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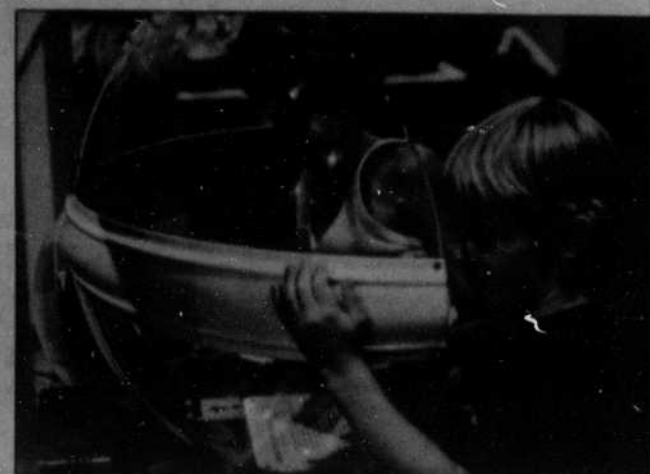
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The legend of A.C. Gilbert comes alive at WISTEC



He said he would never work at a job unless it was fun, and A.C. Gilbert focused his entire adult life on that philosophy.

During a professional career that spanned six decades, Gilbert created a variety of educational toys that inspired an interest in the sciences for several generations of children.

The Willamette Science and Technology Center (WISTEC) is exhibiting several of Gilbert's creations that highlighted the career of this native Oregonian inventor and toy manufacturer.

Gilbert, born in Salem in 1884, first achieved prominence as an athlete while a student at Oregon Agricultural College (now OSU). In 1901, he set the world's record for pull-ups, and the following year, set another world's record in the running long jump. He also was an exceptional pole vaulter, establishing a Northwest Conference pole vaulting record in 1904, a world's record in 1906 followed by another during the 1908 Olympic trials.

At the 1908 Olympics, Gilbert was the unofficial winner of the gold medal in the pole vault, but was disqualified because of the type of pole he used. However, E.T. Cooke, who was declared the winner of the event, gave Gilbert the medal anyway.

The first business venture that Gilbert attempted was in 1909 while a student at Yale University. He and a friend started the Mysto-Manufacturing Co., selling a mail order magic kit.

Probably the most famous of Gilbert's educational toys was the Erector Set, which he invented in 1911 and began to market in 1913. The Erector Set, which was an engineering kit consisting of metal girders with locking edges, gears, wheels and motors, proved to be an enormous success and sold more than 30 million sets during the next twenty years.

In 1917, Gilbert invented a chemistry set that

enabled children to make such things as stink bombs, disappearing ink and ink that glowed in the dark. The Fun with Chemistry Set was another major success for Gilbert's company.

Other Gilbert toys included the American Flyer electric train, a realistic and complex microscope set, a telegraph kit and a miniature weather station.

Gilbert's Atomic Energy Set, produced in the late 1950s, was considered one of the inventor's most innovative toys. The set included a Geiger counter and several other radiation-testing devices as well as particles of uranium ore. Gilbert discontinued manufacturing the Atomic Energy Set when parents expressed concern about the safety of the "toy," and this venture was probably Gilbert's biggest creative disappointment and a major business disaster for the company.

As an inventor, Gilbert held more than 150 patents, including the small horsepower motor that originated with the Erector Set and was the basis for many of his other inventions. Other products included the Polar Cub fan, the first small low-priced fan sold in America, the hand-held vacuum and a prototype of the food processor.

The success of the A.C. Gilbert Co. began to fade quickly after the inventor's death in 1961, and within six years the business dissolved completely.

The A.C. Gilbert exhibit at WISTEC, on display through November 1, was developed at the Horner museum at OSU. It includes models of the American Flyer train, the chemistry set, the Erector Set, several microscopes and a few of Gilbert's household and other inventions.

WISTEC is located at 2300 Centennial Boulevard. For information call 484-9027.

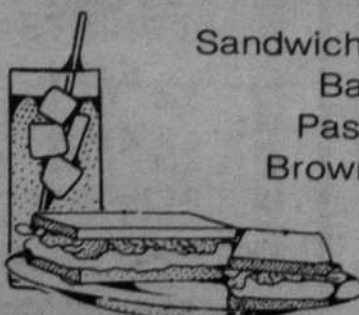
Story by Marty Swartzbauer
Photos by Rob Hare



(above) Kids as well as adults will enjoy the current WISTEC exhibit — toys. (left) The A.C. Gilbert display proves to be both educational and fun.

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