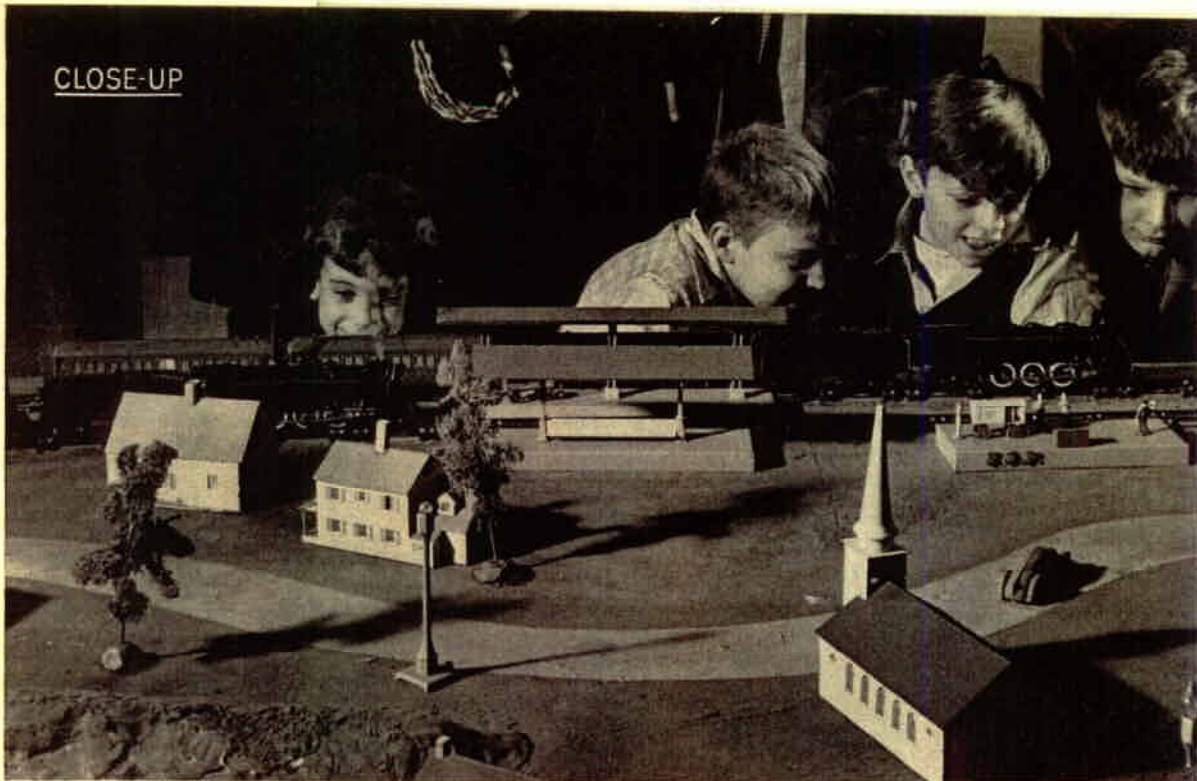


CLOSE-UP



AT GILBERT'S "HALL OF SCIENCE" ON NEW YORK'S FIFTH AVENUE, SMALL BOYS ARE ENCOURAGED TO FLOCK IN AND TO TALK SHOP

# TOY KING

A. C. Gilbert, who constructed his empire with the Erector Set, prepares for biggest Christmas

by GILBERT MILLSTEIN

**A**LFRED CARLTON GILBERT, an earnestly energetic gentleman of 62, is probably the nation's foremost advocate of Good, Clean Fun for the Youth of America. The capitals are his. He feels he is on solid ground in this, having written many years ago that he knew what boys liked because, as he said, "I have been a boy myself." Gilbert is the former boy who invented the Erector Set, a metal construction toy whose chief components bear a close resemblance to structural steel girders. It constitutes the framework of his toy and electrical appliances business, The A. C. Gilbert Company of New Haven, Conn. Generations of youth in this country, and elsewhere in the world—to say nothing of large numbers of their elders—bought so many Erector Sets that they made Gilbert a millionaire at a relatively boyish age. The international aspects of Erector were clearly demonstrated during the war by two French sailors on shore leave in New York. They wandered into the Gilbert Hall of Science at Fifth Avenue and 25th Street, a six-story building "dedicated to the Youth of America," buttonholed an attendant and spoke all the English they knew, which was "Yes," "No" and "Erector." An immediate rapport was established.

With the Christmas season approaching, Gilbert's business is moving into its regular annual rush. He is not the largest toy manufacturer in the U.S. but, among some 2,000 U.S. toymakers doing a total retail business of \$240,000,000 a year, he ranks close to the top. This year he even expects to better the \$4,000,000 gross his company rolled up in 1941, the toy business' last normal, peacetime year of production. Gilbert copywriters do not hesitate to call his products "The World's Greatest Array of Precision-made Scientific Toys." Besides Erector Sets and American Flyer trains they include chemistry sets guaranteed not to explode, mi-



A. C. GILBERT admires Ferris wheel made from his Erector Set. Structural pieces of the set also enable boys to build dirigibles, refrigerating plants, walking-beam engines.



CHINNING CHAMP in his youth, Gilbert displays medals and sashes.



POLE VAULT mark was made by Gilbert with his 12 ft. 7 1/4 in. leap.

## TOY KING CONTINUED

crossscopes which are called toys but have Polaroid lenses, and magic and puzzle boxes. These outfits are accompanied by manuals masterfully designed to educate painlessly through fun.

The words "scientific" and "educational" bulk large in all Gilbert promotional material and are an integral part of his thinking. He likes to tell people about the retired professor of chemistry at Yale who confided in him that "no one in America has done more than yourself to create an interest in the sciences." Gilbert has also started to go after that generation known as "children of the pre-screwdriver stage" with relatively simple, wooden contraptions determinedly named "Erector Junior," "Babykins" and "Kiddikins." A short while ago he hired Anne Farrell, a young woman who had created a lot of toys for Swedish cooperatives, to think up things for the pre-screwdriver crowd. One of them is simply a six-inch cube. Kiddies have to pick it up with both hands. The theory is that it forestalls left-handedness as well as more serious Freudian complications.

American Flyer trains, like Anne Farrell toys, are among the few Gilbert products that are not fundamentally of his own design. He acquired them from a moribund Chicago firm for virtually nothing and then had them redesigned from locomotive headlights to caboose cars on a scale of three-sixteenths of an inch to a foot. He added such indispensable railroad accessories as automatic log loaders, coalers, magnetic cranes, crossing gates, water towers, stations, billboards and blinker signals. American Flyer trains are now models of verisimilitude. The locomotives do not merely chug but their smokestacks belch real smoke and they whistle for crossings in a manner nostalgic enough to bring tears to the eyes of old railroaders. Gilbert's trains are now the principal competition of the Lionel Corporation, the largest manufacturer of electric trains in the world. In addition to being made in several sizes larger than the biggest American Flyer, Lionel trains whistle and smoke, but they no longer chug. The Lionel people think there is enough noise being made already.

### How the Cabinet played with toys

IN toy circles Gilbert is regarded, even by some of his competitors as the Man Who Has Done the Most for the Industry. One of the organizers of the Toy Manufacturers of the U.S.A., the industry's principal trade association, he was elected its first president in 1916. By a process of natural selection he was chosen in 1918 to head its war-service committee, which undertook a junket to Washington to stem a wartime threat to curtail the industry's business. He and the rest of the committee appeared at the Navy building loaded down with bulky packages of toys, including, of course, Erector. The group was shown into the office of the Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, for what the Council of National Defense had planned as a half-hour audience. It lasted three hours. Most of the time was spent on the floor over such weighty matters as the running of a child's steam engine and the building of a toy bridge. Newton D. Baker, Secretary of War, Franklin K. Lane, Secretary of the Interior, and William C. Redfield, Secretary of Commerce, took part in the deliberations. A Boston newspaper later interviewed Gilbert and editorialized cozily, "How the boys and girls of America would have laughed if they could only have been concealed in that room and, peering over the tops of the daven-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 73

## TOY KING CONTINUED

ports, seen the members of the Cabinet playing with the toys." The Cabinet kept the samples.

Later on, in 1921, Gilbert did some powerful talking on the tariff before the House Ways and Means Committee. He deplored the position of American toy manufacturers in the face of cheap German and Japanese labor and a tariff of only 35%. As usual, he was laden with toys, which he left as souvenirs for happy congressmen. He asked for 60%. He was given 70%.

A sports columnist said recently of Gilbert that "he could easily have stepped right out of the pages of a Horatio Alger novel," a not-too-original observation with which Gilbert is in strenuous private disagreement. "I had," he says, "the happiest boyhood of anybody I ever knew. Nobody ever had so much fun, good clean fun, I mean. Or so many hobbies. I wasn't a poor boy and I never paid my way through school, not entirely, that is. My father was a banker. He wasn't a big banker and he wasn't always a banker, but he helped put me through school. I worked because I wanted to work."

The columnist's regard for Gilbert, however, was primarily of a sporting nature. Gilbert is the only manufacturer of toys, or anything else for that matter, who ever won an Olympic Games title, held the world's record for the pole vault and wrote an *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on that sport. He is thought by the best minds in the field to be the greatest living authority on pole vaulting and is said to have revolutionized the technique of vaulting by the introduction of the bamboo pole and a painstaking study of the physics involved. He devised an apparatus for demonstration of the art that unquestionably helped his alma mater, Yale, to dominate pole vaulting for at least two decades. Moreover at one time or another in his youth, he won the Northwest amateur wrestling championships (at 125 and 135 pounds, respectively) and the somewhat esoteric title of world's chinning champion (63 times), placed second in the intercollegiate gymnastics tournament at Yale, played football for tiny Pacific University in Oregon and was captain of its track team.

### Medicine and magic

MOST Alger heroes, many and brainy though they were, would have found such a regimen wearing. Gilbert did not. In the intervals between winning several hundred medals, cups, rosettes, plaques and similar tributes to his muscles, he found time to become a startlingly proficient magician, conjuring up enough money in that art to help him get through Yale Medical School. It was the characteristic Gilbert thoroughness that also led him to become a physician. He never intended to practice medicine. He did think of becoming an athletic coach and figured a medical degree to be an indispensable adjunct.

Gilbert got his medical degree but meanwhile had become so enamored of magic that he neither practiced medicine nor followed his inclination to become a coach. He went forthwith into the magic business with a partner, whom he eventually bought out, and set himself up as the Mysto Manufacturing Company. He did his own peddling for quite a while. His first catalog was a small affair, the precursor of what the toy industry has since conceded to be the most potent job of promotion ever dreamed up by a toy manufacturer. For several years Gilbert published a newspaper for boys. Its contents were largely the incidents of his own happy boyhood. He ran prize contests and gave away automobiles and Shetland ponies. He also created the Gilbert Engineering Institute for Boys, which was not an institute and taught no engineering, but sold a great many Erector Sets. These achievements in publicity have since been succeeded by the more sophisticated Gilbert Hall of Science on New York's Fifth Avenue.

The idea for the Erector Set came to Gilbert one day in 1912 while he was returning from New York on the New Haven railroad. He was just a nod short of the apathy that assails train riders when they have finished their newspapers. As he sat looking out the window, his eye was fixed by the regularly spaced girders the road was putting up in the process of electrification. That night, burning with a medium-hard gemlike flame and assisted by his wife, he cut out the first Erector in cardboard. He says the name just came to him. The Mysto Manufacturing Company almost tripled its business in the next 12 months. Three years later it was rechristened with its present name and promptly burgeoned into the impressive business it is today.

Gilbert's situation today is but a logical extension of his childhood. He was born in Salem, Ore. on Feb. 15, 1884, the son of Frank and Anna Charlotte Hovenden Gilbert. Gilbert says he was a "frail" child whose family feared he would not "grow up" physically, a gross misjudgment in view of what happened. By the time he was

CONTINUED ON PAGE 72

15 he had run, wrestled, chained, boxed, huddled and jumped himself into a vest-pocket edition of Charles Atlas.

It was four years previous to this, when he was 11, that destiny had overtaken him in the form of a set of magic tricks he got as a premium from a boys' magazine (years later the magazine bought Gilbert's tricks for premiums). Alfred became the boy wonder of the neighborhood. A professional magician, the late Hermann the Great, put on a one-night stand and called for volunteers from the audience. Alfred volunteered. Hermann astounded him by pulling eggs from his mouth and coins from his ears, whereupon Alfred astounded Hermann by extracting some silver from his ears. "My boy," the magician told him, "you will be a great success."

At Pacific University, a small Congregational school in Forest Grove, Ore., Gilbert was accounted a campus cut-up, being partial to such exploits as muffling the clapper of the chapel bell. These were relatively quiet years, however, except for one incident. Someone beat him in a wrestling match. This rankled so that he forthwith traveled 3,000 miles eastward, enrolled in a physical-training class at Chautauqua, the great American educational catch-all, and returned to Pacific to throw the man who had unaccountably beaten him. Before he left Pacific, Gilbert met Mary Thompson, the girl who was to become his wife.

In 1904 he went off to Yale with assistance from his father and some money he had picked up working as a flagman on the Northern Pacific and as a toiler in the wheat fields. "But at last the harvest

was over," he reminisced later in his boys' newspaper. "My hands were calloused and my muscles were like iron. That's the way to get strong, boys. And yet, with all my great strength, when I got to Yale, I said to myself, 'You'll have to have something more than hard muscles to be a champion here.' And I looked with wonder at the splendid physiques of some of the athletes I saw. . . ." Gilbert did all right. He broke the world's record for the pole vault with a 12-foot, 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch leap at the Olympic games trials in Philadelphia in 1908 and triumphed the same year in London. Years later he was to become an important member of the American Olympic Games Committee.

Gilbert's attitude toward his business was always been strikingly similar to his feeling for



ALASKAN BEAR, 10 ft. high, adorns Gilbert's Connecticut hunting lodge.

sport. Sport was never just fun for him but almost, as he says, a way of life, and he made it pay him dividends over and above big muscles and a good digestion. "I learned something from each game I played," he says, "and nobody forced me to. That's the way I always figured toys had to be."

In recent years Gilbert appears to have slowed down. He now rises as late as 6 a.m., jogs only a mile or so on the roads outside his New Haven home, works out with Indian clubs, punching bag, rowing machine and weights in the basement, and gets to work at 7:30 a.m., punching a time clock like his employees. He is a noticeably informal individual, given to gabardine suits, rubber-soled shoes and pipes. He has a dangerous habit of pushing lighted pipes into a pocket when something is on his mind. "He spends more money having his clothes rewoven," his son says, "than he does buying new ones." Admittedly a forgetful man, Gilbert has been known to forget to have them rewoven. A high official of the Amateur Athletic Union, who sees Gilbert about once a year at national A.A.U. meetings, once said of him, "You know, nobody'd think he was worth a dime. I remember him turning up one time with a burn in his coat. I didn't pay much attention to it at the time but there he was at the next convention—same coat, same burn."

At 62 Gilbert is almost bald. He has a pleasantly sharp face and looks much more like a successful coach than a successful businessman. There is, as a matter of fact, a good deal of the coach in Gilbert's manner. The concept of teamwork is, he says, more or less of a religion with him. "Sometimes you don't know whether you're doing business with him," an acquaintance has remarked, "or whether you're going out for your 'Y'." The A. C. Gilbert Company has no workers. It has, instead, a "team" or a "family" of 1,400 "co-workers." They are governed by what Gilbert calls his *Creeds*,

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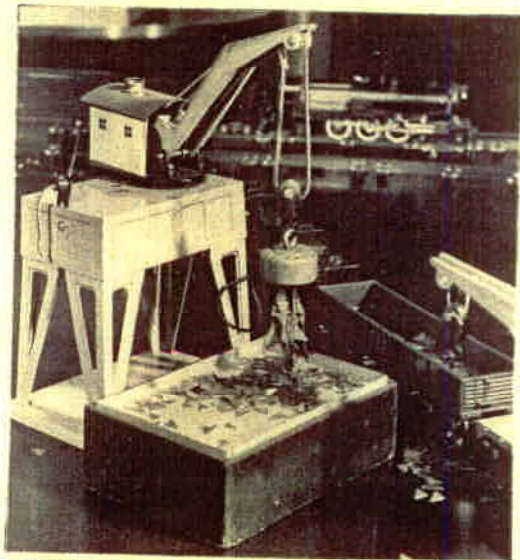
*Policies and Procedures*, a document of 89 pages, the tone of which is at once enlightened, evangelistic and chummy.

The Gilbert code even provides for birthdays. All co-workers receive on their birthdays a card signed by Gilbert. If they have been with the company less than five years, a foreman delivers them. After that Gilbert himself does the job and shakes hands with the recipients. It is stipulated that after a quarter-century with the firm, a co-worker "shall on his birthday, in addition to the birthday card, receive a corsage if the co-worker is a woman; a boutonniere if the co-worker is a man." Almost half of the Gilbert "family" has worked for him anywhere from 10 to 30 years. "You've got to like people," he has concluded. "You can't not like people and get along with them." He sometimes gives copies of *How to Win Friends and Influence People* to foremen he thinks do not like them sufficiently. Although there is a small C.I.O. unit in the factory it has not made much headway. Union organizers claim that Gilbert steps up his entertainment program whenever a picket heaves into sight, lulling the co-workers by making rabbits emerge from his hat on the stage of the company's cheerful cafeteria-auditorium. It is also true, however, that he pays his employees higher wages than the average for the New Haven area.

### Paradise, Connecticut

GILBERT goes in for rather more elaborate toys than he sells. Notable among them is a 600-acre game preserve and dairy farm in Hamden, seven miles outside New Haven. He calls it Paradise and operates it at only a negligible loss. Paradise is stocked with several thousand pheasants and gray mallard ducks, 100 white-tailed deer, 9 cows, 250 turkeys and about 1,000 chickens. Syndicates willing to pay the price for the privilege may shoot pheasant and duck in season. Gilbert shoots the deer himself and sells them to a New York City butcher. The trophy room in his rustic hunting lodge is crowded with the heads of some formidable animals Gilbert has killed in 20 years of big-game hunting in British Columbia and in Alaska.

The Gilbert home in North Haven is a 15-room suburban Elizabethan affair in an exclusive residential section developed mostly by Gilbert. In addition to the basement gymnasium in which Gilbert works out every morning, the house has a swimming pool and a trick nine-hole golf course with three greens and nine tees. Gilbert built the pool to teach his children, Alfred Jr., Charlotte and Lucretia, how to swim. The young Gilberts, all married, now live in homes of their own nearby. Alfred Jr. works for his father who, according to a friend, was once mildly worried that his son might become an intellectual. The son did, indeed, become an engineer, but he set his father's mind at rest by making the Yale swimming team.



MAGNETIC LOADER is one of Gilbert's most popular toys. A magnet run by remote control draws up metal objects and deposits them on a car.