

The Perils of Radio Shipping

By Paul R. Farmer and Greg Gore

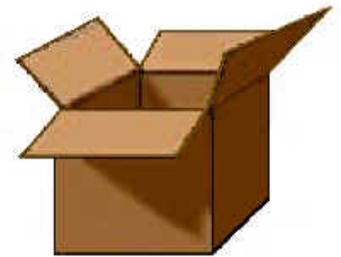
An earlier version of this article by Greg Gore originally appeared in Radio Daze, the Newsletter of the Carolina's Chapter of the Antique Wireless Association (CC-AWA). Greg, W1KQBQ, resides in Charlotte, North Carolina, and collects National and Hallicrafters communications equipment. Paul Farmer is Membership Chair for the Mid-Atlantic Antique Radio Club. Paul, formerly K3YFQ, is a National equipment collector too, but also collects colorful plastic table sets from the mid-1930s to mid-1950s, and early transistor radios.

With the advent and explosive growth of Internet radio sales, the importance of safety in shipping is greater than ever for radio collectors. A scarce set badly damaged in shipping is a loss not just to the buyer, seller, or insurer; it is a loss to the entire collecting fraternity and to future radio collectors and historians. We have a responsibility to do our very best to protect and preserve the artifacts that we so strongly admire, for the appreciation and use of future generations.

When shipping radios and radio-related items, buyers and sellers should be particularly concerned about the way in which their precious cargo is going to be packed and shipped. Even though I always insure an expensive item, I never assume the insurer will pay—there are too many loopholes for the insurer and too many difficult hurdles for the insured. The best way to prevent a loss is for the buyer to ensure that the seller packs for an incredibly rough ride.

If you are the seller, pay strict attention to your buyer's packing requests and err on the side of over-packing. If you are the buyer, good communications and rapport with your seller is your only real hope. If you have not clearly established these, do not close the deal. You should check your seller's shipping safety record if you can (thanks, ebay), but this is not a substitute for precisely communicating your packing instructions to a sympathetic seller who wants, above all else, to please his courteous customers.

How fanatic should you be about packing vintage radio items? You just can't overdo the packing part! Ed Gable, the curator of the AWA museum up in Bloomfield, New York, couldn't believe it when I sent him a scarce and expensive pocket-sized Regency TR-1 transistor set (for loan in the museum's recent transistor radio exhibit) in a 3 foot by 3 foot by 3 foot, double-walled, corrugated box with an inner box and six miles of large size bubble-wrap. But do you know what? It survived the trip without a scratch. And knowing how much I cared about packing, when the time came, he sent the set back with the exact same treatment! (The only exaggeration here is the length of the bubble-wrap.) More than once I've had a very large outer box punctured right down to, and even slightly into, a much smaller inner box (ouch!).



So how fanatic should you be about packing a prize? UPS doesn't consider a package "mishandled" when it is subjected to a 3-foot drop, and they will tell you that even 6-foot drops are possible. Have you ever watched from your window seat as the conveyor loads shippers' packages onto your aircraft? They don't always stay on the conveyor. I've seen them drop to the tarmac, more than 15 feet below! And who knows how much weight or how many other packages may end up on top of your treasure in transit?

I know someone who used to work at UPS. When the UPS dock workers load the trucks, they are timed with a stopwatch. Asked if “FRAGILE” or “HANDLE WITH CARE” on the box helps, he said when he was there they didn’t have time to read what was written on boxes. When UPS delivers to our place, the driver tosses the boxes that are for us out the back of the truck onto the pavement. He is perhaps as careful as he can be given the situation—they are extremely busy. They handle a lot of packages every day and are accountable for their time. The boxes go out the back and hit the pavement.

Handle With Care!!!

When sending something out, pack so that it can survive being thrown down a flight of stairs...all the way down a flight of stairs...a basement flight of stairs with a concrete floor at the bottom...without hitting any of the stairs! For something coming in, try to get the sender to wrap the item with many layers of medium or large-size bubble wrap, in two directions, and ask that he or she use a large, stable box, the stronger the better. Double-boxing should be an absolute requirement for all but the lightest and least valuable radios (transistor and ac-dc sets worth less than \$75).

When packing, leave at least two inches all around between the inner and outer boxes, and two inches all around the bubble-wrapped radio, for fill. The fill material can be lots of densely crumpled newspaper or peanuts for those small, inexpensive items, but not for anything you care about. Peanuts and crumpled paper will loosen up and will not support the box shape during routine handling of heavy packages. Heavy items will attempt to move around and migrate to the bottom, where they will be vulnerable to cabinet damage from a drop. How many times have you opened up a package to discover that most of the styrofoam peanuts were on top of the radio rather than underneath where they are needed?

For heavier and more expensive items, use double-boxing with builder-grade styrofoam sheets tightly packed between the boxes for protection, rigidity, and support. Styrofoam sheets come in sizes up to 4 feet by 8 feet by about 1 inch thick. It is easy to cut to size with a utility knife or electric saw (band saw or sabre saw) and can be found inexpensively at Home Depot or Lowe’s. The inner box can have some styrofoam peanut fill to absorb shock, if it is very densely packed and if the set has many layers of large bubble-wrap, as described above. Scraps of bubble-wrap tightly packed in the inner-box fill area is probably better than peanuts. Bubble-wrap and peanuts have more give than styrofoam sheet. So use styrofoam sheet for rigidity and bubble-wrap and peanuts for shock absorption. I like to use all three together, in layers. Don’t leave any free space, whatever you do.

For a radio with a heavy chassis in a delicate wood or plastic cabinet, it is a very good idea to remove the chassis and ship the chassis and cabinet in separate boxes. Otherwise, when the radio is dropped upside down, the weight of the chassis may cause the cabinet to crack from the stress. But when the chassis is shipped separately, you may need to take extra precautions to protect IF transformers, coils, or other components that may be subjected to stress if the box is not maintained right side up. Each radio is different and there is no substitute for good judgment. Always, always, always remove the chassis from a catalin set and absolutely always double-box the catalin case, as described above.

Fragile—Do Not Drop!

Use extra padding on the front panel to prevent controls from jamming, bending, or breaking themselves or the front panel/case front. A lot of force can be transferred through packing material, and a high ratio of large set weight to the small knob surface can concentrate impact forces in the knob/shaft/front panel areas, if the box is dropped on that side. Heavy components mounted on the chassis may contribute to damage from a drop, as the force has to be absorbed by something. (A transformer in motion tends to stay in motion, even if the chassis it is attached to does not.) Missing rear cabinet screws for securing the chassis at the back (left out from a previous repair) can be another problem. There is no assurance of the package being shipped right-side-up. If a boat anchor is shipped with missing rear cabinet screws, you may get a bent or buckled front panel if the box is dropped and the radio happens to be upside down at the time.

If the set has expensive tubes, remove and wrap them separately or at least add packing material inside to prevent things from getting out of their mountings and banging around and making a mess inside. To prevent micro-scratches in plastic, painted, or lacquered surfaces, wrap the set first in tissue paper or soft, clean plastic, before the bubble-wrap goes on. Thin Glad-style food storage bags or soft plastic grocery bags work well for

transistor radios and table sets. I've had some boat anchors with their original glossy painted surfaces in mint condition shipped to me, and I always asked for the set to be wrapped in tissue paper first. A couple of layers of soft tissue gives any stray dust some place to go instead of into the paint when the set comes under the transferred pressures of rough package handling. Remember, it is not possible to completely isolate the set from shock.

Fragile! Handle With Care!

When you are having a radio shipped to you, if you are not confident that the sender understands or cares enough about all of this, offer to send him or her a proper box or boxes with packing material and instructions. I have done this more than once, and although it adds cost, it sure beats opening up a poor packing job and finding a damaged set, which I have also done more than once.

If you have to settle a claim with UPS, remember they are self-insured and will send out representatives to examine your item. They know what they are looking for and will be pretty critical of the packing and shipping materials. Unfortunately, most people pack and use materials that are

below UPS standards for the delicacy, value, or weight of a particular item. The retail shipping stores you see in the strip shopping centers (Mailboxes, Etc. for example) usually do a horrible job unless you stand there and watch while they pack. Most of the time, you will get one thin layer of the small-size bubble-wrap and the rest will be peanuts, for which you will be overcharged on top of the UPS rates.

I recently read an account of how the radio manufacturers of the 1920s packed and crated their new merchandise for shipment. The story told of how they constantly tested their methods by throwing crated new radios out of a second-story window or down a flight of stairs and examining the results. They weren't happy unless the merchandise made it OK. How can we expect our increasingly valuable and scarce vintage radios to survive all the perils of a bumpy trip and uncaring or even disgruntled package handlers, if the sets are just shoved in an old box with a little newspaper pushed in to take up space? Well, we can't. But you know what to do.



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