

A Yellow Streak from American Flyer? You Better Believe It.

A Rare Pre-Production No.405 Yellow Striped Silver Streak Diesel and Set

In 1952, American Flyer introduced their line of knuckle couplers that replaced the early link couplers which had been the staple of the S Gauge line since before World War II. During this transition phase, you could still get link coupler sets along with the new line of knuckle coupler trains and cars. With the new more realistic couplers coming out, Gilbert was still inundated with link coupler equipment. One of the major holdovers was their 360/361 Santa Fe Diesels with chrome shells. The new PA/PB's were equipped with knuckle couplers on the front and rear of the locomotive, unlike the earlier link coupler versions which had no front coupler and the A and B units were hard connected with a draw bar. The changeover necessitated the reworking of the PA/PB molds and frames to accommodate the new couplers, so Gilbert was left with a large amount of early chromed PA shells. Instead of modifying the existing shells, they designed a new locomotive to use up the surplus. 1952 was also the year Gilbert eliminated the aluminum passenger cars from production in favor of the lighter plastic streamlined cars. To eliminate some of these now obsolete cars from inventory, they created set number 5205W which included a single chrome streamlined PA with a diesel horn installed and also three passenger cars (a combination baggage, vista dome, and a coach) which could be all aluminum, or a mix of aluminum and plastic chrome streamlined cars as inventory allowed. There was no observation car included with this set that year.

Initially, they considered creating a Burlington Railroad paint scheme. Some of the early 1952 catalogs printed in 1951, show this engine, designated number 405, in a Burlington paint scheme. For whatever reason, Gilbert decided to forgo the Burlington designation and went with a generic name for the engine. Thus the "Silver Streak" was born and (with the exception of the Santa Fe PA's) would set a trend in the streamlined passenger sets with flashy high-speed names such as "Silver Rocket" and "Silver Flash" for the next few years.

In the early monochromatic catalog depictions, you can see where the locomotive has a light-colored side stripe with black lettering. When the 1952 catalog came out, you could see on the cover, a chrome 405 Silver Streak diesel with a bright yellow side stripe and black letters crossing an Erector bridge. Inside the catalog, the production locomotive available that year was actually depicted as produced with a red side stripe and yellow letters. According to an interview with Maury Romer, one of Gilbert's chief design engineers, approximately a dozen of each "pre-production" locomotive and sets would be produced for the annual toy fairs around Christmas to highlight the next year's production items. The toy fairs allowed the manufacturers to evaluate potential demand for an item the following year and review early production problems that may arise. It is quite possible the first Silver Streak 405's were for this demonstration purpose and following these initial displays, the company decided to change the side stripe to red instead of yellow.

In researching this engine, I spoke with my Uncle, collector Ray Mohrlang, and he mentioned these early yellow-striped engines may have also been made to operate on the Gilbert Hall of Science layouts. In a photo of the New York Hall of Science, you can see pedestrians along 5th Avenue peering in the picture window and observing a 5205W set perched on the high line of what is known as "The Second Layout." The train is a single PA engine followed by a combination baggage, a vista dome, and a coach. Based on

items on the layout, such as the Mini-craft buildings, this appears to be a photo from late 1951 or 1952. Unfortunately, you can't see the side stripe on the locomotive, but it's quite possibly one of the yellow striped 405's on display.

I personally came across this rare yellow striped set when I was visiting a hobby shop in Norman, Oklahoma in 1999. A man had come in and wanted to sell the trains he had when he was a kid. When I talked to him, he said he grew up in Chicago and the trains were given to him and his brothers. He had moved to Oklahoma and was in need to sell the trains. I was able to pick up the set for my Uncle Ray and I had the opportunity to see one of these rare items in person. The set had the yellow striped no. 405 Silver Streak with a mix of passenger cars, a no. 660 aluminum baggage car, no. 662 aluminum vista-dome, and a no. 661 chromed plastic coach all in the original boxes and wrapper. Written on the side of the diesel wrapper twice in dark pencil were the words, "To the Boys, To the Boys."

Since my Uncle's passing in 2018, this set as well as many other interesting Gilbert items are now long gone, but it was my privilege to be able to see some of this American Flyer history in person. I now have only photos, but the memories are good and I enjoy sharing them.

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