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Erector Sets Linked Gilbert With Boyhood

NEW YORK (AP)—“One night I went up to the attic and messed around,” wrote Stephen Smith of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. “Then I saw a funny thing. I didn’t know what it was.

“I opened it and it came to my mind it was an Erector set. When my father was a little boy he had an erector.

“For Christmas I wished to have an Erector and a microscope and a lab set. And ever since then I did many things with both.”

The youngster’s letter, sincere if not altogether grammatical, didn’t differ much from more than a million others written to A. C. Gilbert over the years, which shows that when he died January 24 a part of American boyhood went with him.

With Gilbert’s death, leadership of the company passed to his son, Alfred Carlton Gilbert Jr., who says he’ll “make every effort to continue to create” the same type educational toys his father made famous.

In his later years, the elder Gilbert went to the office only three days a week and concerned himself mainly with choosing new toys to add to the existing line of 51 different sets in 11 science categories.

Among the new favorites are an electronics set with which boys can build transistor radios, burglar alarms and other gadgets; and a physics set which teaches the principles of hydraulics and other scientific subjects modern boys are amazingly familiar with.

But none of Gilbert’s inventions (he owned more than 150 patents) has had the success of the Erector—the original do-it-yourself gift that not only has occupied many a boyhood hour but also launched many an adult career.

“If you had read the hundreds of letters I have received from engineers who tell me their interest in their profession started with an Erector set,” Gilbert once wrote, “you would know I had done something besides make money.”

More than 10 million boys have owned Erectors sets, and who can say how many, like Stephen Smith, have added to the ones passed along to them by their fathers; because the thing hasn’t changed a whit since A. C. Gilbert built the first one back in 1913.

Gilbert made friends through his other toys, to be sure, though company spokesmen say Erector represents “a substantial part” of its science toy business.

American Flyer electric trains account for one-third of the company’s income and science toys two-thirds.

Gilbert insisted all his toys “had to do something.” He would not allow his model airplane to remain motionless on a string. He put a rubber band in it and it flew — opening up a whole new hobby.

But no toy does more than the Erector, nor were its creations confined to the playroom.

The prototype model of the World War II Bailey Bridge was built with a No. 10 1-2 Erector. An Erector was used to design industry’s Gantry Crane. The motor and other Erector parts were used to build the first heart-lung machine, now in the Smithsonian Institution.

At the A. C. Gilbert Company factory in New Haven, Connecticut,

baskets constructed from Erector sets carry parts to the assembly line on overhead trolleys.

The thought for the versatile Erector “seemed to come to me all of a sudden in the fall of 1911,” said Gilbert, during a time when he was commuting by rail between New Haven and New York. Girders being put up to carry new electric cables gave him the idea.

Gilbert was born in Salem, Oregon, February 15, 1884, and tales from his adventurous boyhood read like a Mark Twain novel. The family barn was his haven, and was where his inventive knack began to bud.

He once rigged a fire house pole from the loft to the floor, for example, and the first kid to slid down landed on a level which flung open the door. One day his father, alerted by a gathering crowd, snatched young Alfred from an upper window seconds before he was about to demonstrate Salem’s first parachute jump.

Gilbert was slightly built — five feet seven and 135 pounds in his prime — but was wiry and strong and took offense at biographers who described him as a “frail” boy.

In college he became captain of the track team, a star football quarterback and a wrestling champion. In 1908 he won the Olympic pole vaulting championship and set a world record (since broken.)

When he decided he would like to become a physical education instructor he felt he should have a medical degree. He set out to get one at Yale, and helped pay his way by giving magic shows from a kit he had put together.

In 1909 he put on a demonstration in a variety store hoping to sell a few kits for Christmas money, and got orders for \$600 worth.

“I sat right down and multiplied this figure by all the book stores, toy stores and department stores in the United States,” he said, “and knew that I was soon going to be a millionaire.”

He borrowed \$5,000 from his father, and opened the Mysto Manufacturing Company in an old New Haven carriage house. When he introduced his educational line of toys he changed the name to the A. C. Gilbert Company.

Today it is a \$20-million concern which no longer features magic tricks, but continues to work magic in the hearts of boys.