



Norwegian shipbuilders came to Hamden to build A.C. Gilbert's log cabin and big-game trophy room at the Paradise Game Preserve in 1931.

## A.C. Gilbert Found A Home In Laurel-Laden Dunbar Hill

"I have never worked at anything if it wasn't fun," the late A.C. Gilbert once confided. He found fun in inventing the world-famous Erector set, in dabbling as a magician, as one of the world's busiest toy manufacturers, as an Olympic pole vault champion and later as manager of the U.S. Olympic team with General Douglas MacArthur, and as a world hunter of great repute — but most of all, A.C. Gilbert had fun in the development of his 600 acres of land in Hamden's Dunbar Hill section.

In his autobiography, "The Man Who Lives in Paradise", published by Rinehart & Co., Inc., of New York and Toronto in 1954, "A.C." narrated much of the excitement and pleasure he experienced in first locating, and then plotting the careful development of the expansive Hamden tract off Paradise Ave.

It was the laurel — picturesque in stands well over 200 years old — that first attracted him to the area. Gilbert wanted to plant laurel at his mansion, "Maraldene", on Ridge Rd. near Skiff St. A local nurseryman, August Dondi, first took him over to Dunbar Hill. The area for generations had been called "Little Egypt" but no one could trace the origin of the title. Many arrowheads were to be found there, verifying that the spot once had been an Indian hunting ground.



A visitor at the game preserve marveled at the ten-foot-tall Kodiak bear looming up in one corner. The room featured eight other species of the finest North American big game and 18 of them appeared in the "Records of North American Big Game".

Gilbert first obtained hunting rights from area farmers, then began buying up parcels over a period of time. He completed that undertaking in 1930. Then he had two Norwegian shipbuilders come to Hamden to erect a unique log cabin and big-game trophy room on the banks of a trout pond off Hill St. in 1931. Paradise Ave. had been so named years before by a man who built his house there and found the place to be a paradise. A.C. Gilbert used the name for his Paradise Game Preserve.

He'd fenced in about 260 acres west of Paradise Ave. and found that a few deer had been fenced in as well. Gilbert imported some white-tail deer from Virginia and started his famed herd which was to roam the grounds for years. Pheasant and other game was bred there also and during the years when Yale hosted Army and Navy in alternating years for major football games at Yale Bowl, one year generals and the next year admirals and others were weekend guests of A.C. Gilbert at "Paradise". Saturday mornings were spent hunting on the property before the military or naval entourages headed off for Yale Bowl in the afternoon.

Also created was a prize-winning dairy herd with the barns on Paradise Ave. near Hill St. The ingenious Gilbert wired the barn screens and each morning collected electrocuted flies for use in his microscope sets which were manufactured at Erector Square in New Haven.

Gilbert saw the eventual development of Dunbar Hill coming, and he donated land for the widening of Paradise Ave. and also constructed a paved portion of Dunbar Hill Rd. Melville Roberts ran the dairy and Alfred James, another Englishman, was the game-keeper at the Paradise Game Preserve. Archie Uren was a groundsman.

Along with the game preserve, Gilbert long-envisioned a rustic park to be developed for the use of the employees at his factory in New Haven (he called them co-workers). He personally labored long and hard to create Paradise Park off Hill St., and it was opened with a company outing in 1947.

A few years later, the Town of Hamden stepped in and claimed that the park was in violation of local zoning regulations. Deeply disappointed and annoyed, Gilbert fought the town all the way to the State Supreme Court, where he lost his case. He retained ownership of the property but turned use of the park over to a community association, initially consisting of members of the then-new Dunbar United Church. His co-workers were granted use of the park for their annual picnic. Paradise Country Club continues there today.

A.C. Gilbert also stimulated the residential development of Dunbar Hill, selling off building lots on streets fronting his expansive property. He also picked out the site of his own new home, today the location of the clubhouse at Laurel View Country Club, the municipal golf course developed on other acres of former Gilbert-owned land.

Gilbert built a hunting cabin on the highest peak of his property off 310 West Shepard Ave. He called the place "Mountain View" while his late wife, Mary, preferred "Hilltop". Deer roamed those grounds as well and the Gilbert house was set up a slope from a huge natural growth of laurel which still stands on the golf course site.

The Estate of A.C. Gilbert sold the two tracts in Dunbar Hill to G. Harold Welch in the early 1960's, after "A.C.'s" death. The Town of Hamden acquired the West Shepard property about ten years ago as the site of Laurel View Country Club. Welch's Wilford Associates retained title to the Paradise Game Preserve which had been eyed originally as a golf course site — until this week.