

A TOUCH OF Paradise

FROM THE Laurel View Country Club's main building, the view is tremendous. There's New Haven to the south and rolling hills in every other direction.

The location used to be the home of A.C. Gilbert, the famous toy-maker, athlete and hunter who lived in Hamden most of his adult life.

Alfred Carlton Gilbert is one of the most fascinating people of the early 20th century. Born in 1884 in Salem, Ore., Gilbert was infatuated with physical fitness and magic as a child growing up in rural Idaho.

He worked his way through Yale medical school by being a professional magician, then founded a toy company. As a pole-vaulter, he set world records and won an Olympic gold medal.

Gilbert is perhaps best known for his company's Erector Sets. Few boys who grew up in the early 1900s went without the toy Gilbert invented after he observed some construction cranes from a train window.

Introduced in 1913, Gilbert eventually sold 45 million Erector sets over the next half-century. He was the pitchman, beginning his magazine advertisements with his famous "Hello Boys!" tagline.

Gilbert was hailed as "the man who saved Christmas" during World War I, when he convinced government officials not to ban the sale and

manufacture of toys to aid the war effort.

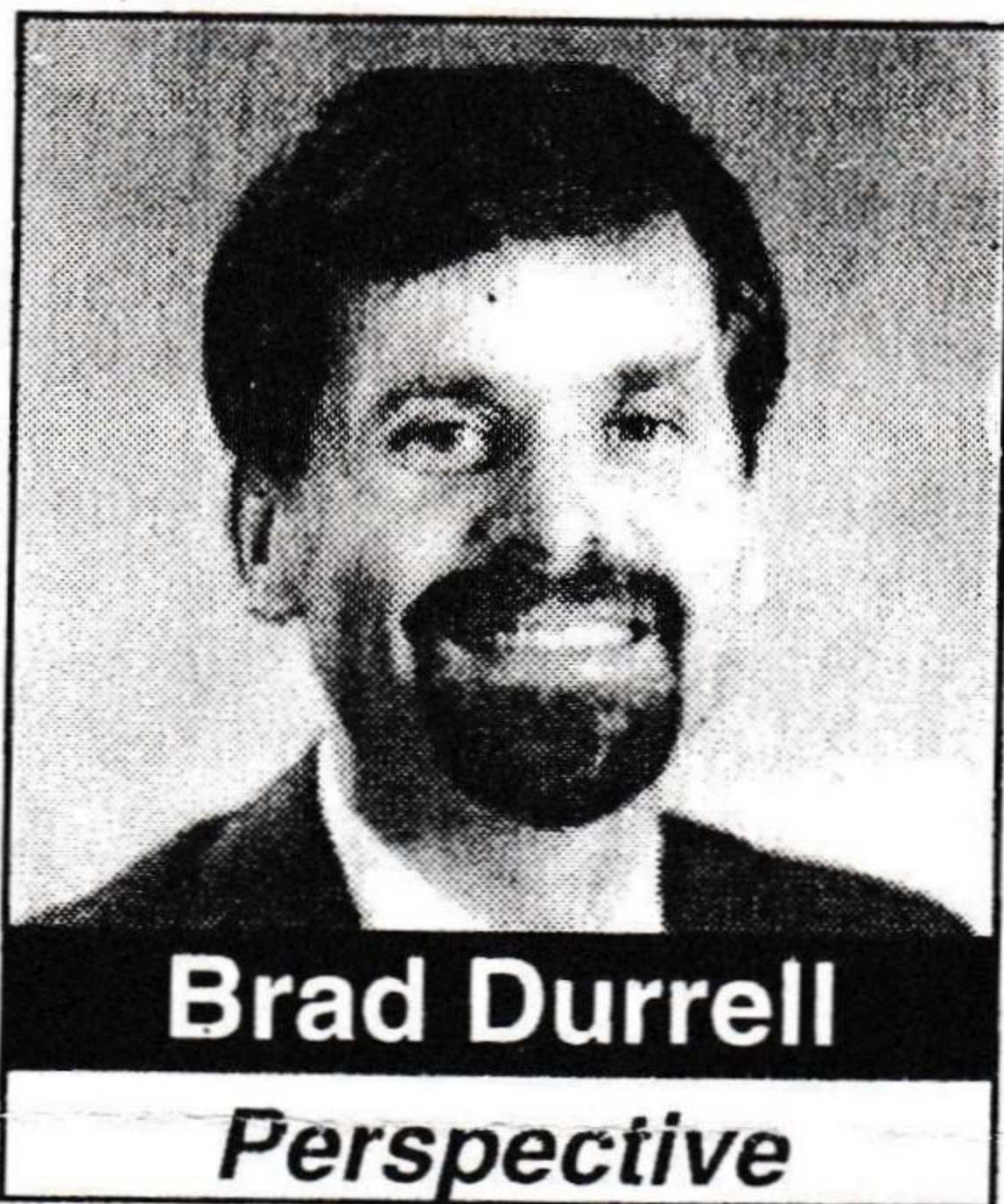
The A.C. Gilbert company also sold toy microscopes, chemistry sets and other scientific do-it-yourself-kits.

Toys made Gilbert a very wealthy man, but his focus always was on having fun. For him, life was an adventure.

Perhaps Gilbert's favorite recreational pastime was game hunting. He traveled to Alaska and throughout the world to hunt big-time game.

He displayed with pride his trophy heads — from grizzly bears to moose — at his Hamden hunting lodge. That showed his eccentric side.

MORE IMPORTANTLY, Gilbert was a man who con-



nected with the common man and woman.

He didn't call himself the boss, but a "co-worker." He would arrive early at his New Haven toy factory every day, punching a time clock like everyone else.

Gilbert met with employees individually on their birthdays to mark the occasion. He paid more than the prevailing wages and offered generous benefits.

Every Friday at his factory, he would entertain workers by performing magic tricks. He would show movies, bring in bands and encourage dancing.

FOR HAMDEN residents, Gilbert's greatest contribution may have been the preservation much of western Hamden's rural ambiance.

He purchased a lot of land from farmers in the Paradise Avenue-Dunbar Hill area in 1930s, naming his property the Paradise Game Preserve. The

name came from the existing road.

Gilbert liked being in the country, and would spend hours walking his laurel-covered land. Paradise eventually included 600 acres and had 31 miles of hiking trails.

He built a hunting lodge and raised many kinds of animals, from pheasants to cows, and stocked the fenced-in property with deer.

Later, he built a country club for his company employees. The Paradise Park Country Club, which included all sorts of recreational facilities, opened in 1947.

The country club was soon
(See "Paradise" page 5)

Paradise was found in Hamden for A.C. Gilbert—

(Continued from page 4)

closed due to zoning problems, but he continued to hold the A.C. Gilbert Co.'s annual picnic on the property.

Gilbert and his wife Mary, who had three children, primarily lived in an estate called Maraldene on Ridge Road in North Haven.

They later moved to a home where the Laurel View clubhouse now sits, called Mountain View or Hilltop.

He built the new home at the property's highest point. "No home near New Haven has a more beautiful setting," he wrote in his 1954 autobiography, "The Man Who Lives in Paradise."

He also began to develop some of Paradise's outlying areas, often helping to construct the houses himself.

A.C.'S NEPHEW, 81-year-old Charlton Gilbert of Hamden, remembers his uncle well.

He spent time at Paradise, enjoying the parties and observing the deer. He said his uncle gave him tips on how to pole-vault.

Charlton's wife, Joyce, said

Paradise was simple but special. "It was a retreat, very comfortable," she said. "Nothing fancy. It had a large dining room with English furniture."

Gilbert died in 1961 at age 76, but his mark on the world will never end. Ask any man over age 50 about the Erector Set, and watch him become a young boy again.

Gilbert helped inspire many young men to science-related fields. And Erector Sets are now hot collectibles, with some selling for \$15,000 each.

HAMDEN DOESN'T DO enough to recognize Gilbert. Salem, Ore., has an A.C. Gilbert Museum. New Haven is home to the A.C. Gilbert Heritage Society. A collectors' club is based in California.

While the Eli Whitney Museum has exhibits on Gilbert, Hamden should do more to



honor the man's legacy.

Gilbert is in the same class as writer Thornton Wilder and inventor Eli Whitney, and deserves more local recognition.

This column represents the opinion of Brad Durrell and does not necessarily reflect the views of Hometown Publications.