, important news broadcasts—bars would be packed with people who might not otherwise patronize them. Families sometimes came together, unusual in an era when bars were predominantly male spaces. The television provided a socially acceptable reason to be there.

This changed drinking patterns. People nursed drinks longer while watching programs, sometimes frustrating bartenders who preferred quicker turnover. But overall volume increased—more people meant more sales, even if individual consumption slowed.

Television also changed conversation patterns. Instead of constant chatter, bars would fall quiet during exciting moments, then erupt in reaction. Strangers bonded over shared viewing experiences, debating calls and celebrating dramatic plays. The television gave people something to talk about beyond the usual bar topics.

THE DECLINE OF THE BAR BIG-SCREEN ERA

By the mid-1950s, the bar's dominance of large-screen television was ending. Several factors contributed:

Home television ownership exploded. By 1955, over half of American households owned televisions. By 1960, it was nearly 90%. As home sets became common, the novelty factor that drove bar viewing diminished.

Home screens grew larger. The 21-inch screen became standard for console televisions by the mid-1950s, offering viewing experiences comparable to many bar sets. Families could watch comfortably at home without dealing with bar crowds and smoke.

Programming expanded beyond sports. Early television's sports-heavy schedule was perfect for bar viewing. As programming diversified—situation comedies, dramas, variety shows—content became less suited to communal bar watching. People wanted to watch "I Love Lucy" or "The Honeymooners" in the comfort of home.

Color television emerged. The first color broadcasts began in the early 1950s, and color sets reached consumers by the mid-1950s. Bars were slow to upgrade to expensive color sets, giving home viewing an advantage for certain programming.

Social attitudes shifted. Television viewing at home became a marker of middle-class status and family togetherness. The wholesome family gathered around the TV became an American ideal, while the bar became associated with less desirable elements. This cultural shift reduced television's power as a bar draw.

THE LEGACY

The era of bars as big-screen television venues was relatively brief—perhaps 1947 to 1956—but its impact endured. It established patterns of social sports viewing that persist today. Modern sports bars, with their walls of large screens showing multiple games simultaneously, are direct descendants of those 1940s taverns with single large-screen sets.

The bar big-screen era also accelerated television's adoption and cultural penetration. Millions of Americans experienced television for the first time in bars, becoming familiar with the technology and its potential before they could afford home sets. These bar viewers became television's early advocates, spreading enthusiasm that drove home adoption.

For manufacturers, the bar market provided crucial early revenue and testing grounds. Commercial installations revealed which technologies were reliable and which were problematic. Lessons learned in bar televisions informed home set design for years.

A MOMENT IN TIME

There's something poignant about those early bar television installations—the massive wooden cabinets, the crowds gathered in dim rooms, the shared experience of watching grainy images of boxing matches and baseball games on screens that seemed enormous then but would be laughably small now.

It was a transitional moment when television was still new enough to be special, when owning a large-screen set was aspirational rather than routine, when gathering to watch was the only option for most people. The neighborhood bar, often a working-class institution, became democratizing—a place where everyone, regardless of means, could access cutting-edge technology and participate in the television revolution.

Today, 70-inch screens are common in suburban living rooms, and we stream content on phones while commuting. The idea of going to a bar specifically to watch television on a 16-inch or 20-inch screen seems absurd. But in 1949, that bar television was magic—a window to the world, a technological marvel, and a gathering point for communities.

When you walk into a modern sports bar with its dozen flat screens and surround sound, you're experiencing the descendant of those 1940s taverns where neighborhood crowds gathered around a single large-screen DuMont or RCA to watch the Friday Night Fights. The technology has changed beyond recognition by the fundamental human desire to share viewing experiences hasn't changed at all. experiences, debating calls and celebrating dramatic plays.

IS IT WORTH IT



WORKING WEBSTER CHICAGO 80-1 WIRE RECORDER + ACCESSORIES



Item Description from the Seller:

Webster Chicago 80-1 Wire Recorder +
Accessories.

Comes with four reels of recorded wire, power
cable, microphone, operating instructions, and a
cheat sheet instruction pamphlet.

Unit is in working order but has a loud hum (see
attached video).

There is also an extra 6V6 vacuum tube

 **ASKING PRICE: \$222**

Appraiser's thoughts: There is a surprisingly large collector community for vintage audio recording devices, and many want the Webster models as examples to their collection. This one works and has all the original parts and guides. It is a good deal in the range of \$175-\$300.

VERDICT:

FAIR DEAL



FUN FACTS ABOUT BROADCAST TECHNOLOGY



WERE PEOPLE MONOCHROME UNTIL 1954? Early cameras could only see in black and white—color capability didn't arrive until the 1950s and wasn't common until the 1960s.



WHAT TAPE? The TV and movie studio term "roll tape" is a holdover from the analog era, when film or video tape was used, but now studios now use hard drives or flash storage to record and still use the term.



MARKETING MAKES UP A NAME FOR SOUND: "Hi-fi" is a marketing term. The term "high fidelity" was introduced in the mid-1950s to describe audio quality superior to AM radio and 78 rpm records.

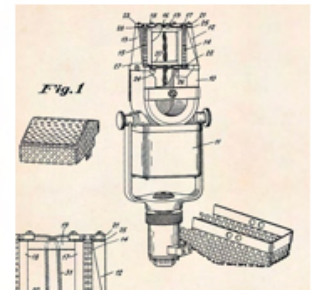


CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW? Early radio stations often broadcast from department stores, newspapers, and hotels as promotional ventures.

In the early 1920s, radio stations could choose any frequency they wanted, leading to chaos as stations interfered with each other



MIC CHECK: RCA introduced the ribbon microphone (44 series) in 1932, revolutionizing broadcast sound quality. Ribbon mics used a thin metal ribbon suspended in a magnetic field—extremely delicate and sensitive.



The RCA 44 became the iconic "radio microphone" shape we still associate with old broadcasts



TOP OF THE MORNING TO YOU: Most people dream in color, but those that grew up watching black and white television often dream in black and white.

Picture tubes contained enough vacuum pressure that, if broken, they could implode violently—so repair technicians wore face shields.





WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

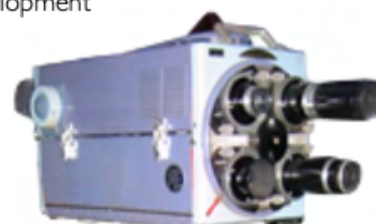
THE VIRTUAL MUSEUM OF THE BROADCAST TELEVISION CAMERAS

The objective of this site is to record and document the history, technology and development of broadcast television cameras. The images and data within are drawn from the cameras and photographs in my collection and the collections of other supporters of the museum. It is hoped that this site will become a valuable reference source.

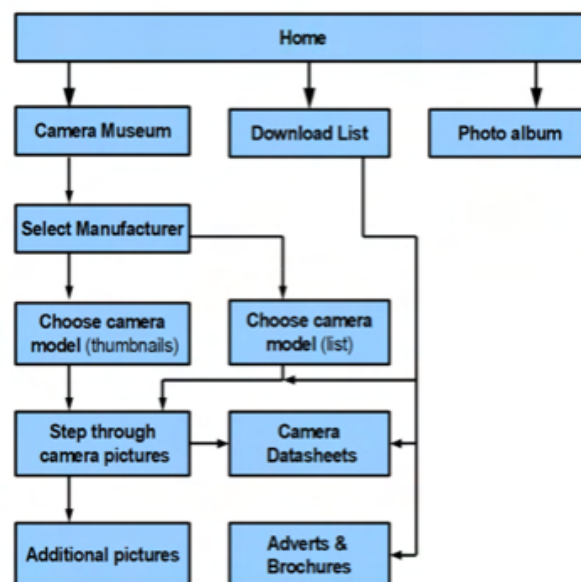
The museum is a long way from finished, and will be adding new cameras and information as and when possible. The intention is to work on European and American television cameras first. There are many pages that are incomplete with gaps and omissions.

Like most museums, where their collections are mostly "in storage", this collection which supports the museum is entirely "in storage" and the museum is a virtual one that exists in cyber space. However, this does have advantages:

- ◆ It means everything can be displayed
- ◆ Admission is free!
- ◆ The Museum is open 24/7
- ◆ The collection is preserved in good condition for the future



<https://www.tvcameramuseum.org/>



HELP US PRESERVE HISTORY



Help us Make a Difference - The Importance of Monetary Donations

Monetary donations to help us pay the bills at a not-profit are welcome and necessary. While we own the building and real estate for the Texas Broadcast Museum, but insurance, utilities and maintenance are expenses that you can help us fund. The modest admission fees and occasional facility rental of the Museum for special events is not enough to cover the annual operating expense. You'd be surprised how much even small monetary donations can help. To donate financially, please click the button below to contribute via PayPal.

DONATE - PAYPAL



Chalk Hill Educational Media, Inc - dba "Texas Broadcast Museum" is an IRS recognized 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization



Donate Your Vintage Broadcast Equipment

The museum is bursting at the seams with exhibits and treasures these days and that is a good thing. But, we have to be selective on what we accept now, as without the floor space to display everything, we hate the thought of your treasures sitting in storage, but we are always on the lookout for these things:

The Holy Grail

We will always be looking for both a pre-World War II television set and a mechanical television set (before 1930). If you donate one of these items, we will make you a lifetime member with free entrance for life, and a guided, hands-on tour of the Museum with up to 20 of your friends.



