

A Gilbert Store Display Layout

The layout you are viewing was built by the A. C. Gilbert Art Department in 1950. Alfred Charlton Gilbert (1884-1961), a man of many talents, began life in Oregon. However, it wasn't long before he headed east to make a name for himself. A. C. attended Yale earned a medical degree, won an Olympic gold medal and set new world records in pole vaulting. Gilbert as a boy worked hard not only on his athletics but also was known for his sleight of hand tricks. In New Haven, CT. he started a business making tricks and magician aides called the Mysto-Manufacturing Company. The company grew quickly and in less than a year a New York store was opened. Gilbert spent many days riding back and forth from New Haven to New York on the train. At the same time the New Haven RR was electrifying the route and Gilbert watched closely as the girders went up to support the wires. This was the impetus that gave him the idea of the Erector Set. Perhaps his greatest invention though was enameled wire for small motors as this led to the introduction of small appliances and other items expanding the company, which in 1916 became known as the A. C. Gilbert Co. The company prospered with continued production of an 'educational toy line' that included the magic sets, chemistry sets, microscopes and Erector. This combined with the appliance production made the company a valuable asset to the government during war years making electrical relays, gyroscopes and other items. Gilbert also founded the Toy Manufacturers Association and was a pioneer in employee relations. Gilbert bought the American Flyer Company from Chicago businessman W.O. Coleman about 1937. He had plans to expand the line to more realistic trains with two rails, but they were thwarted by WWII. After the war, the company worked feverishly to complete the transition and finally started production in 1946. The company lasted only five years without his leadership until 1966. However, those twenty years produced many memories for boys and girls of all ages.

In 1953, Frank Ligocki walked into the toy department of Sibley's Department Store in Rochester, NY and bought the entire American Flyer display including trains and accessories. Art Department employees Frank Castiglione and Art Mauzaka built the layout in December of 1950. Their dated signature is burnt into the underside with a soldering iron. It measures 7' x 16'. The layout consists of three loops of track to run four trains simultaneously. A plain oval on the outside, then a folded dog bone and inside of that an over-under figure eight. The loops are ingeniously wrapped around the layout presenting a myriad of illusions including the possibility of a head on crash. The layout is constructed sturdily of 3/4" marine plywood coupled with door hinges. The Display Department did some customizing of the layout. Continuous rail was used to mold some of the wide-radii curves. Continuous track pin was used as an electrical bus stapled to the underside. The semaphore used to operate two trains on the folded dog bone is controlled by gaps in the rail and latching relays that Gilbert had made for the Navy. A reverse unit is wired into another relay used to operate the whistle and crossing gate on alternating circuits of the train. This allows the talking station to be operated without the interference of the whistle blowing continuously while the train is stopped. The talking station is outfitted with a ceramic phono cartridge wired to a tube amplifier. The amplifier is housed in a radio case and placed under the layout. The talking station can now be heard above the din of the department store. An article was written about the layout in the May 1998 issue of Classic Toy Trains. In 2003, Dave's Twacks & Twains was able to acquire the layout from Frank Jr. We are happy to be able to share this piece of toy train history. Since 2003 the layout has been displayed at train shows, children's hospitals, and senior residences throughout the country. We are in the process of preserving it and hope to continue display it. Donations to its preservation will be gladly accepted. We hope you enjoy the display.