

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, October 15, 2007

Radio Just Prior to World War II: In 1939, my father bought a Farnsworth radio with record player and automatic record changer for \$80. It was housed in a very nice freestanding wooden cabinet. Six or eight 78-R.P.M. records, either 10 or 12 inches in diameter, could be stacked above the turntable and would automatically drop onto said turntable when the playing of the previous record was completed. It took about 15 seconds for this mechanism to operate between records. The unit was located in the living room facing the window to the sun porch. My mother's desk was next to it. Although my parents listened to the radio a few minutes each day, I was the only one to use the phonograph. There was a mysterious button on this unit labeled "TV." Someone said that someday we would be able to see a picture on a screen in addition to hearing the sound. This seemed unbelievable, but the manufacturers of the Farnsworth must have envisioned selling some sort of screen at a later date that could be attached above the radio unit. However, on our unit, the TV button did nothing.

Radio shows were varied but usually fell into certain categories. The only sports events I recall listening to were occasional Major League Baseball games, which were always in the afternoon in those days, certainly not during "prime time." The World Series attracted the most attention. I think some college football games were broadcast on Saturday afternoons in the fall. News broadcasts with several popular newsmen, such as Lowell Thomas, Elmer Davis, H. V. Kaltenborne, Gabriel Heatter, Edwin C. Hill, and Earl Godwin, always seemed to come on right after the evening dinner hour. Presidential candidates could be heard on the radio for a few weeks prior to the general election, and political conventions and election returns received good coverage (Murray Metten of the News Journal traditionally reported Delaware results on Station WDEL) Weekly comedy "hours" (they usually ran ½ hour) featured entertainers such as Fibber McGee and Molly, Eddie Cantor, Jack Benny, Bob Hope, Red Skelton, and Fred Allen. Musical shows really did not come on strong until World War II engulfed us, but singers such as Dinah Shore, Bing Crosby, Dennis Day, Helen Forrest, Kate Smith, Frances Lankford, Ginny Simms, and several others were a regular part of comedy shows. Big bands were in vogue among young people, but they seldom performed on radio. The Hit Parade on Saturday night, sponsored by the American Tobacco Company (Lucky Strike), was paramount among musical radio shows, and featured the 10 top songs as evidenced by the week's sales of sheet music or phonograph records. The DuPont Company's weekly "Cavalcade of America" ("Better Things for Better Living through Chemistry") was a very popular informational show.

Radio stations that had good reception in this area were WDEL and WILM in Wilmington; WIP, WCAU and WFIL in Philadelphia; WOR in Newark, New Jersey; and WJZ in New York. Most were affiliated with NBC, CBS, or ABC, but WOR was part of the Mutual Broadcasting Company, and some of the stations were not a part of the major networks. A small but good simple radio cost about \$20. Radio listening did not compare to going to the movies, but it was the next best thing in occupying young people's leisure time.