

The pioneer of scientific playthings
tapped children's urge to create

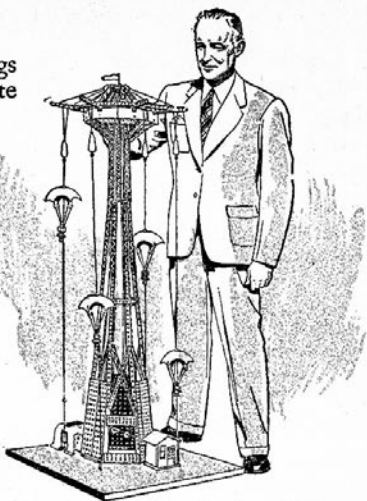
Toy Tycoon

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ALBERT CARLTON GILBERT receives less mail from youngsters than Santa Claus; but for 30 years he has had 100,000 to 300,000 letters annually from small fry—and he has answered them all.

Gilbert is the world's largest manufacturer of scientific toys. He makes Erector Sets, electric trains, chemistry sets, electric-eye outfits, kits for working in metal and plastics, and other toys that appeal to children's constructive ingenuity. It is only natural that the little nippers who sit bug-eyed playing with Gilbert toys regard him as a man worth writing to, not only about toys but about other matters of grave import.

In a recent day's mail was the following: "Dear Mr. Giblet . . . I wonder could you give me a idea where I can get a book on forward passing and receving. I am not very good on the receving, I can't keep ahold of it." Another letter, discussing laboratory experiments with silicates, required an answer from Professor Treat Johnson of Yale, who edits Gilbert's chemistry handbook.



A whole batch of what Gilbert calls "little i" letters, from children too young to know about capitals, always end with "your loving son." That, apparently, is the only way the little fellows know how to end a letter.

In 1912, when Gilbert pioneered in the field of scientific playthings, most toys sold for less than a dollar and were what Gilbert calls "hanky-panky gimcracks." He insisted that children needed toys which would keep their minds perking; that in a scientific age scientific toys were the answer. The children agreed. That is the secret of Gilbert's correspondence and his enormous success in revolutionizing the toy business.

Gilbert knows what children like. They want action; that's why youngsters take to almost anything with wheels. Equally important, they want to accomplish things. Once Gilbert put out a model automobile. It had a real transmission like a

full-size car, but it was a fiasco. After children had run it across the living-room floor a few times they lost interest. It had action but not enough accomplishment.

With an Erector Set, Gilbert's most popular toy, a boy can build a real drawbridge operated by an electric motor, then tear it down and make a power shovel or something else that challenges his mechanical ability. With every chemistry set and microscope kit there is a handbook outlining hundreds of experiments.

This sounds like a lot of work — and it is. But Gilbert says youngsters like to work, provided no one forces them. They may not be enthusiastic about mowing the lawn, but they will work endlessly at being "electrical engineers."

Kids demand the utmost realism. At the Gilbert Hall of Science in New York, displaying Gilbert products, the men in charge never talk to young visitors about "toys," but about such things as "structural steel engineering" and "chemistry laboratories" and "scale-model railroading."

Recently Gilbert brought out a train that goes "choo-choo" with the sound and rhythm of a real steam engine, and gives off billows of real smoke. This smoke, by the way, brought up one of the weightiest problems ever faced by Gilbert's engineers. After trying to scent their secret-formula smoke with everything from Chanel No. 5 to eucalyptus, they hit upon cedar as an odor authentic enough for young rail-

roaders and pleasant enough for mothers as well.

Gilbert's original toy experts were his three children. Today his seven grandchildren serve as toy jury. In his home near New Haven, Conn., are boxes and boxes of toys — both his own and his competitors'. By watching the children at play Gilbert gets an unbiased verdict.

Gilbert was born in Salem, Ore., 62 years ago. When he was ten, he and his two brothers fitted up their father's barn as a gymnasium. Gilbert became an ardent athlete. A year later he received a magic set as a premium from *Youth's Companion*. He soon became adept at sleight of hand, and magic became his second hobby.

At 16, Gilbert entered Pacific University, an institution with 125 students. He organized a track team, got himself elected captain and won the Northwest Conference track title over such amazed universities as Oregon and Washington.

In 1904 he went east to study medicine at Yale. He figured that a doctor's knowledge would give him an edge in becoming an athletic coach. At Yale he became fascinated by pole vaulting. Vaulters then were using heavy hickory poles, and the record — 12 feet — was regarded as the limit of possible achievement. Gilbert changed to a light bamboo pole, and in the 1908 Olympic trials set a new world's record of 12 feet 7¾ inches. Later he vaulted 13 feet 2 inches. The bamboo vaulting pole has long been standard.

Gilbert paid part of his way through school by performing as a magician in theaters and clubs. When fellow students demanded lessons in magic, he started the Mysto Manufacturing Company in a woodshed outside New Haven, to make magicians' equipment.

By the time Gilbert received his M.D. from Yale, in 1909, and married his childhood sweetheart, he had determined to make his living in the magic business. At the end of the second year his profits totaled only \$366 and he decided that he would have to add other products to his line.

One day he was riding on the newly electrified New Haven railroad. As the steel power-line supports flashed by, he got his idea for a miniature structural steel construction set. Gilbert and his wife made the first models out of cardboard. These were translated into steel parts and the Erector Set was an immediate success. Then he devised the tiny "mousepower" electric motors to run such things as miniature cranes and elevators. The following year he began making chemistry sets. Then he put his motors to work powering inexpensive electric fans.

Year by year new toys and household appliances have been added — an electric orange-juice squeezer, an electric mixer. By 1940 two thirds of his 30 products were toys, one third electrical appliances.

The Gilbert factory is as educational to the young visitor as any of Gilbert's toys. A staff of 1200 people turn out toys the way General Motors turns out automobiles, assembly lines and all.

To insure that making toys never becomes grim, Gilbert pays his staff more than the going wage rates and provides virtually every known form of employe benefit. Added Gilbert touches are free movies during the lunch hour and an orchestra that plays for dancing every Friday noon in the cafeteria.

Clear-eyed, bronzed and wiry, Gilbert still indulges his hobbies. He has his own nine-hole golf course, a swimming pool and a complete gymnasium. He maintains a 300-acre farm and game preserve, where he raises pheasant, wild ducks, deer and rainbow trout.

Gilbert was in charge of the American team at the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin. He has found time to coach a long line of outstanding Yale pole vaulters and has designed special machines to demonstrate vaulting technique. As the world's top authority, he recently wrote a treatise on vaulting for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Meanwhile his toy production is booming. Most toy manufacturers guard their experimental projects with extreme secrecy, but Gilbert admits that he plans new toys in the fields of electronics and aviation, including jet propulsion.

