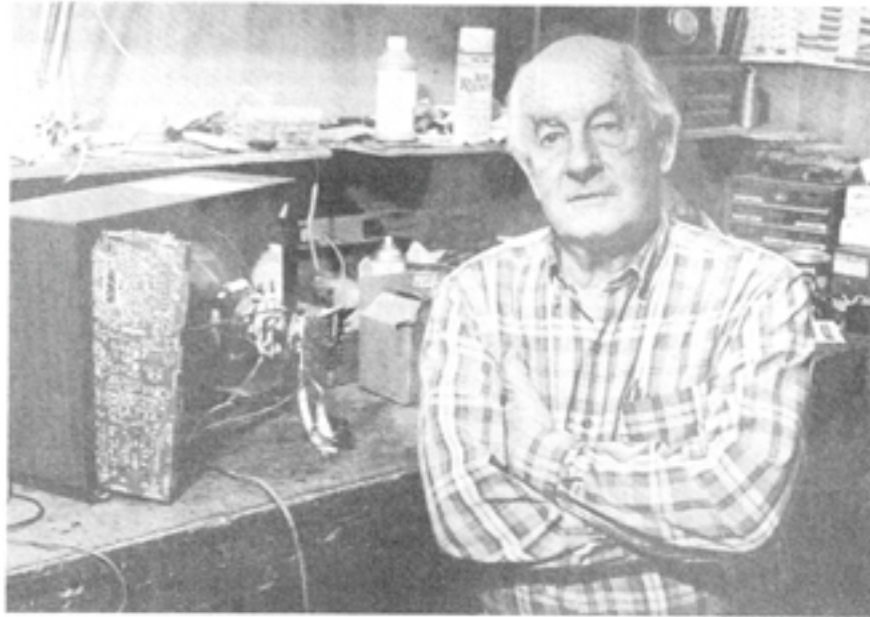


## TV repairmen are endangered species



*"Television sets today have become throwaway items. the day is coming when you won't be able to repair your television. You'll just get another one."*

*-- L. G. Barnes*

If you have ever wondered why television repair shops are always cluttered with old TV sets, it's not because repairmen are so busy they can't keep up. What used to be a lucrative and busy vocation is now vanishing—done in by a technology that has gotten so good.

"See that 19-inch set," said L.G. Barnes, whose Tel-Tronics is the last television service center in Blackstone since Sheffield's Appliance closed. "That Sylvania will never work again. It cost about \$120 to fix, and the customer left it here because you can buy a brand new equivalent set for about \$225, and it will be better and last a lot longer than this one did." Barnes doesn't speak with much hope when he talks about the future of his business.

"Television sets today have become throwaway items. The day is coming when you won't be able to repair your television. You'll just get another one" And if you have an expensive set you want repaired, you'll have to take it to a service center in the city, or have a serviceman come here. "Can you imagine what a service call from Richmond costs?" he said, looking at the ceiling to give a hint.

It has taken about 40 years for America's television industry to complete its life cycle. Barnes was there at its optimistic beginning, and now (ironically) he is witness to its sad end. Where once there were giants, RCA, Sylvania, GE and Zenith, now there is only Zenith, the last American-owned company—and it gets all its work done in Mexico.

And then, of course, there are the Japanese. The Japanese were only making cheap radios then, and nobody was taking them seriously. But while everyone was watching I LOVE LUCY, "the Japanese were taking our ideas, improving them, and

selling them back to us. They snuck in the backdoor, and you've got to give them credit," Barnes said.

What people wanted and needed then was service. And it was cheap, about \$2 a house call. Barnes, who got out of the Navy in 1952, went to work at Lucy and Sheffield Appliances in Blackstone, and averaged about 12 to 15 calls a day. "A good black and white set would cost about \$500 to \$600, which would be about \$1,500 or better today," he remembered. That was an investment you couldn't afford not to have fixed.

Then the repairman's real bonanza arrived, color television. "If somebody whizzed by one of those things with a vacuum leaner, you needed a service call. They were not like the small sets today that you can throw in the back of your car without a second thought. Every time you changed a channel, you needed to adjust the fine tuning, and tint, and reset the color lever. Remember?"

Whether it was the black and white screen rolling or making like a zebra, or the color so out-of-whack that it looked like a painter's soup, it was a great time for service. Barnes would appear in your living room with his bag of tools and spare parts, and in a few minutes, leave with the family happily plugged into the evening's show. "I could fix 94 percent of the old tube sets in the house," Barnes said.

But nothing stays the same, especially technology. Soon the old hand-wired sets with tubes were gone, replaced by modular circuits that could be replaced easily. Service men didn't worry. Business was still good.

But then came chip circuitry and the lights began to dim. "You open up a TV today and you find a PC board with maybe ten chips. It looks like nothing...and it cost almost nothing to build. And with no moving parts, nothing ever breaks down!"

"Electronics is the only thing we've got that over the last 30-40 years has steadily gone down in price." And the Japanese caught this wave of change while the big American companies sank.

"When they started selling televisions here, they only had a sales set-up. They didn't have the large network of dealerships and service centers." The American way of doing business was to make huge profits on service and then selling the customer a new set after he'd sunk so much in the old one. "What the Japanese sold had to stand up...and now the electronic business can't be retrieved. It's just gone."

But the new generation of television sets has a weakness: chip circuits are very susceptible to lightning. In the summertime, Barnes is kept pretty busy because the average television owner doesn't realize that the TV he just bought doesn't have the same resistance to voltage surges his old TV had.

Summertime is Barnes's Christmas season. He prays lightning will strike, maybe twice. "Yes, when the lightning is really popping, I'm standing at the door saying YEAH, do it again!"