

AdLore: An Interview with Jim Gilbert

By: Kathy Jex

It began as research for an obituary. I was calling some of the older Ad Club members looking for information or anecdotes about a fellow ACT “alumni” who had recently passed. As they dusted off the memories and shared them over the phone, I was immediately hit with the thought that somebody should record this stuff. Of course, we all know who “somebody” usually ends up being, so I decided to take up the task of recording the oral history of the Advertising Club of Toledo.

The Ad Club has been around since sometime before the 1930's and just as our world has changed drastically in those decades, so has advertising. Most of the current members can't imagine life without a Mac, but the early days of advertising and marketing relied on the craftsmanship and artistic talents of those employed in the business. Early Ad Club member Harold Tenney, President in 1955-56, created and drew the Buckeye Beer waiter using a pen and ink. Printers cut stencils by hand, and artists used drafting tables and the basic tools of the trade – rulers and pencils and pen and ink, to create the ads and letterheads of the day. Later in the 60s and early 70s, keyline artists headed to drafting tables armed with type galleys fresh from the overnight type house. Using rubber cement and X-acto knives, they produced the artwork for ads and slide shows and film. Yeah, I said film, and negatives, and audio tape that was all cut with a razor blade and spliced with special tape.

So in order to give us all a glimpse of the part, I am happy to present a brief segment of an interview I did with Jim Gilbert, former owner of Gilbert Mail Service and ACT President in 1980-91. Gilbert Mail Service was founded in Toledo in 1924 by Jim's father, Hal Gilbert. It specialized in Mail Advertising and Illustrated Letters, and the original letterhead promoted “Typewritten illustrated forms up to 14” by 19”, mimeographing, multigraphing, addressographing, varityping, addressing, personalizing, signing and mailing, letters, cards, bulletins, programs.” After becoming an icon in the Toledo business scene, Jim retired in 2000. I had the pleasure of meeting with Jim and his wife, Jane recently to talk about old times in the ad biz.

I asked Jim about his father Hal's business here in Toledo:

KJ: So 1924 he started a direct mail business?

JG: Well, it was called a lettershop in those days.

KJ: So then you started working for him?

JG: Well, course I was always running around the shop as I was growing up, and learned how to operate the equipment, which was basically a mimeograph, multigraph, set type and addressograph machine. Up until the beginning of the war it was really the basic equipment.

KJ: What kind of clients did you have?

JG: It depended on the way things were going. Course there were always people doing advertising. I think we represented the guy who had the General Electric

Distributorship. But the changes in the business were always forced by the changes in equipment and changes in competition. And all this time my father became very attached to the American Legion and that was his life. Everything he did was based on keeping in touch with those people. And there were a lot of influential people in that organization. So a lot of the work was for organizations like the B'nai Brith Bowling League publication, composition and duplicating; actually mimeograph work was most of the time. This was pre-offset. Course it was the only way you could do things economically. I can still see him carving off stencils, he was quite artistic and would go to the mimeograph stencils and actually carve them out to produce announcements. I wish I had some here – I probably have them someplace. That was really the basic way of doing that business up until after World War II. Let's see it was from 1924 to 1945 he made a living at it. Sometimes it wasn't so easy because of the Depression and the Recession, but he stayed in business. Business started out in just rental floor space, over on I think it was 439 Huron Street, then he moved into the National Bank Building for a while, then he got space in a building which is no longer there, it was called the Produce Exchange Building and later the Edward Lamb Building which is now a parking lot. But I can still see him practically rebuilding the interior to perform the services he had to do. He was building clientele all along. If somebody needed something duplicated at a reasonable price, the mimeograph was the way to do it, up until post-1945. And he pretty much stayed with that with the minor technological developments like the varitype, which of course did typing in various size faces and you could condense copy. And he had also had a jumbo typewriter for headings. Or he would use a stylus and a guide to actually draw the headings from the stencil. So it was very much a manual operation. But the job got done and he maintained a lot of customers for that work. We do a lot of work for organizations like professional societies, dental society, all the engineering professional societies, and clubs Inverness Country Club, Glengarry Country Club, which is no longer there. So that was the basis of the business up until even when I came back. I stayed in the Service and in California until 1953. And when I came back things were pretty static, I mean things were still being done manually. So then I of course immediately saw the importance of offset printing and we went into offset printing. And I think after I came back everything was driven by technology in our mailing field. You can imagine all the changes. Xerography started up. Originally you'd copy your copy onto a plate by manual methods. I suppose nobody here has ever seen the original xerograph machine. And it was not as simple as it is today, it was a complex process. But you could do artwork and transfer the image to a plate and print it on offset. So these transitions are always affecting the business. Then meanwhile, in the addressing end, of course we had Addressograph plates, which were very laborious to put together with a metal plate and then you put an imprint on the card which identifies the plate. Very, again, labor intensive. I can recall we at one time just prior to the computerization of addresses, we built a mailing for Jobst Institute, we had 100,000 addressograph plates. They never really used the list, but it was just a steady business for us to make those addressograph plates. Then along came the various computers facilitating things

and that's when the whole business changed, like everybody else's business. It was very, very hand-labor intensive, all the mailing processes. Of course the Postal Service developed the Zip Code and what followed from that in a way simplified the business but was in a way a very electronic intensive type thing.

(Closing) The complete interview will be on our website for you to hear at your leisure. I plan to conduct other interviews in the future, and already have a couple of candidates lined up. I hope you find these stories as interesting as I do, and appreciate the work of these pioneers of the Toledo advertising scene.

If there is someone in particular you would like me to interview, please let me know by e mailing me at inhouse.communications@yahoo.com.