

VINTAGE RADIO

By JOHN HILL



Finding receivers from the 1920s

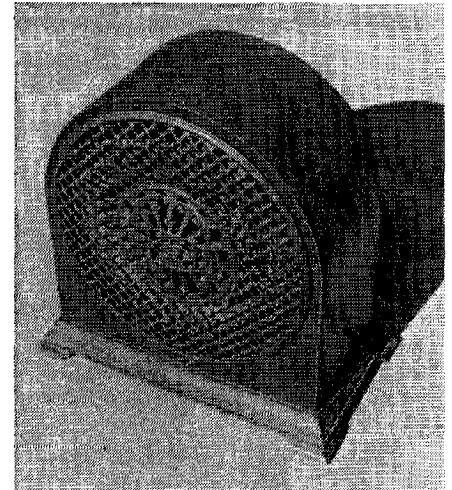
Radio receivers from the 1920s are very collectable items but are now becoming hard to find. However, there are still a few treasures to be found out there if one is in the right place at the right time.

The term "vintage radio", as far as I am concerned, refers to old valve-type radio receivers. In covering this subject so far, the radios I have chosen to write about have mainly been from the 1930s and 40s era. This period of time produced some interesting and well made receivers and these sets would make up the bulk of most collections.

The period prior to 1930 is another matter. Radios made back in that particular era would have to be referred to as truly antique radios for they belong to another world.

The year 1923 saw the beginning of broadcasting in Australia and the surge of interest it created was astonishing to say the least. The receivers used in the mid 1920s were unique because they were in vogue only for a very short period of time. Once the mains operated superheterodyne receiver became established in the late 1920s and early 30s, the old style battery operated reaction sets with their harsh sounding horn speakers quickly fell from favour — and no wonder!

However, when it comes to collecting, it is these old sets from the



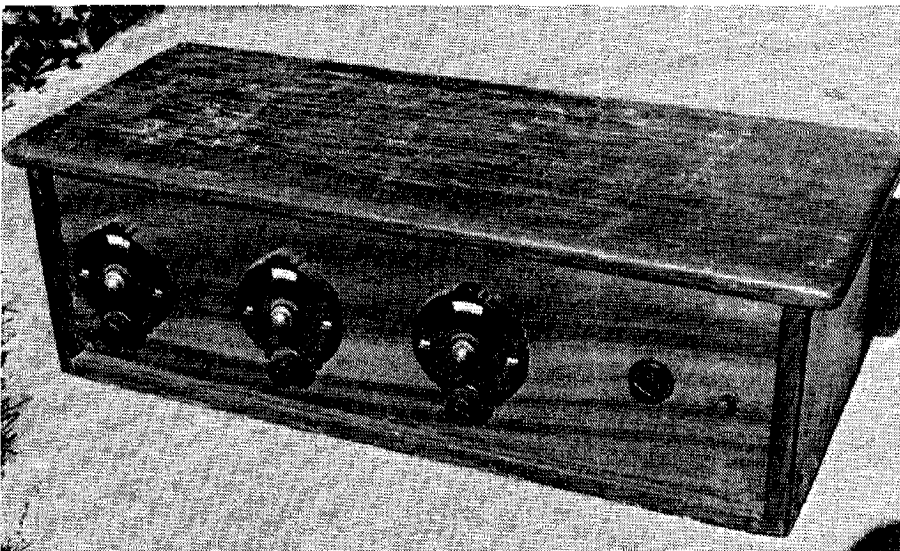
This Amplion cone speaker was the latest thing in the late 1920s. Unfortunately it no longer works and needs repairing.

1920s that are the really collectable ones. Despite their age, the problems associated with operating battery receivers and the scarcity of old triode valves, any set that pre-dates 1930 is a collector's gem and is worth having regardless as to whether it is in working order or not.

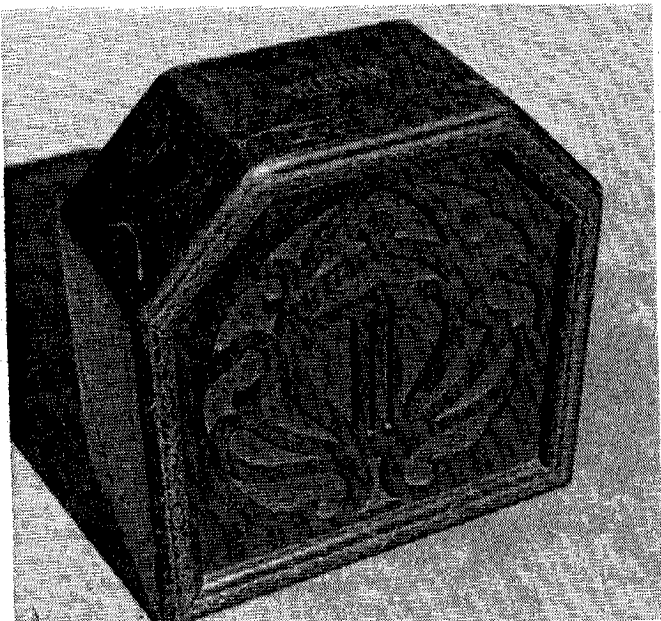
The trouble is, very few of these old receivers have survived the purges of the rubbish tip brigade. They are not only almost impossible to find but if they are found they will cost quite a few hundred dollars a piece. What's more, there is every likelihood that the set will not work and has been separated from its original loudspeaker.

Antique shops

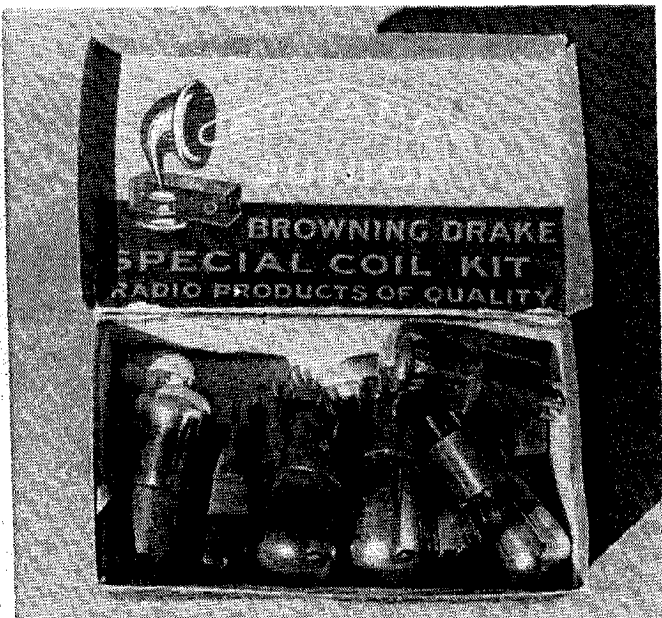
One occasionally sees an old radio or an old speaker in an antique shop, but nearly always as separate items. Rarely do two matching units stay together.



A typical mid 1920s radio receiver. This unrestored 5-valve neutrodyne is a home-made effort, built by the late George Irvin about 64 years ago.



A Celestion cone speaker. The tone of these speakers was supposed to improve with age — a claim that is difficult to substantiate.



A dozen old triodes in usable condition is always a good find but these even came in an old Browning Drake coil kit box.

Many months ago I made the comment in this column that it pays to let others know of your interests as this can alert a whole army of people who will contact you if they find something interesting. In my case, all of my friends, relatives and acquaintances keep a look out for me. In addition to this, public displays of my collection have also lead to some interesting finds.

My \$2 neutrodyne

Only a few months ago I received a phone call regarding an auction sale. There was supposed to be an old speaker amongst the goods being auctioned, so off I went with great enthusiasm.

The information was correct — lot 107 was a large Brown horn speaker of about 1926 vintage. Looking around I found that lot 63 also held a bit of interest for me — it was the receiver that originally went with the Brown horn.

The receiver was a five valve neutrodyne TRF with three tuning dials on the front panel. Unfortunately, the front panel was made of three ply which had become wet at some time and the layers of ply had separated. Otherwise, the set was complete, valves and all.

"What am I offered for lot 63?" the auctioneer asked. "Will anyone offer me \$20?"

"Will anyone offer me \$10?"

"Will anyone make an offer?"

"Two dollars", was my reply.

As there were no further bids, I purchased my TRF receiver for the said amount.

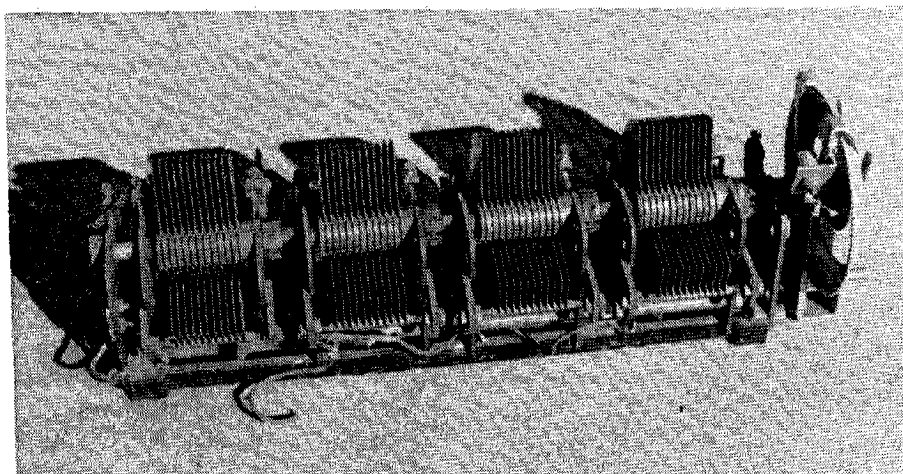
Lot 63 also included a substantial wooden box containing a lady's handbag and five one gallon cans for which I was offered a dollar, thus making the old five valver the best buy I ever have made.

To cut a long story short; the horn speaker attracted a few more bidders and I was run up to \$14 before it was mine. Considering the fact that the speaker was in working order and the flare was not dented, I felt that I did fairly well at that particular auction.

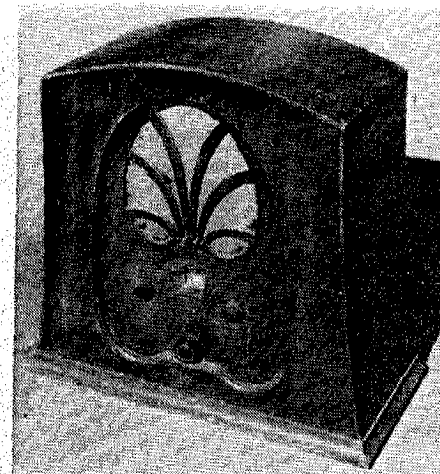
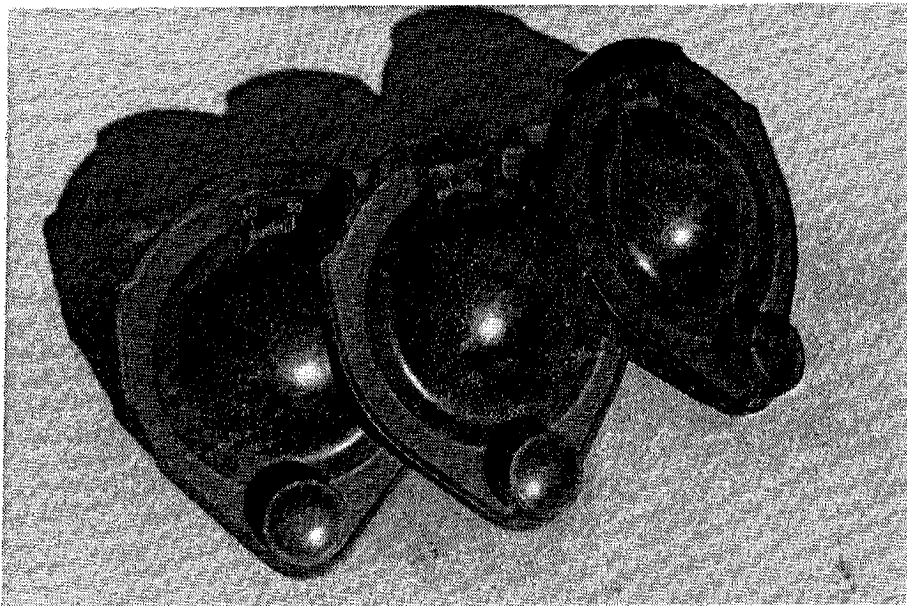
It is a matter of being in the right place at the right time and having a few friends who will pass the message on when they see something of interest.

TRF Radiola

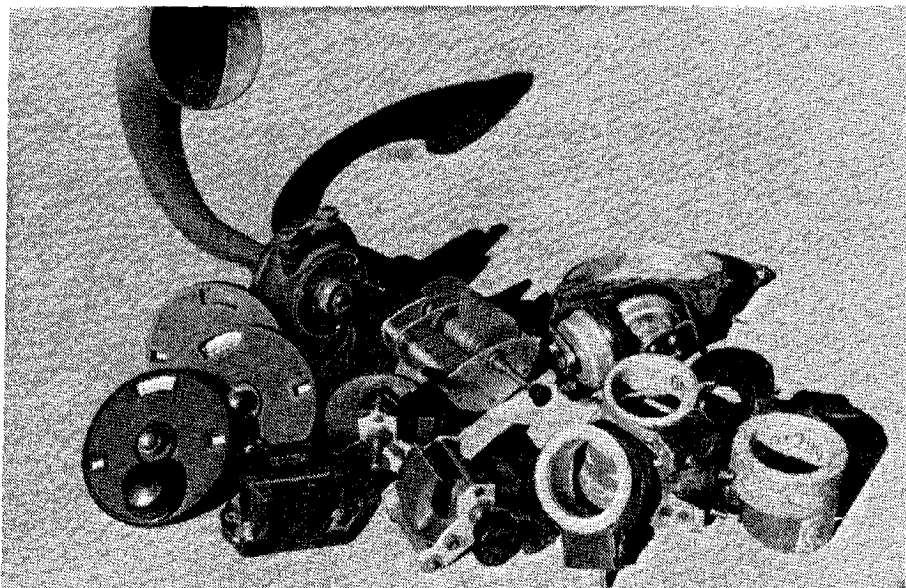
Once, my wife received a phone call regarding an old radio and took down the details in my absence. The caller's neighbour had recently seen one of my vintage radio displays and had passed the information over the side fence that I was interested in buying old radios. Usually such phone calls lead to a "Little Nipper" or the like with a cracked cabinet and missing knobs, but not this time.



This 4-gang brass tuning capacitor is from an old TRF receiver. The unit was obtained complete with a gear driven dial mechanism (at right hand end).



This large unrestored table model Radiola is of 1929-30 vintage and shows the trend at the time to bring receivers and loudspeakers together in the one cabinet. Receivers from the pre-1930 era are very collectable items.



More miscellaneous bits and pieces from the past. Included are tuning capacitors, headphones, various coils and a horn speaker.

This particular receiver was a 4-valve Radiola, a TRF set of 1930 vintage. Although the set was a bit shabby and not in working order, it was complete and restorable. It is also mains operated which makes it a more attractive proposition than the battery operated sets of the mid 1920s.

The old Radiola also had a more expensive price tag than the neutrodyne mentioned earlier and it cost me \$50.

Every time I buy a genuine antique radio, I always get the feeling that it must be the last one I will

ever find. If you have spent any time looking for radios from the 1920s, then you will know the feeling I am talking about. Most of these early receivers have either been dumped at the tip or adorn someone else's collection. But no matter how disheartening the task may be, keep looking, for there are still a few out there to be found.

Deceased estate

Only last week I received a phone call from a small country town approximately 250km away which just goes to show how the word gets

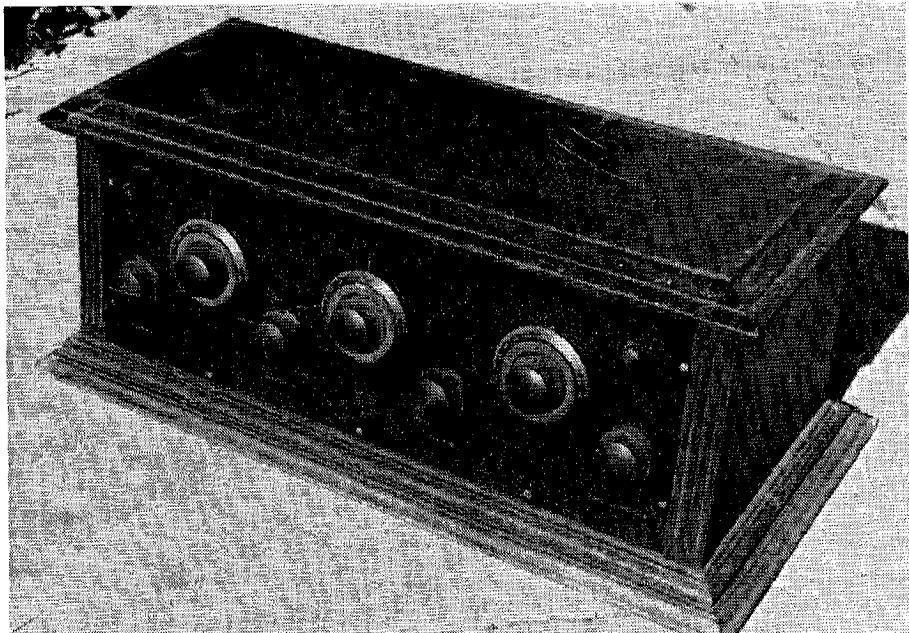
around. It was about a quantity of radios and radio parts from a deceased estate.

On inspecting the radios I can only say that I was pleasantly surprised. Walking into the room where they were I immediately noticed four mid 1920s receivers on a dusty shelf with a large Amplion speaker (early cone type) sitting on the largest of them. It is indeed hard not to get excited and show too much enthusiasm when inspecting such treasures.

Apart from the old radios, there were heaps of useful radio parts, plus other miscellaneous bits and pieces. A cardboard box of old triode valves looked particularly interesting, as did several larger boxes of valves of more common varieties. There was also a set of three matching dials from an early receiver, as well as half a dozen other early dials.

Other items that caught my eye were a four gang brass tuning capacitor from some old TRF set and an Emmco "B" battery eliminator that appeared to be in good working order.

There were also many smaller items such as high voltage capacitors, wire-wound resistors, dial lamps, valve sockets, rolls of cotton covered wire, Bakelite coil formers, rheostats and wire wound potentiometers — all the things a vintage



Another unrestored "coffin" type wireless from the 1920s. This particular TRF set can tune in six different wave bands and would have been a high class receiver in its day. It is a 5-valve battery set made in Australia by Udisco.

radio enthusiast can eventually find a use for.


All this equipment had belonged to George Irvin, an 82-year old who had spent his younger days experimenting with radio. It was fairly obvious that he had thrown nothing away during his lifetime. Apparently, he had one of the first radio receivers in the district, a 5-valve set which he built himself.

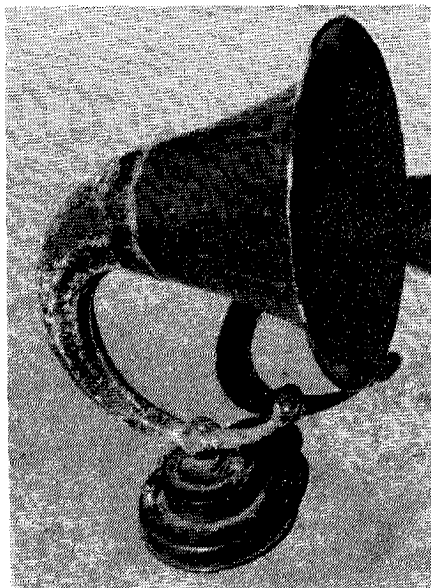
It was a real treasure chest for someone like myself but I was disappointed to discover that I could only tender for the radios and parts and would be notified if mine was the successful bid.

It is this type of treasure trove that is becoming more difficult to find. Perhaps in another 10 years or less, all the old guys with these old radios will have all passed on and the supply will suddenly dry up.

In today's throwaway society where Mr Average shifts his abode every eight years, things like antique radios do not survive that type of lifestyle.

Anyway, I am pleased to relate that my tender for the old radios was accepted. Possibly, it was the only one? Now those antique receivers are part of my collection and that also includes all those useful bits and pieces. No doubt some future vintage radio story will deal with some of the restoration work on these ancient radios.

Although radio receivers from the mid 1920s are not very listenable with their metallic sounding horn speakers, this type of material is extremely collectable. A few sets from this era, together with their odd looking speakers, will give an interesting balance to any vintage radio collection. 



This Brown horn speaker was bought at auction for \$14. Although the paintwork has become shabby, the speaker is not damaged and is in good working order.