

A.C. Gilbert Biography

Athlete, scholar, magician, toymaker, businessman, inventor, marketer, a life-long advocate for children and learning, Alfred Carlton Gilbert had a remarkable career designing, making and selling creative, fun, yet educational toys for 50 years with his company, A.C. Gilbert.

Born in Salem, Oregon, Gilbert graduated from Yale Medical School in New Haven, but never practiced medicine. A world class athlete, while at Yale he won a Gold Medal at the 1908 Olympic Games in England for pole vaulting and held two world records. He is credited with inventing the pole vaulters "box." During his college years, Gilbert began appearing as a successful magic act. After obtaining his degree, he and a partner opened a Westville, CT manufacturing plant making magician kits and tricks called Mysto Manufacturing Co. The company eventually became the A. C. Gilbert Company and moved to New Haven.

Gilbert commuted to New York City during a dramatic explosion of skyscraper and bridge building in the early years of the 20th century. Seeing all the exposed girders and metal work on the towers that were being built to convert the trains from steam to electricity gave him the idea of creating kits that would have metal parts that could fit together to make multiple objects and buildings. Soon Gilbert was designing toys with motors, wheels, pulleys, and real steel so that boys could build working machines and understand the science and engineering behind them.

Though another company had a similar product, Gilbert began manufacturing what he called the "Erector Set" at Erector Square in New Haven in 1913. The toys sold extremely well, in part because Gilbert marketed directly to boys while pointing out to parents his kits were multiple toys in one.

Gilbert believed that play was essential to learning, and that because each of his kits could make multiple objects, boys would be given choices and the chance to make hypotheses and execute a plan using the knowledge they had gained from working with the erector sets. He felt the kits had long term positive effects on children that could assist them in their problem solving skills and in basic design.

In 1916 AC was a founder and first president of the Toy Manufacturers of America, Inc., an industry watchdog and lobbyist for the fledging toy industry. Today, renamed as the Toy Industry Association, the group represents 90% of the manufacturers of toys and toy workers in the United States.

A.C. Gilbert Company began designing science and chemistry kits in the mid-1930s. The kits were comprehensive laboratories where children could experiment while learning basic science skills. Where in high schools today even the most basic chemistry is under lock and key, in 1940 a grade school student with a Gilbert kit could be working with full strength chemicals at the kitchen table designing their own experiments.

Taking this to an extreme, in 1951 A.C. Gilbert debuted the "Gilbert Atomic Energy Laboratory." The kit even included a Geiger-Mueller Counter and small amount of radioactive material!

AC passed away in 1961 and his company, held together so much by his personal passion, would only survive for 5 more years. It has often been said that the rise of children's television hurt children's ability to commit long hours to playing with Gilbert's toys. Ironically, a designer working on an attraction in Disneyland in the 1950's built a model to illustrate how the attraction would function. He used an Erector set.

– Dan Wisneski, Communications Director, American Manufacturing Hall of Fame