

# AMERICAN FLYER COLLECTOR'S COLUMN

By Robert J. Tufts

This column will focus on American Flyer S gauge dealer displays. These were created by The A.C. Gilbert Company primarily for hobby shops so they could increase their sales and have an exciting display of the AF items for their customers to see in operation.

## SELF-LIQUIDATING ACTION DISPLAY

The stated purpose of the Gilbert displays was to provide the hobby shop owner with a "Self-Liquidating Action Display" that was both exciting to watch and still profitable. Normally, the cost of the display would be the total catalogued price for the track, transformer, all of the accessories and the train sets (if any). In other words, a dealer who purchased the display would recoup his expense by selling the trains and accessories for the listed price. Then, if desired, he could sell the display board for pure profit.

One problem with this approach was that it forced the hobby shop owner to try to sell used merchandise at new merchandise prices. It is doubtful a customer would pay full price for a train set or accessory that had many hours of operation on it, especially at the end of the holiday season. Therefore, the hobby shop owner might be selling each year's display just to make up for the price of the train sets and accessories.

All of the AF displays sold to hobby shops were one of seven specific sizes, and all were constructed of similar materials. Standard sizes included at least one large display each year as well as a plethora of smaller ones. Table 1 shows the standard sizes available each year. Note that four sizes of displays were made prior to 1957, the largest being 8' x 8' and operating three trains. Displays



**Fig. 1. The No. 133 "Island Display" from 1953 is a 4' x 6' display that sold for \$131.95, the price of the track, switches and operating accessories. This display did not come with an engine and rolling stock.**

numbered below 250 were for one train operation while displays numbered between 250 and 349 were for two-train operation. Displays numbered greater than 350 were for three-train operation.

In 1959, Gilbert added two additional standard sizes, a 4' x 8' display, and a small 4' x 4' tabletop display, both for one train operation. The 5-digit numbers listed in Table 1 for these new sizes are just examples of these displays. Gilbert abandoned their scheme of grouping displays by sizes in 1957, choosing to place their standard displays for each year in a particular set of numbers. Note also that Gilbert chose not to produce their 6' x 8' displays from 1957 on.

## SPECIAL DISPLAYS

Gilbert also made hundreds of special displays for various department stores along the East Coast. The Gilbert 5-digit IBM

numbers list identifies more than 200 such special displays, and most were one-of-a-kind items for specific toy department windows, TV shows and other promotional opportunities. Some, such as the five-train, 12' x 12' display for Wannamakers, were general enough to be sold to any hobby shop, but were not carried as a dealer display.

## AF DISPLAY CONSTRUCTION

Gilbert displays from 1946 to the early 1960's were almost all constructed of plywood with 2 1/2" or 3" white pine runners along the outside edges to give them a base. If the display was larger than 4' x 4', the white pine runners were also used underneath other sections of the display for additional support. Most of the Gilbert displays had green paint (or Gilbert imitation grass sprinkled on green paint) to simulate grass, others had gray or brown roadways painted on the layout, and still others had both.

Some of the displays came with upright sections that included display shelves with large "American Flyer" signs on the top. These upright sections were either connected to the center of the display board to make an "Island Display" (see Fig. 1), or connected to the back ends of the display board to make a "Wall Display" (see Fig. 2). If the display was an island display, the plywood base would sit on sawhorses or some other stand and the

*(Continued on page 38)*

**Table 1. Standard AF Dealer Display Sizes and Years Offered**

Size	3-Digit Numbers	Years Offered	5-Digit Numbers	Years Offered	Use
8' x 8'	400-450	1954-56	28234	1961	Three-train operation
6' x 8'	350-399	1954-56			Three-train operation
5' x 9'	250-349	1953-56	28113-28114	1957-64	Two-train operation
4' x 8'			28175, 28195, 28211, 28213	1959-63	One-train operation
4' x 6'	Less than 250	1949-56	28112	1957-64	One-train operation
4' x 4'			28172	1959-64	One-train operation



**Fig. 2. The No. 151 Display from 1952 is 4' x 6' with a typical upright wall display section. The four-shelf upright section was attached to the base with two wood screws on each side.**



**Fig. 3. The No. 28117 Display from 1957 is 4' x 6' and was matched with the No. 28118 5-shelf wall display with an American Flyer semaphore as the sign.**

*(Continued from page 37)*

prospective buyers could walk around it as it operated. The upright section would have lettering on both sides so it could carry two messages.

If the upright section was for a wall display, it was only painted on one side, and often had interior lighting or other ways to catch people's attention. In all cases, the upright sections were attached with two or more wood screws to the sides of the display.

#### SHELVES

If the upright section included a set of shelves, these were usually made of white painted pine or plywood, about 1/2" thick. The width of the shelves depended upon how they were being used. Most were 2 1/2" to 3" in width, just enough to hold track, an engine and three to five pieces of rolling stock. Usually, there were four shelves per upright section, though some displays had five. When the upright section was for an island display, it came with additional upright supports for all shelves to allow for heavier locomotives. If the upright section was for a wall display, the back of the wall display was also painted white and served to support the shelves.

All upright sections included a sign with a white painted background with the "American Flyer"

lettering either in red paint or "red felt paint." Red felt paint was made by painting the lettering with normal red paint and then pressing granules of red felt into the wet paint. (This was a standard technique in the 1950's.) Lettering was always done with a stencil, but at least three different stencils were used for the "American Flyer" lettering, each with a slightly different lettering style (see Fig. 3).

Many of the wall displays included overhead lighting. The most common form included three small lights encased in a valence that was wired behind the upright to be plugged into a wall socket. The red-painted valence allowed the lighting to backlight white frosted plastic sheets with slogans in black lettering. Common slogans were "Real Puffing

Smoke," "Life-Like Choo-Choo," "Air Chime Whistle," "Streamlined Cars," "Action Accessories," "Talking Station," "Powerful Worm Drive," "Built to 3/16" Scale," "Realistic 2-Rail Track," "Choo-Choo Sound" and "Pull-Mor Power." Each white frosted plastic sheet contained three slogans.

Once a good track play was produced for a Gilbert display, the display was often reused for a couple of years, each year with slightly different operating accessories. In later years, Gilbert also re-painted existing displays to provide a different theme for the next year such as the 28179 display for 1961 as a re-work of the 28135 "Badlands" display of 1960 (See Fig. 4).

Sometimes, the year of the display can be deduced from the year of production of the accessories. For instance, the AF 98C Display was manufactured in 1949. This conclusion comes from the inclusion of the No. 758 Sam the Semaphore which was only sold in 1949. (In 1950, Gilbert brought out a No. 758A Sam the Semaphore which they carried until 1956.) Another example is the 251 AF 5' x 9' action display. This accessory included a K766 Animated Station and car which was produced from 1953-55 and a 566 Whistling Billboard which was produced from



**Fig. 4. The No. 28179 Display from 1961 is a simple 4' x 6' display using Pikemaster track and stylized mountains and other scenery. This is the same display as the 28135 "Badlands" Display from 1960, but it used Pikemaster track instead of regular track, was scened for mountain foliage instead of the desert, and didn't include the whistling billboard nor the early American station found on the "Badlands" display. The tunnel was shipped separately.**

## Flyer Facts

Did you know .....

- According to George Connell of Herndon, Virginia, the Alcoa Cresona Works (of Maryland) made the extruded aluminum for Gilbert's 660 series of extruded aluminum passenger cars in 1950-52. Alcoa Cresona then made the Lionel 2530 series of extruded aluminum passenger cars in 1952-60.
- Alcoa Cresona Works also made the extruded aluminum rail, I-Beam girder and walkway as a single unit for the Lionel 456 Coal Ramp in 1950. The interesting aspect of this unit is that the rail casting is an exact copy of the AF S gauge rail. That raises the question, did Cresona go to Gilbert first and get turned down? If so, what exactly was Cresona making that rail, I-Beam and walkway unit for in S gauge?
- Gilbert made two different "Scena-rama" special displays. One, the number 20048 Complete Train Display, was made for department stores in 1959. It included a 21085 engine, five freight cars, an oval of track with fiber roadbed, and six "Scena-rama" panels. The second display was the number 28143 AF Scenic Action Display which came with the track, fiber roadbed, transformer and a different set of six "Scenic-rama" sections mounted on a wooden base. This display came without trains.
- In the 1960's Gilbert often made combined displays that included S gauge and HO gauge trains as well as Autorama displays.

1955-56. That means the only possible year that train display could be available is 1955.

Sometimes, the display had something truly out of the ordinary. For instance, the 98C display came with space for a ring of Marx track! The allowance for the ring of Marx track is an interesting ploy. From all of the Gilbert literature I have gone through, Marx was not considered a threat to Gilbert sales. Lionel was the primary competitor, and Marx sold toys on the low end, which Gilbert wasn't going after. Placing AF next to Marx would have shown the better engineering of the Gilbert products.

Another unusual display was Display

28176 from 1960, which included space for six trains, four running on a 26611 four-level cardboard action display (see Fig. 5).

Each display was packed in a shipping container, some made of wood, and others made of cardboard. For example, the 113 AF Wall Display from 1952 was packed in a 73<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" x 45<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" carton made of 200 lb. corrugated cardboard. The frosted sheets for the display valence were rolled up and placed in a cardboard tube.

### DISPLAY INSTRUCTION SHEETS

Usually, the display came with the wiring already in place for the track and switches, and all accessories were wired to Fanstock clips which were fastened to the underside of the display base. Each of

the Fanstock clips had a rubber-stamped accessory name or number and the color of the wire to attach to the clip.


Each display also came with a set of instructions for hook-up and assembly of the equipment. The instructions provided guidance to the hobby shop owner on how to place and wire the accessories to the Fanstock clips. Normal operating accessories were connected to the display by dropping their wires through the holes underneath the accessory and connecting them to the appropriately marked Fanstock clips. Some of the smaller accessories, most notably the 592 crossing gates, had to be wired underneath the accessory. In those cases, the AF display came with the wires already attached to the Fanstock clips, pushed up through the wire holes, and scotch taped to the display board. The hobby shop need only attach the wires to the accessory.

Large accessories with operating buttons, such as the 751 Log Loader and 752 Coal Loader, normally were shipped with the buttons soldered to the accessory wires. Holes were cut in the display before it was shipped for dropping the operating buttons through the display underneath where the accessory would be mounted, and then brought back up at an appropriate hole on the control panel. These accessory buttons would have to be screwed in place on the control panel before connection to the transformer.

Small transformers had the problem of being knocked off the display by small hands. To solve this problem, Gilbert shipped the transformer with a special strap that went across the base of the transformer and was screwed in place. That strap provided additional safeguards against the transformer being knocked off the display.

This concludes the discussion of AF Dealer Displays. Unfortunately, I only have full information on about half of the dealer displays. I am still looking for dealer display catalogs for 1946-1952, 1954, 1957-58, and any dealer display catalogs after 1962. If any reader has one of these catalogs, I'll gladly pay for a Xerox copy just to get the information.

Well, that's all for now. I now have less than 25 copies remaining of my book, *The Almost Complete Guide to American Flyer S Gauge Sets*. The price is still \$14.95 and \$3.50 shipping. There will not be a fifth printing of the book.

Please feel free to drop me a line about any aspect of AF. My address is 4719 Logwood Lane, Chantilly, VA 20151. My e-mail address is puffntoot@erols.com. 



**Fig. 5. The No. 28176 Display from 1960 is 5' x 9' and includes a 26611 four-level cardboard action display. This display could be used to run six trains at once!**