

VINTAGE RADIO

By JOHN HILL



A few old receivers from the 1920s

A while back, I was fortunate enough to get onto a few old receivers from the 1920s. Actually, I tell a lie – in this instance, they came to me. All I had to do was answer my telephone.

These sets were owned by a collector who was selling up. And he is not alone in this regard; quite a number of collectors have been forced to sell up during the past 12 months or so. Many people are enduring hard times at the moment and, when finances become strained, unessentials such as hobbies are the first to go – particularly when those pay cheques stop coming in.

On the other hand, many such collectors have had to face the harsh reality that, due to the recession, their collections are not bringing the prices they originally paid. The true value of something is only what someone is prepared to pay for it at that particu-

lar time. If it doesn't sell, then the asking price is greater than its current worth.

The person who was offering me his radios was strictly a collector. He simply acquired old radios and stored them in outside sheds. He made no attempt to clean up any of his sets or make any effort to restore them to working order. From this description, readers can well imagine the generally neglected condition of these receivers. They were dirty, dusty and looked decidedly unloved. Add the aroma of mouse infestation and the picture is complete.

There were four radios with four horn speakers, plus three horn driv-

ers and an upright Brown horn without a driver. Also included was an incomplete 1929 Airzone portable receiver.

Actually, the word portable should be used with inverted commas, because portables from the 1920s era were fairly hefty items. Adding a carrying handle doesn't necessarily make something portable!

The other receivers consisted of two 3-valve regenerative types (detector plus two audio); a 4-valve regenerative type with a neutralized radio frequency stage and two tuning dials; and a 5-valve TRF with two neutralized stages of RF amplification and single knob tuning. All were battery operated and used either 4V or 6V triode valves.

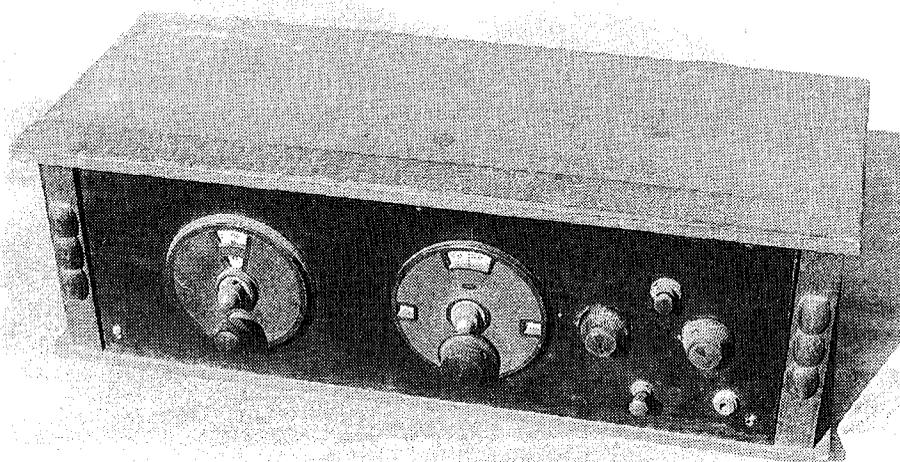
Dealer prices

If these receivers were to be found in an antique shop, one would have to spend a couple of thousand dollars or so to purchase them, regardless of their mediocre condition.

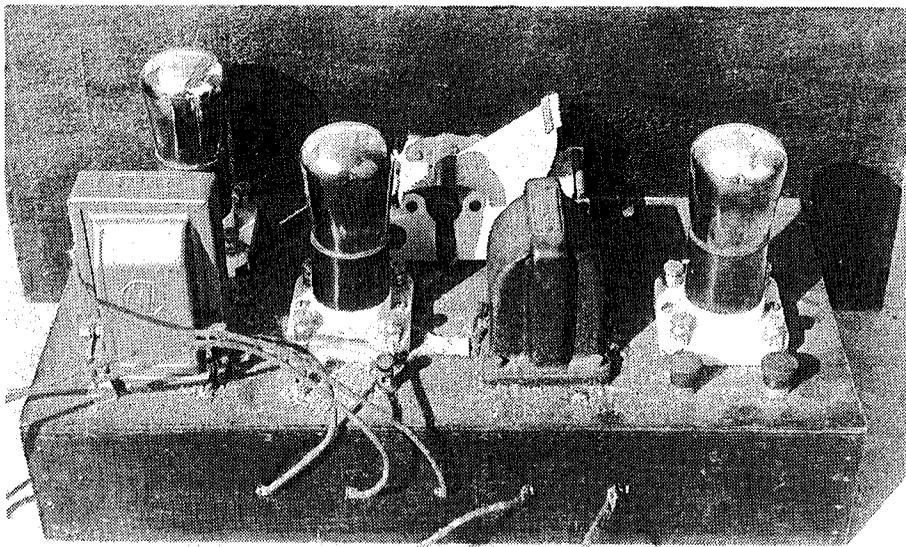
Personally, I believe that the prices dealers place on old radio receivers far exceed their worth and that their true value is generally about one third the asking price. I don't pay dealers' prices for my radios unless it is for something really exceptional.

Accordingly, I offered \$600 for this collection of dusty relics and my bid was accepted. \$600 was either the best or only bid that had been offered. I believed it was a fair price considering nothing was clean, tidy, or in working order. Most of what was on offer needed the full restoration treatment before any of it could be considered valuable.

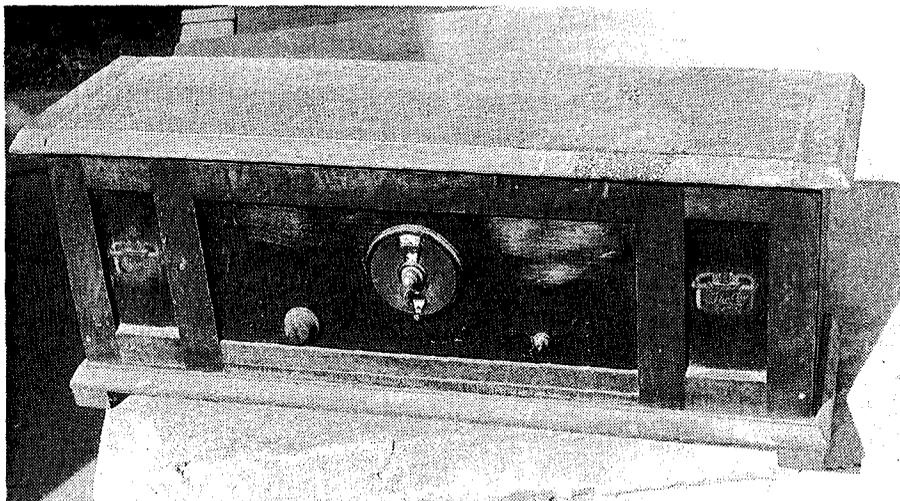
Returning for a moment to antique dealers' prices, I find it incredible that when I sell a fully restored radio I cannot obtain what a dealer asks for



This is the home-made 3-valve TRF receiver. Its cabinet has been built from roughly dressed poor quality timber not unlike that used in packing cases.



Back view of the home-made 3-valve chassis. There are plenty of problems here, including three useless valves, two open circuit audio transformers & a broken dial, to name just a few.



This 3-valve receiver was built by "Golden City Radio" of Ballarat, Victoria. It is very long for a 3-valve set & has battery storage space at both ends of the cabinet.

a similar set in unrestored condition. In many cases, the dealer's set doesn't even work. Either I'm too cheap or antique dealers are too dear. I think the latter is more likely correct!

However, in all fairness, one must take into account the time and travel costs involved in going to auctions, garage sales, or whatever. This must be added to the price of any collectable item and the rarer the item, the more time it takes to find. If you are not prepared to do this, then the antique dealer will do it for you – for a price; his price!

Only a few days ago, I had an antique dealer complain to me that I hadn't bought a radio from him for at least a year. My reply was "when you

have something I really want and it is realistically priced, then I will buy it!" Because I am interested in old radios he expects me to buy every receiver he has in stock.

This same dealer had on display a mid-1950s 4-valve Radiola with a cracked plastic cabinet, odd control knobs and a price tag of \$89.00. This example should convey the message I am trying to get across about dealers' prices being too high.

Now then, let's get back to those old receivers.

Really, there is only one good one among them and that is the 5-valve TRF set. Like so many early radios, it has no maker's name but it must have been better than average in its day

because it is fitted with single knob tuning. Most 5-valve TRFs from that era have three vernier dials driving three individual tuning capacitors.

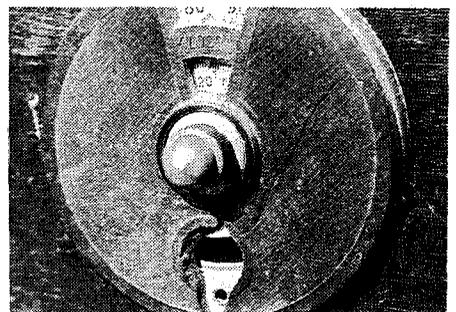
Like many TRF receivers, it is a straight set with no regeneration. Regeneration can shift the tuning of the detector circuit and is undesirable with a ganged tuning capacitor unless one section can be trimmed from the control panel.

Of the other sets, one of the 3-valvers is a home-made affair with two dials on the front control panel. Only one is used for tuning; the other is used as a vernier for the reaction control.

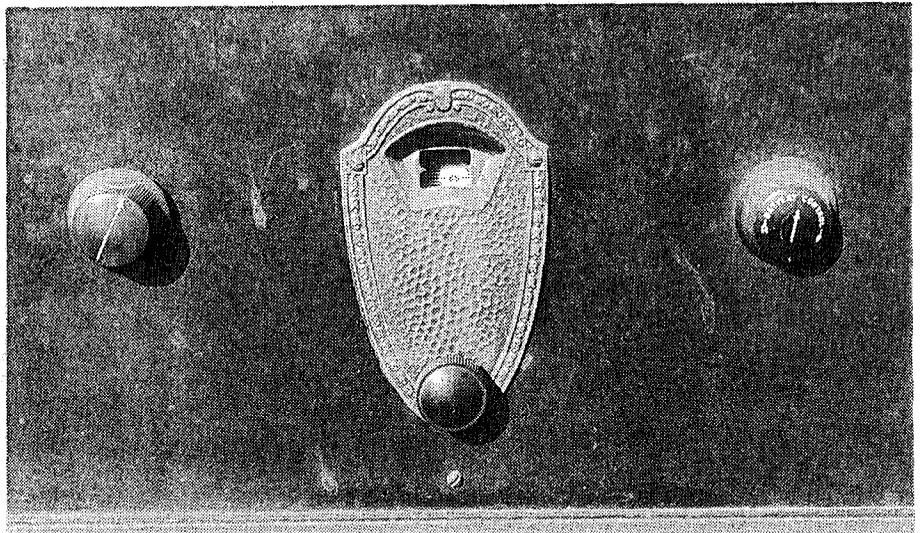
This little home-built set is unique in a rough sort of way, for its cabinet has been fashioned from the proverbial packing case. Although my first impression was "yuk!", I have since developed a liking for this scruffy little packing case special. It truly represents the typical home-built receiver of the 1920s, whereby the overall expense of the outfit was kept to an absolute minimum. Its only aesthetic feature is three little wooden bobbles attached to each side of the front control panel.

The other 3-valver is a large commercially made receiver built by "Golden City Radio" of Ballarat, Victoria. As with most 3-valve sets from the 1920s, it is about as basic as a regenerative detector receiver can be. These radios were produced in quantity for the budget end of the market. Three valves gave sufficient power for reasonable loudspeaker operation on local stations.

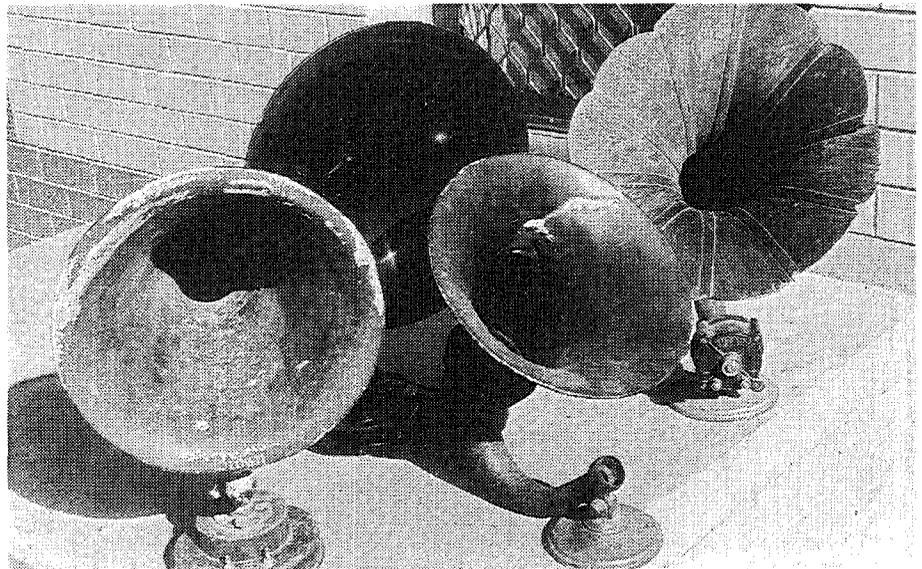
Unfortunately the dial on the front control panel had been smashed. As luck would have it however, I have an



The "Golden City Radio" receiver has a smashed dial – just one of the many problems in this particular set. Fortunately, a spare dial is available but general restoration work on old receivers is difficult due to lack of spares.



This rather uninspiring control panel belongs to the 5-valve TRF receiver. The controls are, from the left: volume, tuning & filament rheostat. The latter control also serves as an on/off switch.



These four horn speakers came with the old receivers. A lot of work is required to restore them to working condition.

identical unit that can be used as a replacement when I finally get around to restoring the set.

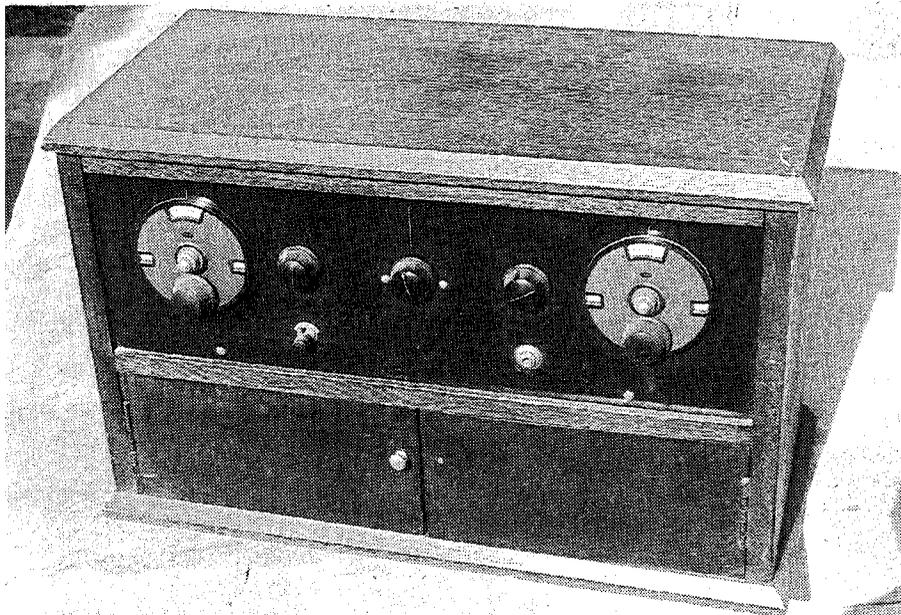
Another problem with this particular receiver is with the top of the cabinet lid, for it has been subjected to a massive paint spill. There is a scab-like blob of lacquer on the lid which will take quite a bit of work to remove without damage.

Finally, there's the 4-valve TRF set with the single RF stage. While this unit appears to be commercially made, once again there is no brand name. Some of those manufacturers of old were not very proud of their products. It is a poor state of affairs when they were too ashamed of what they

made to put their name on it.

Or was it was a way around paying royalties or taxes or something? Or maybe the sets sold so fast that no-one had time to fit a badge or name-plate!

This little 4-valver is a fairly compact outfit and its cabinet has double doors underneath the receiver to house the batteries. Receivers with self-contained batteries were a good deal tidier than those without. Batteries strewn all over the floor, together with their connecting wires, must have been a great annoyance during the early days of radio. Mains-operated sets must have been a great relief after the humbug of battery power.



The 4-valve regenerative receiver was commercially made & has a stage of neutralized radio frequency amplification. Note the battery storage space at the bottom of the cabinet.

All the horn speakers were fairly sad looking, especially an Amplion "Senior Dragon". This particular horn speaker has an oak flare and, like most timber flares, has not survived its near 70 years very well. It has several splits and chips and the rubber parts have also gone out of shape, a common problem with old Amplions.

Another unit is a Claritone, a horn speaker that has quite a large flare. Once again, it is only in fair condition and is rusting due to peeling nickel work.

The big Brown horn is quite a stylish shape and should restore fairly well, although it will require a full repaint job. Do anyone know where I might get onto some "Brown" transfers?

Every one of the horn speakers re-

quires the full restoration treatment and that includes a rewind of the driver coil in some instances. However, it was not a bad collection of junk for the price, even though very little of it is in good condition and there is a lot of work to be done.

Valve checks

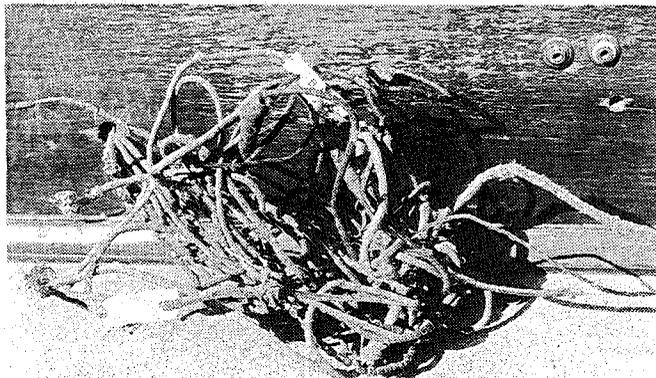
This is a project for the future. So far, I have done nothing other than check the valves – and that was a somewhat disheartening experience.

Out of 19 valves (including the Airzone portable), there was only one good one. Some base pin resoldering may retrieve some of them, otherwise I will be scrounging around for some old 4V and 6V triodes.

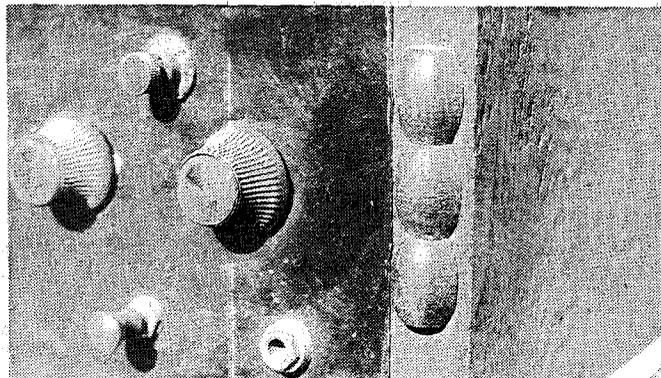
But that is what vintage radio is all about – searching, scrounging, find-

ing and restoring. There would be little satisfaction if every set was in perfect working order, although a good one now and then would be nice.

Every time I add an old 1920s radio or horn speaker to my collection, I reckon that it will be the last I will ever see. I have said that a few times now but something else always seems to come along. It just goes to show that there are still odd bits and pieces of 1920s equipment out there. It is only a matter of finding it! **SC**



This wiring mess once formed the battery leads of the 5-valve TRF receiver. A complete rewiring job should solve the problem. The two sockets are for the speaker leads.



These bobbles on the home-made 3-valve TRF receiver did little to improve its appearance & certainly did nothing to improve the set's performance.