

GILBERT & AMERICAN FLYER HISTORY

"... NEVER WORK AT ANYTHING THAT ISN'T FUN."

The story behind the magnificent Gilbert company

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What happened to the A. C. Gilbert Company? Was it a victim of changing times? Did the big holding corporation run it into the ground to create a big tax write-off? Did Al Gilbert, Jr. sell the American boy out? Or, did that spark sputter out when Alfred Carlton Gilbert left this world at the age of 76 years young?

Before we can even speculate, we should look at the company, and especially the man - for he was the company. A company may be as magnificent as a 550,000-square-foot plant or as humble as an old tool shed, but a company is an idea. A. C.'s idea was not to make money hand-over-fist, but: "... Never to work at anything that isn't fun."

And fun it was. In the early days of the Mysto Manufacturing Company it was the fun of magic boxes and some pretty grand-scale professional tricks. Then in 1911, the idea for the greatest construction toy invention came to the man as he traveled along the new haven railroad and absentmindedly watched the erection of the electrification girders. If you look at these real girders today, you will note the striking similarity to Erector girders (at least before Gabriel Industries took the Erector name).

Fun to A. C. was a challenge - a challenge like making something that was considered impossible. Fractional horsepower motors were the basis of success for the A. C. Gilbert Company. The basis for the success of fractional horsepower motors was and still is enameled wire.

A. C. holds the patent on enameled wire. General electric said it couldn't be done. But A. C. said to his engineer "I'll support you and help you make enameled wire." A. C. did and the engineer did it. Even though UL would not approve the motors on the polar cub fans that used the first enameled wire, A. C. stuck to his guns and made them. The public bought the fans and they worked! When the other big companies began to use the process, UL approved! A toy company did what mighty GE could not do!

But what did the toy company do? It made Erector sets. It made magic boxes. It made chemistry sets. It made microscopes. Specimens like the fly that was packed with each microscope came from the Gilbert dairy barn that supplied the milk for the company's lunch break! That's innovation. And finally the company made trains.

To A. C. the American Flyer train was a real challenge. "Chicago Flyer" was a second rate company just hanging on. The trains were no better than the Lionel items being marketed at the same time. In 1938 AF sales were not quite at the million \$ mark. Gilbert bought the name and nothing else when he got American Flyer. He redesigned the entire line from track to transformer.

But before the birth of the AF line, many of "our boys" had to die in the worst war of all ages. During these years, the A. C. Gilbert Company was converted completely to war production. Hundreds of thousands of flares were produced. Drawing on their experience with magic tricks, booby traps that caught the enemy off guard and triggering mechanisms were produced. The motors that controlled the trim tabs on the first American fighter planes came from the genius of the A. C. Gilbert Company. Designed in a record 72 hours from inception, these tiny motors were produced in thousands and became the prototype for the motor that powered more than a million and a half engines that pulled a string of freight or passenger cars around the family Christmas tree.

When the war was won and the last flare burned out, it was 1946, the American Flyer train hit the market. It was in a new scale and a new gauge. It ran on realistic two rail track that was not rounded on top due to some antiquated extrusion process, but it was "t" shaped like real railroad track. The surface contact was greater and so was the pulling power. AF never needed "magna-traction" - it had real traction.

The engines were true scale - they could be since the scale was 3/16" to the foot rather than 1/4" to the foot. They were the right length to their height. (A 1/4" scale would never make the turns on the small radius curved track if it were of the proper length.) The detail was there. Every rivet. Real, prototype railroad blueprints were used in designing each engine. A worm drive motor was used in all engines - not just the most expensive ones.

And then in 1952 the ultimate realism - knuckle couplers - appeared. "a boy wants realism," A. C. said when he spoke to a father about to buy a train for his son. Realism he got. There were no compromises at A. C.'s plant in those early days.

All engines were die cast to make them look real and to have the heft of the real thing. How many different engine designs came off the Gilbert Production lines? There were, in the company's prime, seven basic steam type engines. There was one basic diesel and one basic diesel switcher. In 1957 there was a model of the New Haven's Electric. At a cost of \$100,000 per engine design, it is no wonder that this is the extent of the variety. But was the AF line accepted?

Based on comparative sales records taken from Moody's Industrials of the A. C. Gilbert Company and Lionel corporation between 1950 and 1960, the total train sales were about \$340 million.

Of this, American Flyer is estimated to amount to \$120 million, or as much as 1/3 of the market. That's quite a figure for me to believe, since I was the only boy in my grade school class to own an AF train. But figures don't lie. Somewhere in this vast country there are thousands of engines, millions of cars and miles of track that collectors can find and preserve.

So what burst the bubble? Probably the most significant event was the death of A. C. Gilbert in early 1961 at the age of 76. After years of sporting activities including the Olympics, his heart just gave out. His son had taken over as president during the peak of the AF era and probably ran the business as well as A. C. had in its 50 years.

But things began to change in the lifestyles of the American boy. The time for leisure began to be absorbed by that greatest absorber - the television. With all the concentration on the flickering screen, there was little time for an excursion into engineering with an Erector set or for a trip around the oval with a train.

This was the space age. Trains were out of date. Slot cars were the real thing. Gilbert made slot cars. Wrather corporation bought Gilbert. The family sold all its 144,000 shares to the Disneyland hotel and Lassie conglomerate owners right after A. C.'s death.

The company never made money after that year. It lost and it lost and it lost - for five straight years - up to \$17 million. Who wanted trains? Who wanted those trains with the Japanese motors (the first time worm drive was absent from a Gilbert set). The quality was bad. The market was non-existent. The American boy changed his life style. In 1967 the A. C. Gilbert Company ceased to be. The American Flyer name and designs were sold to their greatest competitor, Lionel (who had entered into other lines such as electronics and aerospace).

The Erector still is sold by Gabriel industries [a toy company from the old days (1910)]. Lionel was made by General Mills. Lionel gets a royalty for the trains. It has put the powerful pull-mor motor, the three-second smoke with choo-choo system on their present trains, but the three rail track remains. Only HO and N are authentic with respect to the track. "S" gauge is a hobbyists' and a collector's specialty. The days of the A. C. Gilbert Company are gone forever. The American boy has decided that such things as trains are "square." let's hope for a revolution.

Maybe the fathers who grew up in the A. C. era will instill that spark in their sons and renew the belief that creativity, innovation and fun are still part of the American way.