Hot off the shelf: DVDs for a dollar

By Thomas K. Arnold, Special for USA TODAY

DVD prices have hit a new low: a buck.

Shows that are now in the public domain (like The Beverly Hillbillies) make for veritable steals on DVD, with some selling for as little as a buck.

Target Stores, Wal-Mart and other discount chains now carry $1 discs of old movies, cartoons and TV shows. They're touted as stocking stuffers.

And consumers are snapping them up. According to Videoscan, the national point-of-sale tracking service, last week, 19 of the 50 top-selling DVDs were dollar DVDs from Genius Products, a leading supplier of budget videos. Compilation discs of Popeye cartoons and The Lucy Show episodes came in at No. 17 and No. 18, right below the Star Wars Trilogy and Dawn of the Dead.

"We get letters all the time from people, thanking us for making this great stuff available at such a low price," says Howard Balaban of Genius Products. "It's mind-boggling."

Genius, a Solana Beach, Calif.-based company best known for its Baby Genius line of $10 DVDs for infants, began releasing dollar DVDs eight months ago. The company now has a library of 180 titles. They include classic movies such as Road to Bali, vintage Popeye and Betty Boop cartoons, and compilation discs of episodes from such TV shows as Beverly Hillbillies, The Dick Van Dyke Show and The Andy Griffith Show.

"It's a new phenomenon," says veteran home entertainment industry analyst Tom Adams. "I remember in the early 1990s, there was an uproar when McDonald's began selling videocassettes for $5 with the purchase of a Big Mac. (Traditional video retailers)
accused the chain of devaluing videos."

Back then it cost about $3 to manufacture a videocassette, Adams says. Making a DVD today costs 50 cents or less.

"Consumers are not dumb. They're not going to be fooled into thinking they're getting a premium product for a dollar," Adams says. "But if you're just looking for something to watch, it's a hell of a deal."

Most dollar-DVD titles are in the public domain, which means the copyright has expired and has not been renewed. That makes them cheap to put on DVD.

The dollar-DVD market arrives after a steady decline in DVD prices across the board. Hot new theatrical releases routinely sell for less than $15 their first week of release, about half what they were going for when the format was launched in 1997. The drop-in prices for older films is even more pronounced: Wal-Mart has huge "dump bins" in its high-traffic aisles filled with DVDs selling for $5.88.