

“Build It and They Will Come”

A new radio and television museum is now “receiving” visitors near the nation’s capital. This weekends-only treasure trove has a rich collection of electronics history.

Thanks to the officers and members of the Radio History Society (RHS), officials of Bowie, Maryland, and George Washington University, a new radio and television museum opened on June 12, 1999, in Bowie.

In addition to exhibiting vintage electronic equipment, components and memorabilia, the RHS hopes to help area kids get their Amateur Radio licenses. RHS instructors will be assisted by members of area ham clubs (some RHS members are not licensed operators).

The Museum is housed in the historic Harmel House, which was renovated and provided to the RHS by the city of Bowie. The Harmel House was built in 1905 and was the home of a shopkeeper (see the sidebar).

Radio, Radio and TV, Too!

The exhibits are fascinating for antique radio/TV buffs, radio amateurs and the general public. Viewing them is a walk through time that brings back memories for

some, and provides real-world evidence of the electronic evolution for others. RHS members spent hundreds of hours preparing the museum exhibits and refurbishing many splendid wood cabinets that house much of the equipment.

Museum guests begin their visit exploring the earliest days of wireless telegraphy. These sets include equipment such as that

used to alert the ship *Carpathia* to come to the *Titanic*’s aid.

The exhibition continues with the battery-operated sets of the 1920s, the small Depression-era cathedral sets and the large floor models of the 1930s and 1940s. It also includes Amateur Radio equipment such as the Hammarlund HQ-129.

The transistor era of the 1950s follows,



History of the Harmel House Museum

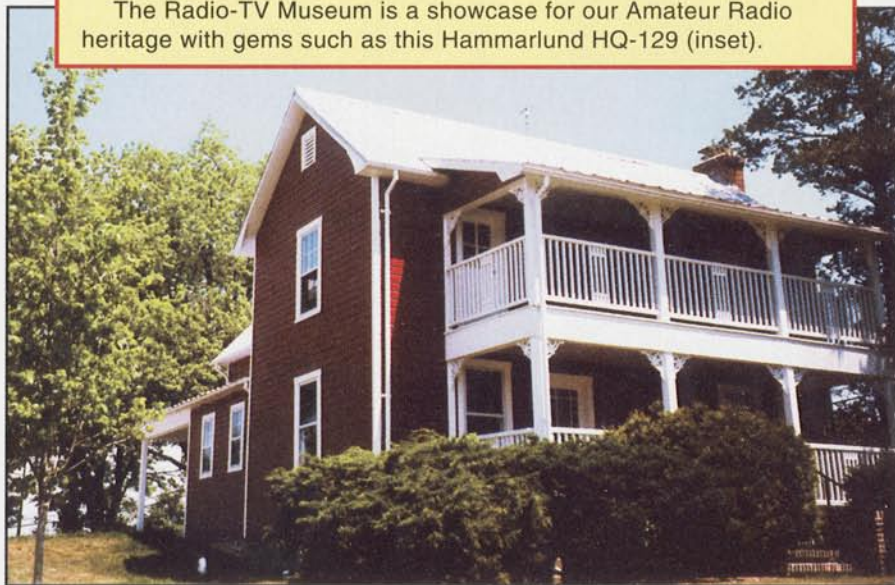
The Harmel House was owned by storeowner George McGaw and rented by his storekeeper, Abraham Edlavitch, a Russian immigrant who came to Prince George’s County, Maryland, in 1888. The Edlavitch family eventually purchased the house in 1925. The Harmel family was the last owner; the city of Bowie purchased the little frame house to maintain the corner’s rural heritage and prevent further development.

The city worked with the Radio History Society to develop exhibits, plan operations, organize volunteer rosters and build the collections. The city also renovated the building prior to the installation of exhibits.

The Radio-TV Museum is a showcase for our Amateur Radio heritage with gems such as this Hammarlund HQ-129 (inset).



An eye-catching collection of equipment and memorabilia.



The Radio-TV Museum (The Harmel House) in Bowie, Maryland. The home was completely renovated inside and out, thanks to the City of Bowie. All photos by the author.

The RHS Web Site

To learn more about the Radio History Society, point your Web browser to <http://www.radiohistory.org>. RHS President and radio and television personality Ed Walker, N3HFT, hosts a weekly three-hour radio program on WAMU FM, 88.5 MHz, from the Washington, DC, area, Sundays, from 7 to 10 PM. The program features old-time radio shows.

as does the history of television from the primitive mechanical sets of the 1920s to the tiny-screened, post-war (WW II) sets, to the high-definition TV sets of tomorrow. The HDTV set on display is on loan to the Museum and presently sells for about \$7000!

Items You'll Want to See

- ◆ A part of the original transatlantic telegraph cable, found in the Sunken Forest at Rye Beach, New Hampshire, in 1979. The cable was started in 1857, completed in 1874 and operated until the 1920s.
- ◆ The first miniature tube. This Western Electric filament-type triode was designed for use in the trenches of WW I, but production began in 1919 and the tube was never used during the war.
- ◆ The tabletop radio made famous in the popular TV series, "The Waltons." The family was often shown seated around the kitchen table with the radio visible in the background. The introductory price of the radio was \$89.95—a lot of money in the late 1930s!
- ◆ The DeForest Audion tube used by Edwin



Historic broadcast receivers highlight the museum's collection.

Howard Armstrong when he invented the regenerative receiver and the Armstrong oscillator in 1911/1912. (The tube was generously loaned to the RHS by Renville McMann of New Canaan, Connecticut.)

- ◆ A classic "Hopalong Cassidy" radio. The wire antenna is unique in that it's shaped in the form of a lasso. (For younger readers, Hopalong Cassidy was a fictitious cowboy TV star similar to, but not as famous as, real cowboys Roy Rogers and Gene Autry.)
- ◆ Several vintage microphones from the earliest days of broadcast radio.

These are just a few of the many historic, unusual and beautifully preserved items displayed throughout the Museum. A complete list would probably fill half of the magazine!

Summary

If you want to take a fascinating step into radio and TV history, the Harmel House/RHS museum is the place to go. As an added attraction, the building is in a quiet country setting that's surrounded by beautiful trees and green lawns. Although the site is fairly small, it's a great place to relax.

The Museum is open on Saturday and Sunday from 1 to 4 PM. Volunteer tour guides are available, or you can leisurely browse the exhibits by yourself. Group tours can be arranged by calling 301-



Enormous indoor antennas like this one were common in American homes in the early part of the century.

Directions to the Museum

From the Washington, DC, Beltway (Interstate 495), take exit 19A (Route 50 East, Annapolis). Exit at route 197 and turn right (south). Drive about 1 mile to Mitchellville Road and turn right at the traffic light. Continue for 1-2 miles and watch for the red museum house on the left at the corner of Mitchellville Road and Mount Oak Road. From the Interstate it's about a 15-minute drive.

390-1020. Admission is free!

Collecting, preserving and displaying historic electronic equipment is a monumental task. Our sincere thanks go to members of the RHS and the city of Bowie, Maryland. Some of the equipment displayed is part of our Amateur Radio heritage. We are most fortunate that the gear has not been allowed to deteriorate or linger in the dark corners of basements, attics and garages.

It's essential that this type of equipment be permanently displayed for present and future generations. The RHS and the city of Bowie recognized this and can be proud of their foresight and their worthy contribution to society. Without it, there would be no foundation to learn from; no memories to be stirred. "Build it and they will come." I know they will.

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Note: This article contains excerpts from the *Bowie Musings*, the Newsletter of the City of Bowie, Maryland, Museums Division. Permission to use the excerpts was obtained from Stephen E. Patrick, Curator and Editor.



City of Bowie Mayor G. Frederick Robinson was present at the museum dedication. The photograph on the wall shows David Sarnoff and Guglielmo Marconi in 1933 at the RCA Transmitting Center in Riverhead, New York. 