



## Offbeat Oregon History

### How Oregon's own "anti-Grinch" saved Christmas

It was late in the afternoon, on a late autumn day in 1918, when Oregon native Alfred Carlton Gilbert, president and CEO of the toy company Mysto Manufacturing Company, was shown in for his scheduled 15-minute hearing before the Council of National Defense. He was greeted with weary courtesy by the Council members, all of them high-ranking members of President Woodrow Wilson's cabinet — Secretary of War Newton Baker, of course, as well as Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels, Interior Secretary Franklin Lane, Commerce Secretary William Redfield, and others.

The Council had spent the entire day listening to similar pleas from various industry groups. The country had shifted to a full-fledged war economy to meet the challenge of the First World War, and that had meant a lot of disruptions to domestic industries as factories were re-tooled to produce war materiel.

But now the Council was considering taking an additional step — a step that had Gilbert and his fellow toy makers deeply worried: They wanted to cancel Christmas.

The reasoning behind the plan was solid and understandable. Tremendous amounts of money would change hands in the months ahead, spent to buy Christmas presents for children. If spent instead on war bonds, those millions could really help the war effort. So the Committee on Public Information prepared a publicity campaign urging American parents to "Buy bonds, not toys" for their youngsters for Christmas 1918, and the War Council prepared to place an embargo on all toy sales. Yes, Christmas would still exist ... but without presents to unwrap, it promised to be a cold and lifeless shadow of itself.

Luckily for Santa Claus and other parties interested in children, the industry group Toy Manufacturers of the U.S.A. got wind of the scheme in time to arrange for a 15-minute opportunity to make the case for Christmas. To win over the Cabinet members, they turned to the president of their association, the charismatic and enthusiastic A.C. Gilbert.

They could not have made a better choice. Alfred Carlton Gilbert was an extraordinary man. Born in the 1880s in the frontier town of Salem, Ore., he entered college at Pacific University in Forest Grove, then transferred to Yale for medical school — paying part of his way through school as a performing magician.

After he earned his M.D., Gilbert's father hoped he would move back to Oregon and establish a practice. But Gilbert had other ideas. Joining with a fellow magician, he established the Mysto Manufacturing Company, producers of supplies for professional and ama-

teur magicians.

Then one day, in 1911, Gilbert was watching some railroad workers assemble a steel trestle, and it gave him the idea for what would become the original Erector Set.

It was the Erector set, and the various similar creative-construction toys that followed it — chemistry sets, microscope kits, and later even an atomic energy set with a Geiger counter and real uranium-238 samples — that would make Gilbert rich and famous.

In 1918, most of that success was still to come. But his toy company was already one of the biggest in the country, and his natural enthusiasm and charisma had made him a natural as a spokesman for his industry.

Still, the task that faced him was a daunting one. He had to convince the most powerful men in the United States to change their minds, to voluntarily walk away from a source of war-bond revenue that could shorten the war and could save American lives. He had to convince them that canceling Christmas for America's children was too high a price to pay, in morale and in lost educational development, for that short-term advantage. He himself was absolutely convinced that such was the case. Now he just had to convince the nation's war-hardened leaders.

Gilbert faced the Cabinet members and began his pitch. "The greatest influences in the life of a boy are his toys," Gilbert told them. "A boy wants fun, not education. Yet through the kind of toy American toy manufacturers are turning out he gets both. The American boy is a genuine boy, and he wants genuine toys. He wants guns that really shoot, and this is why we have given him air rifles from the time he was big enough to hold them. It is because of the toys they had in childhood that the American soldiers are the best marksmen in the battlefields of France."

Gilbert went on a bit in a similar patriotic vein, and then, when the time seemed right, the other toymakers who had accompanied him into the room started pulling out toys and passing them around the table.

"From the moment he opened them out onto the library table, the Secretaries were boys again," wrote the reporter from the Boston Post, which published a big spread on the event. "Secretary Daniels was as pleased with an (Ives Mfg. Co.) Submarine as he could be with a new destroyer."

The fifteen-minute allotment of time was soon gone, but nobody was paying attention now. The tense, somber atmosphere of a war planning meeting melted away into the joys of remembered youth.



"How the boys and girls of America would have laughed if they could only have been concealed in the room and, peering over the tops of the davenport, seen the Cabinet playing with the toys!" the reporter continued. "Secretary Redfield wanted the steam started in one of Mr. Ritchie's Weeden Engines as soon as he set eyes on it. 'I learned the rudiments of engineering on a machine like this,' he said. Secretary Lane became buried in an aviation book just issued by the McLoughlin Brothers and wanted to know where he could get more books just like it. Every one of the 40 or more toys they laughed over and played with. 'Toys appeal to the heart of every one of us, no matter how old we are,' said another Cabinet member."

"And it was because they did, and because the words of a man who makes them, a man who believes in them, a man who loves them, appealed too, that the boys and girls of the United States are going to awake this Christmas morning upon a day as merry as Christmases past."

Over the subsequent half-century, A.C. Gilbert would steadily move from strength to strength. His toy manufacturing business, soon renamed A.C. Gilbert Company, became one of the biggest and most successful in the world.

But that fifteen minutes in front of Woodrow Wilson's cabinet, in which he saved Christmas for America's children, always remained a highlight of Gilbert's life.

By the way, although A.C. Gilbert never did move back to Oregon after he went away to Yale, his home town of Salem remains very proud to claim him as a native son. The Gilbert House Children's Museum, located in the house that belonged to Gilbert's uncle, has an extensive collection of the products of his company, and is well worth a visit — especially with a youngster in tow.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Gold mine museum a success

The Grand Re-opening of the Bohemia Gold Mining Museum on January 28 was a huge success, attended by many from our community and outside the area. After closing for a year and relocating to the newly renovated Boots and Sandals Square Dance Barn, we are happy to be welcoming visitors once again.

We are also very pleased to resume our partnership with the Cottage Grove Historical Society, who we share this space with. Together we are open Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 1 to 4.

We are grateful to the Faye and Lucille Stewart Foundation for making this space available to us, The Bohemia Mine Owners Association for starting the museum in 2003 and the entire community for supporting our efforts to preserve the mining history of our area.

Sara I. Smith,  
President of the Board  
Bohemia Gold Mining Museum

### Opal Center plays deserve more media coverage

I had the pleasure of attending the final performance of "Becky's New Car" at the Opal Center for Arts & Education in the downtown historic district. If you haven't been there yet, it's a small "blackbox" theater with comfy seats and produces a variety of enjoyable events. The atmosphere inside reminds me of the little building that was Cottage Theatre's first home on Thornton Lane.

For me, the play was a wonderful investment of \$12 and two hours of my time on a cold and wet Sunday afternoon. "Becky's New Car" is a delightful comedy and was Marion Dempsey's directorial debut. She is most familiar for her backstage work at Cot-

tage Theatre. All of the actors are veterans of CT productions and each gave a memorable performance. It was a real family affair for the Dempseys: Mom directed, Dad acted and built sets, and Lincoln Middle School son, Austin, operated the spotlight.

The script called for audience participation that only added to the laughs. Amazingly to me, they cleverly created three sets in the small space that realistically took the audience from a car dealership where Becky worked, to her living room, to a balcony of a multi-million-dollar home.

This is the first full season of productions at the Opal Center. (To see what's coming up visit [www.opalcentercg.org](http://www.opalcentercg.org).) Kudos to

Executive Director Leah Murray, the Opal Center Board of Directors, and the significant investment each cast and crew put into every production. I'm thankful and blessed for the role the Opal Center plays in providing such affordable entertainment. Be sure to get your kids involved in Judy Smith's upcoming Storybook Theater plays. They'll love it!

Opal Center productions do not get the timely media attention I believe they deserve. I hope that will change in the future.

Cindy Weeldreyer  
Cottage Grove

### Devos story lacking

I was pleased to see the front page photo of the CGHS students who led a protest against Betsy DeVos. A great opportunity was missed when the article interviewed only one student, and instead focused on the "unexcused absences" of these students. In my opinion, it trivialized the importance of cultivating students who care about issues in our government. Students have voices that need to be heard.

Thank you  
Jean W Miksch  
Eugene

## Cottage Grove Sentinel

116 N. Sixth Street · P.O. Box 35 · Cottage Grove, OR 97424

<b>ADMINISTRATION:</b> JOHN BARTLETT, Regional Publisher..... GARY MANLY, General Manager..... 207 • publisher@cgsentinel.com	<b>SPORTS DEPARTMENT:</b> SAM WRIGHT, Sports Editor..... 204 • swright@cgsentinel.com
AARON AMES, Sales Representative..... Ext. 216 • aames@cgsentinel.com TAMMY SAYRE, Sales Representative..... Ext. 213 • tsayre@cgsentinel.com	<b>CUSTOMER SERVICE</b> CARLA WILLIAMS, Office Manager..... Ext. 201 • cwilliams@cgsentinel.com LEGALS..... Ext. 200 • cwilliams@cgsentinel.com
<b>NEWS DEPARTMENT:</b> CAITLYN MAY, Editor..... Ext. 212 • cmay@cgsentinel.com	<b>GRAPHICS:</b> RON ANNIS, Graphics Manager

(USP 133880)

Subscription Mail Rates in Lane and Portions of Douglas Counties:  
Ten Weeks ..... \$9.10  
One year ..... \$36.15  
e-Edition year ..... \$36.00

Rates in all other areas of United States: Ten Weeks \$11.70; one year, \$46.35, e-Edition \$43.00.

In foreign countries, postage extra.

No subscription for less than Ten Weeks. Subscription rates are subject to change upon 30 days' notice. All subscriptions must be paid prior to beginning the subscription and are non-refundable.

Periodicals postage paid at Cottage Grove, Oregon.

Postmaster: Send address changes to P.O. Box 35, Cottage Grove, OR 97424.

**Local Mail Service:**

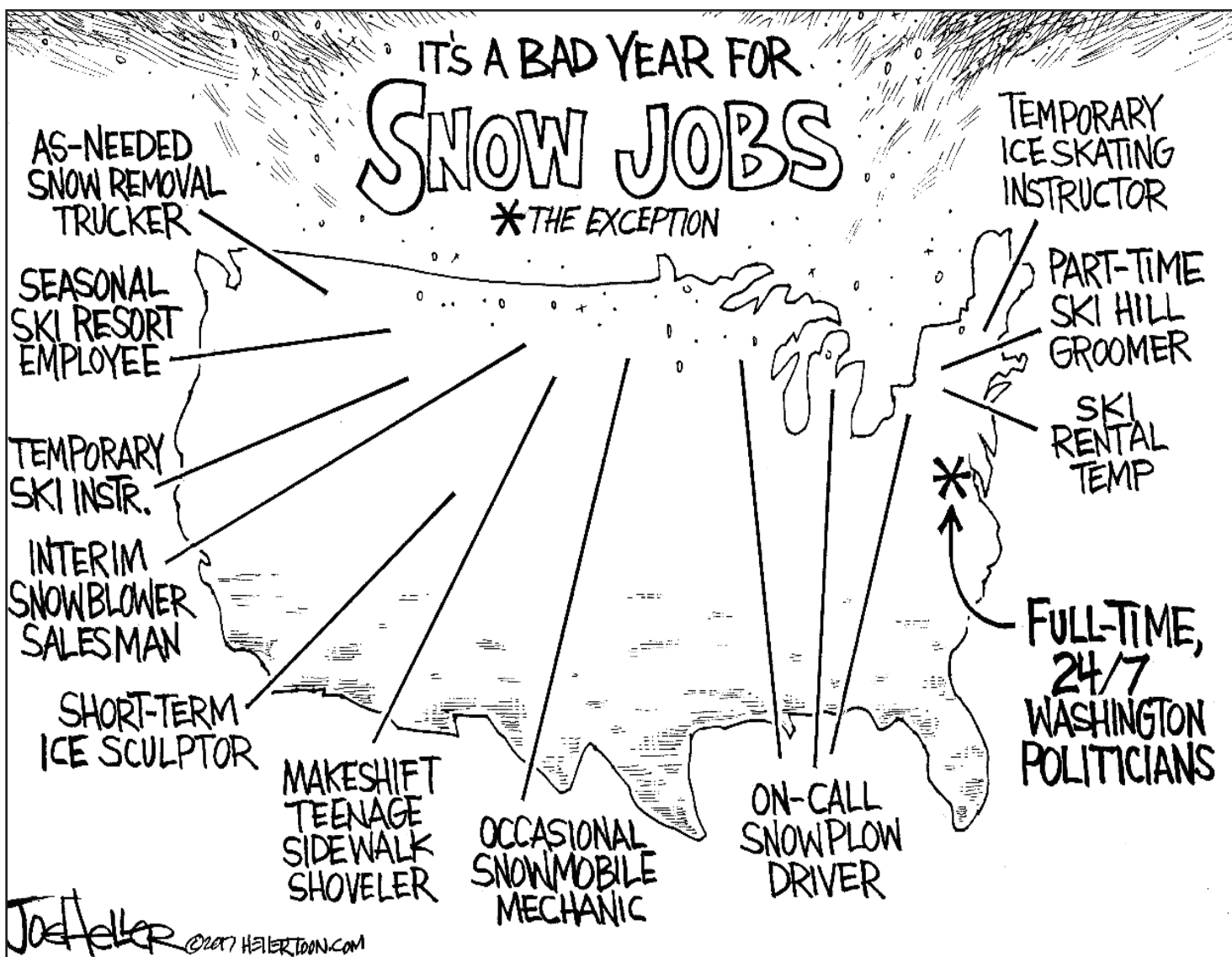
If you don't receive your Cottage Grove Sentinel on the Wednesday of publication, please let us know.  
Call 942-3325 between 8:30 a.m. and 5 p.m.

**Advertising Ownership:**

All advertising copy and illustrations prepared by the Cottage Grove Sentinel become the property of the Cottage Grove Sentinel and may not be reproduced for any other use without explicit written prior approval.

**Copyright Notice:**

Entire contents ©2017 Cottage Grove Sentinel.



### Letters to the Editor policy

The Cottage Grove Sentinel receives many letters to the editor. In order to ensure that your letter will be printed, letters must be under 300 words and submitted by Friday at 5 p.m. Letters must be signed and must include an address, city and phone number or e-mail address for verification purposes. No anonymous letters will be printed. Letters must be of interest to local readers. Personal attacks and name calling in response to letters are uncalled for and unnecessary. If you would like to submit an opinion piece, Another View must be no longer than 600 words. To avoid transcription errors, the Sentinel would prefer editorial and news content be sent electronically via email or electronic media. Hand written submissions will be accepted, but we may need to call to verify spelling, which could delay the publishing of the submission.