

# A sportsman's legacy

By Scott Trauner

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## A.C. Gilbert's outdoor playground in Hamden left lasting impression on local youth

As a kid, the only reason I had even heard of an Erector Set was that my grandmother once worked for the New Haven company that made them decades earlier.

I grew up on G.I. Joes, the small ones without the buzzcuts, but despite the many years between my childhood and A.C. Gilbert's reign over the toy industry, he is still the one I hold responsible for those moments of youth that were full of adventure and nerves and dirt — the ones that vaulted us from the status of children to the status of boys.

And moments like this can only happen outdoors.

A half a century ago this year, Gilbert's autobiography "The Man Who Lives in Paradise" was published, and as much as it is a story about a businessman's success, it is also about a sportsman's love for the outdoors.

"It was the laurel that first brought me here," wrote Gilbert in 1954, and, in 1988, it was a trail Gilbert blazed through this same stand of laurel that my friends and I followed to the legendary toy maker's abandoned hunting lodge in Hamden for the very first time.

Built in 1931 by Norwegian ship-builders, the huge log house sat at the hub of 600 wooded acres that Gilbert named the Paradise Game Preserve, a place where the dedicated businessman found respite in the activities he had enjoyed since childhood.

In his 2002 book, "The Man Who Changed How Boys and Toys Were Made," Gilbert biographer Bruce Watson describes the retreat as "a child's daydream of Daniel Boone's camp." Unfortunately, by the time we got there, the lodge had been vandalized by older kids and was more like a nightmare of an Edgar Allan Poe tale. The lodge was backed up against the laurel, its glassless windows black like the dilated pupils of a cornered animal, and as frightened as we were, the unwritten laws of middle school kids prohibited our return to the trail without exploring the empty retreat.

But it hadn't always been empty and photographs of the lodge validate Watson's romantic description. In the famous trophy room, our feet crunched broken glass where plush bearskins once lay and the chestnut log walls that now bounced our echoes once held so many antlers that it looked like the branches were never milled from the logs at all.

Gilbert's grandsons, however, don't need any old pictures to remember the way Paradise was in its prime.

"My older brother and I spent a lot of time there as kids," said Jeff Marsted, who can still picture his grandfather fishing at Paradise.

"The trout pond was enveloped by



Photo courtesy of the Gilbert Family Collection

A.C. Gilbert's autobiography was titled "The Man Who Lives in Paradise," a reference to his Paradise Game Preserve in Hamden.

his beloved laurel," said Marsted. "Since that made fly casting difficult, he built a long dock into the pond. I remember watching him fish with his ever present pipe and familiar fishing hat he always wore."

Jeff's older brother Sev still practices the fishing skills his grandfather taught him decades ago at Paradise.

"He was primarily a streamer fisherman," Sev said. "At least he was at Paradise. He taught me how to retrieve the streamer fly after the cast. I still use the fairly complex technique."

The grandsons also got a taste of hunting while at Paradise, especially on Thanksgiving mornings when Gilbert staged duck hunts for visitors.

"We would wait for ducks to be released to fly overhead from one pond to another and try and shoot them," Jeff said. "I don't recall ever getting one that could be labeled as mine."

Sev specifically remembers hunting pheasant on Thanksgiving mornings with the help of Gilbert's many champion hunting dogs.

"Buster or one of my grandfather's other pointers methodically went up and down the field searching for the hidden birds to flush," Sev said.

The October 1952 cover of *Outdoor Life* magazine features Buster, one of Gilbert's favorite dogs, in pursuit of two beautiful pheasants at Paradise, a picture that could have been taken on one of these Thanksgiving mornings.

Besides having such vivid memories of their grandfather in the outdoors, Jeff still holds onto to some of Gilbert's trophies from his more dangerous hunting ventures, including a grizzly bear head, a mounted bear paw, and a wolverine head. Among the hundreds of mounted trophies once displayed at

the Paradise lodge were 18 that made it into the Records of North American Big Game, a recognition given by the Boone and Crocket Club that was founded by Gilbert's hero, Theodore Roosevelt.

A 1909 graduate of Yale, Gilbert had a close relationship with the university's museum, and in 1950, he traveled to Unimak Island in the Alaskan Peninsula to hunt a Kodiak bear for the Peabody Museum. This bear, as well as a whitetail from Paradise, is still on display on the third floor of the museum.

Usually unseen by museum visitors, however, are the handful of Gilbert trophies in the Peabody's Vertebrate Zoology Collection. Along with the skulls of bears and mountain lions taken down by Gilbert, the Peabody also holds several specimens that hadn't been attributed to Gilbert until recently.

I visited the Vertebrate Zoology Department with a copy of "The Man Who Lives in Paradise" and asked the zoologists if they recognized any of the mounts in a photograph of the trophy room. Museum Assistant Gregory Watkins-Colwell immediately pointed at the golden eagle mounted on the log wall. Kristof Zyskowski, Ornithology Collection Manager, then led me into the bright storage room that is so different from the rustic walls of Gilbert's lodge and showed me the eagle, looking no different than it does in the photo.

The eagle and I held a secret between us for a moment, a secret about Paradise that few others could understand.

Until our meeting, the bird's origin had been a sort of mystery to the zool-

ogists, whose familiarity with the eagle was because of its unique pose.

"Given the posture in which it was mounted, we suspected it was mounted for private use," said Watkins-Colwell. "That posture is not a natural pose and would not likely have been done by a taxidermist mounting the bird for academic reasons."

The golden eagle probably came from Alaska before Gilbert brought it back to Hamden to display in the trophy room, details that are helpful in cataloguing the specimen.

"It was a eureka moment," Watkins-Colwell said. "We finally have definitive proof that this particular mounted eagle is from that particular donor. This specimen is now being cataloged and entered into the museum's database."

Most of the trophies, however, were auctioned off at Christie's of New York in June 1979, eighteen years after Gilbert's death. Proceeds from the auction benefited the Peabody Museum as a tribute to Gilbert's love of nature.

Not only did Gilbert love nature, but he also acted responsibly in it. He once had a streak in which he killed 39 deer with 39 shots. Most of his deer hunting was a result of the necessity to thin his own herd periodically at Paradise, land he knew was only large enough to feed around 100 deer.

Gilbert's childhood explains why he had the desire to settle in the unsettled land of Paradise. Born in 1884 in Oregon, Gilbert saw the American West when it was still young and wild.

His uncle was a pioneer in the 1840s while his grandfather traveled by way of the Oregon Trail. Gilbert spent much of his childhood hunting, fishing, and trapping and he was only about seven or eight years old when he killed his first buck.

One day, out of curiosity, he took his father's double-barreled shotgun and its kickback split his nose open while trying to shoot birds.

Gilbert must have often thought about these days of his youth while casting into the pond at Paradise. Probably with a fondness similar to the one I have for the land that became my own frontier of youth. We may never have played with a Gilbert toy, but we certainly enjoyed his playground.

We got to see his storied lodge before it was demolished. We fished ponds at the far reaches of the old preserve. We explored the miles of trails within Paradise and cooled off in the stream that ran through it.

I can only guess, but considering what Gilbert has done for thousands of other kids of earlier generations, I think he would have understood our being curious, our being young, our being outside.

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