

A Monument to Creativity

He earned money for his education at Yale University by working as a magician, yet he was a talented and dedicated athlete.

He broke the world record for consecutive chin-ups in 1900 and the distance record for running long dive in 1902. He won a gold medal for pole vaulting at the 1908 Summer Olympics in London, England.

Although he received a degree in sports medicine, he chose a career in manufacturing instead; his first products were magic kits. Toys and creativity were his main interests.

Alfred C. Gilbert (1884-1961) started his company in 1909 and invented his Erector set in 1913. His inspiration reportedly was the steel construction girders used on a nearby railroad.

A similar construction set, made by Meccano in England, had debuted in 1901, but Gilbert's sets sold more in the U.S., in part because of the toy maker's promotional efforts. Also, Gilbert's sets could make strong, sturdy square girders—the basis for many towering projects.

The sets came in various sizes, some with small electric motors. By the mid-1930s, Gilbert had sold more than 30 million Erector sets.

His sets of pulleys, gears and miniature girders allowed children to build their own creations or choose them from the instruction book that accompanied each kit. The Erector kits were soon followed by chemistry sets and microscope sets as Gilbert accumulated more

than 150 patents.

After the U.S. entered WWI, authorities contemplated a ban on toy production. Gilbert went to meet with them, accompanied by several men carrying bulky packages.

The packages contained only toys, including his Erector sets. The U.S. secretaries of commerce, war and the interior were invited to play with them and soon were on their hands and knees.

Gilbert told them that toys helped build “solid American character.” The officials played and talked for 3 hours before voting down the ban on toys. The press called Gilbert the “man who saved Christmas.”

In 1941, he opened the Gilbert Hall of Science in New York City, an early science and technology museum. While the facility promoted science and sold his products, it also was Gilbert’s response to concerns that schools were not teaching much about creativity and invention.

Today, there are generations of engineers, scientists and others who had a creative spark fanned, or perhaps ignited, by some miniature girders, some pulleys and an electric motor put together by a Yale-educated athlete with a flair for magic.

I’ve Kept It all these Years

My dad had a Gilbert Erector set, back in the 1910s and ’20s. Dad’s play with the \$2 set was influential; he became an engineer at the

Westinghouse Corporation in Sharon, Pennsylvania and later worked at Ohio Edison in Akron. Shortly after I inherited the set, in 1974, a friend built a chair with some of the pieces. Since then, it's been holding one of my childhood dolls, providing me with fond memories of my dad and friend. —Sandra M., Lexington, Kentucky