

## The 2007 Early Television Convention

by Dave Sica

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*I was delighted that Dave Sica was willing and able to prepare the following report. I am editing this column from Liberia, West Africa. Mercy Ships volunteers have just sailed here in the world's largest and newest hospital ship, the Africa Mercy. You can find out more (and maybe see some photos) on [www.mercyships.org](http://www.mercyships.org)--rb.*

**T**he Early Television Foundation and Museum in Hilliard, Ohio is a testimony to the television pioneers and their remarkable achievements. Each spring, those with an interest in television history have been gathering at the annual Early Television Convention. This year's event, which took place over the weekend of May 4-6, attracted the largest attendance yet.

The theme at Hilliard this spring was "Early Color." And there were some very unusual examples of it. For example, if you're like most people, even



Exterior view of the Early Television Foundation Museum.

many TV collectors, you've probably never seen a DuMont Royal Sovereign, let alone one in perfect operating condition. The Sovereign was one of Allen B. DuMont's crown jewels in 1951, the largest screen black-and-white television ever made.

So how about one showing color bars with the help of a color wheel adapter? And how about a mirror screw mechanical television displaying a program in color? Well, attendees could see those bizarre sights and a lot more at this year's Early Television Convention!

Over the years, Convention papers and technical presentations have covered topics ranging from the mechanics of scanning disk TV--including the restoration of video disc recordings of some of Baird's earliest work nearly eighty years ago, an examination of the facts and the mythology that have arisen around the story of the struggle between Philo Farnsworth and David Sarnoff for the title of "Inventor of Television," in-depth looks at the birth of electronic television in the United States and other countries, and the first demonstration in over fifty years of the original color standard, the CBS field-sequential system.

Each year, the depth and breadth of presentations has been such that one has to wonder "How can there possibly be anything left to cover next year?" Yet this year's Convention --the fifth of its kind--was arguably better than ever.

In "Ludwig Von Drake Meets the NBC Peacock," Disney authority Jim Fanning offered a look back at Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color, called by some the

single most important programming event in the establishment of color television. Jim revealed the story behind the only animated character ever created for television.



Setting up the DuMont Royal Sovereign for color reception. Color wheel at lower left.

Next, we were given a behind-the-scenes look by George Lemaster at television development at Kansas State University, beginning with an experimental project going all the way back to 1931. Then, a first-person history of "The DuMont Years" by DuMont's Chief of Engineering, T.T. Goldsmith, as told to Don Patterson.

Convention attendees were also quite fortunate to hear stories about the career of renowned television pioneer John Battison--including personal recollections dating back to the time of the mechanical receivers of his childhood--from none other than Mr. Battison himself.

Waldemar Poch is hardly a household name, but "Wally" should be remembered for much more than his involvement in RCA's Russian Television project. Thanks to a scholarly presentation by James O'Neal, those in attendance now know the rest of the story about Poch's contributions to the industry.

Denis Asseman came all the way from Belgium to display some of the extraordinary replicas he has constructed of mechanical television receivers. Maurice Schechter's presentation covered the history of RCA's military television development during World War II. This included displays of extremely rare airborne television systems actually sending pictures over the air as if it were 1944.

Ed Reitan provided another rare opportunity to see television history come alive: an eagerly-anticipated screening of the earliest known surviving color kinescope recording of NTSC video. And a team of early color experts asked the question: exactly how good can a picture be on a 15GP22?

Their answer was provided by an extraordinarily rare N.O.S. example of this first generation color picture tube, driven from a fully restored and carefully set-up receiver. The results indicated that, although it was difficult, early color could be very good indeed – some say better than what can be delivered today!

The convention also offered a swap meet, networking sessions and a



A museum display featuring RCA TRK receivers.

banquet dinner for the nearly 100 collectors from this country and around the world, all of whom had converged on this small Ohio town.

The ETF museum itself houses one of the largest collections of historically significant television equipment in the world. Many of the receivers have been restored to as-new cosmetic and operating condition. Nearly every pre-war electronic set from U.S. manufacturers is represented, along with a wide array of prewar British sets.

The museum also includes a dozen of the earlier mechanical receivers (several displaying live pictures in their odd array of scanning formats), early cameras, CRTs and oddities such as color converters. Just added to the collection is a complete five kilowatt RCA TT-5 television transmitter. This very early example nearly covers an entire wall of one room.

The collection is open to the public on Saturdays and Sundays and by appointment. You can also visit the museum on the web at [www.earlytelevision.org](http://www.earlytelevision.org).

So what does the future hold for this annual event? Well, upon reflection, it seems that we've really only begun to scratch the surface. Several important papers are already being planned for next year. Considering how unusual it is to merely see so many working examples of early television technology, let alone to find ancient black-and-white sets displaying programs "in living color," anything seems possible at the Early Television Museum!

And consider that the "early" in Early Television is a moving target. While the museum concentrates on television prior to, and immediately following, World War II, along with the birth of color TV in the mid-fifties, there are plenty of early television "firsts" that came after that. This should provide historians ample opportunity to continue to research and document well into the future.

The birth of video tape recording and the cable industry, as well as TV broadcasts from space, are just a few examples of more recent television history that come immediately to mind. I'd say that the future of The Early Television Convention looks as rosy as the neon glow of a scanning disk TV!