

A.C. Gilbert Video Script

Although he was a world-class athlete with an Olympic Gold Medal, a world record-holding pole vaulter and obtained a Yale Medical degree, in the end it was his love of magic that brought A.C. Gilbert into the world of manufacturing.

Manufacturing toys, that is.

Toys that amazed people in their complexity. Toys that required children to think, to analyze, to create. Toys that lead directly to children choosing a career in engineering, in science and in manufacturing.

During his college years, Gilbert became a professional magician. This led directly to forming the Mysto Magic Company with a partner, which they moved to New Haven at the end of the first decade of the 20th century. Gilbert immediately realized that just selling tricks one by one was difficult to market and by combining several tricks in one “kit” he could more efficiently price, plan production and market his tricks.

The company reformed and renamed itself “AC Gilbert” and the young manufacturer began looking for new products to make.

On a trip to New York City on business, Gilbert was struck by the design of the new electrical infrastructure powering the train. He thought children would enjoy not only playing with his toys, but making them as part of the process.

Combining this with his idea of having multiple toys in the same kit, in 1913 he launched his first “erector set.” The set was comprised of various length flat metal bars with holes along their length at regular intervals. Nuts and bolts held the pieces together and there were instructions to build multiple toys in each kit.

The kits began as simple vehicles, buildings or bridges, but the designers at AC Gilbert imaginations’ could not be contained. With the addition of electrical motors and gearing, soon the company was turning out multi-toy kits like an Amusement park set with a rocket ride, a parachute jump and a merry go –round. Over the years erector sets were built that could fill any child’s imagination, while teaching them the tenets of engineering, construction and manufacturing.

Part of the AC Gilbert allure was its marketing. An image of the founder along with a hearty “Hello Boys!” began every advertisement. The ads were aimed directly to children with images of the toys that could be built with the kit and showing children playing with them. With their flair for marketing, AC Gilbert soon became the first **national** toy maker in history.

In the 1920s AC Gilbert added chemistry sets to its offerings. Children could perform hundreds of experiments by following the handbook included in the set.

Other inventive toys followed. A series of microscope kits, a Kaster kit where lead could be heated to over 400 degrees and poured in a mold to make your own action figures that you

then painted. These kits were followed by science kits, electrical kits and even during the Cold War, an Atomic Power kit with a small amount of uranium and a Geiger counter included.

In the 1930s AC Gilbert purchased a toy train company called “American Flyer.” Obsessed by getting the detail and scale correct, Gilbert created the most accurately built toy train, and predictably, made hundreds of accessories available for customization.

Lionel bought the American Flyer line from Gilbert in the 1960s and the erector set continues to entertain children today.

Over 100 years after making their first magic kit, AC Gilbert indirectly and directly continues to spread their magic. The magic of learning science, engineering and manufacturing through toys.

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