Glass bottles with lights in them

Readers of "The Serviceman" column in "Electronics Australia" over the years will have noticed valves disappearing from his case histories as solid state devices have displaced them. To one retired radio serviceman, however, those "funny glass bottles with lights in them" still remain an absorbing interest.

by BEN FURBY

Keith McIlraith, now 70 years old and in retirement in the city of Christchurch in New Zealand's South Island, still has the Browning Drake kitset receiver he bought as a boy and assembled – and over 100 other valve radio receivers as well. He remembers using the Browning Drake to listen to the radio coverage of the first attempt to fly the Tasman on January 10, 1928, by fliers Moncrieff and Hood in a Ryan monoplane. Wellington's leading station stayed on the air until 2am that night, but the fate of the fliers is unknown to this date.

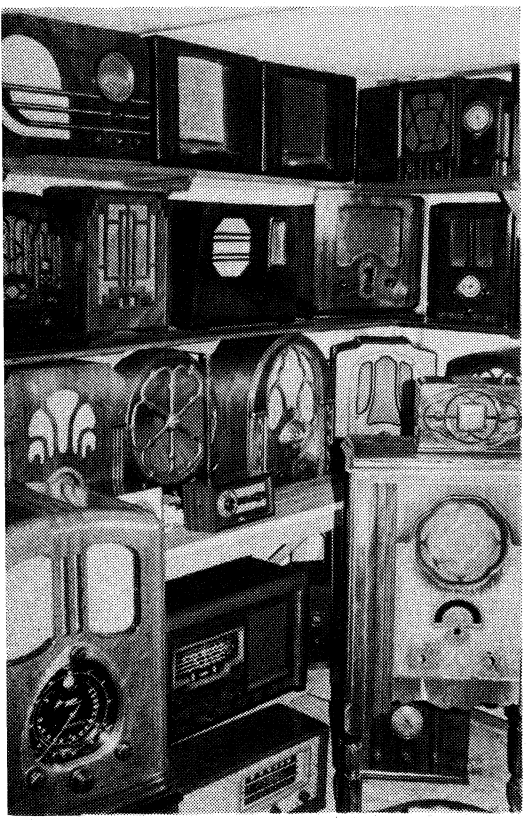
Possibly they overflew New Zealand in the darkness, or crashed in dense bush in some remote spot. In New Zealand the latter idea is still considered, and there is still interest in the possible discovery of the Ryan's wreckage, after 52 years.

In New Zealand, radio servicemen are licensed by the Electricity Registration Board, and after working for a while in a shop, Keith McIlraith turned his hobby into a career and qualified as a radio serviceman. In the town of Ashburton, 80km south of Christchurch, he operated his own business with considerable success until retirement – and collected radios as a matter of personal interest.

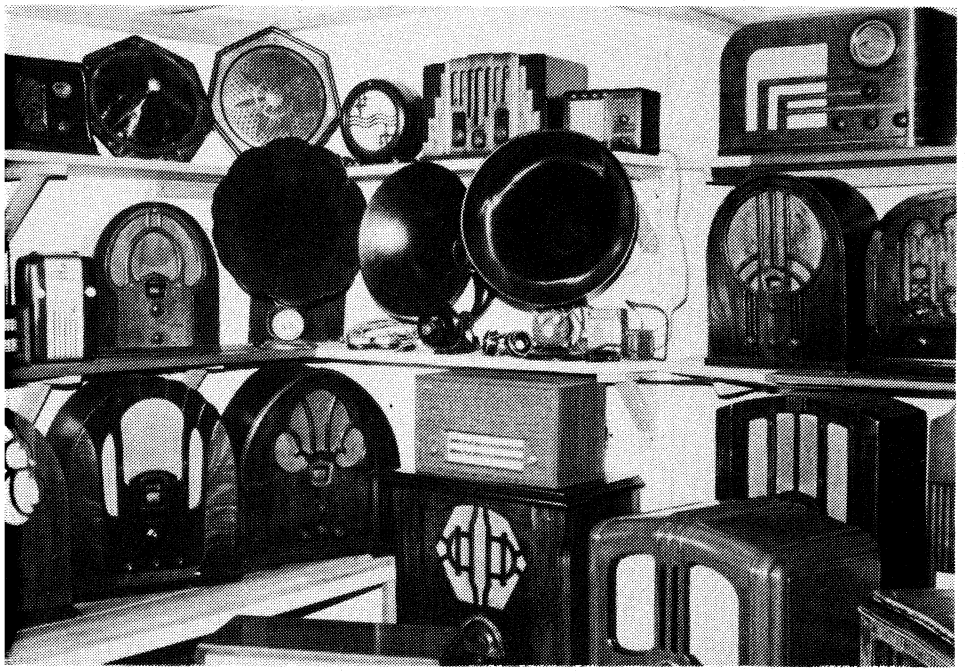
In retirement, the collection has become a major interest for him. Besides restoring the electronic componentry to operating order, cabinets often need major refurbishing: replacement of sections or veneers, and varnishing and repolishing to restore the former glory of these pre-television receivers. In many of the sets repaired, the restoration of major parts of the cabinets has been done so well that the work is barely noticeable.

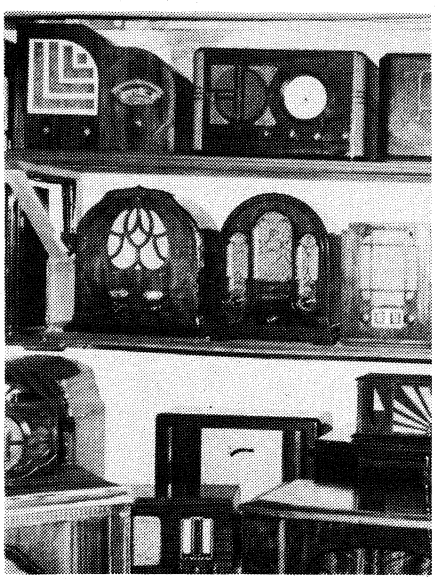
Few Australian receivers were sold in New Zealand prior to World War II, and as local manufacture grew, the engineering tended to follow mostly USA radio practice. The post World War II shortage of US dollars created an opportunity for other manufacturers which Philips, always an active marketer and manufacturer in New Zealand, was quick to exploit. Philips' aggressive post-war marketing saw American valve types replaced by Philips equivalents and the widespread use of the European valve type code. AWA, also active in New Zealand, but more as a component supplier and a source of equipment, such as broadcasting transmitters, has always been prominent in New Zealand electronics.

Visiting Keith McIlraith's collection of



ABOVE: Keith McIlraith holds a radio receiver he made about 1925. It used two 01A valves and a crystal detector, and gave good reception on headphones. Other receivers in this photo and the photo at left include: 1923-24 Crossley (USA) 5-valve; 1931 Philco (USA); 1929 Philips 4-valve; Astor (Aust.) 5-valve; 1935 Cromwell (NZ) 5-valve; 1934 Stewart Warner (USA) 5-valve; 1932 Decca (UK) 4-valve; 1936 Stromberg Carlson (Aust.) 5-valve; and a 1938 Columbus (NZ) 7-valve.





Some of our older readers will recognise at least some of the brands in Keith McIlraith's collection. Famous makes include Zenith (USA), Philips, HMV, Air King (USA), Gulbransen (NZ), Burndept (UK), Amplion (UK), Philco (USA), Atwater-Kent (USA), Stewart Warner (USA), Rolls (NZ), Radiola (Aust) and Astor (Aust).

radios is a true walk down Memory Lane: names of manufacturers, once famous in radio and "wireless", are recalled by those with many years' association with the industry. The lineup of receivers also reminds us that Australia and New Zealand once had many competent radio manufacturers who built an efficient local industry that contributed considerably to those nation's efforts during World War II.