

## The Wizard of Spirit Lake

At the little club where I sometimes shoot I recently singled out the first twelve men I saw and asked each one the same question: "Who in your opinion is the best known trap-shooter?"

Nine gave me some name in reply; three said they didn't know. Out of the nine, six named the same man—Fred Gilbert. That was interesting. It proved that in the six years since Mr. Gilbert's death the fame and the esteem which he held for an entire generation still belongs to his name.

The shooting world first read the name of Fred Gilbert in 1895, when he won the world's pigeon Championship. He was an unknown farm boy from Iowa then, a local champion, barely thirty years old. For thirty-two years after that day his name was almost weekly in the newspapers as performing some new shooting feat. It is always unsafe to use superlatives in describing the work of any man, but I think it perfectly safe to say that Fred Gilbert probably broke more trap shooting records and held more titles than any other shotgun marksman in history.

Just look over this swift picture of his major accomplishments: He won every challenge trophy in the world. He won both the American and national wingshot championships. Twice he won the professional American Handicap—a record never equalled. For eight years he held the high average over the entire field. He periodically broke the world's record for a straight run from 1902 until 1919, when he made a run of 591 targets.

But his story is interesting enough to start it at the very beginning. The du Pont World's Pigeon Championship shoot at the Baltimore Shooting Association grounds in 1895 was well advertised. From all over the country famous shooters came to take part. To the winner would go the crown of world's champion. Each contestant was determined to win. Those experienced champions were shocked when, after the first few rounds, one of the three survivors was the newcomer from Spirit Lake, Iowa—Fred Gilbert. The other two were John L.

Brewer, famous all over the world, and C. Macalester, champion amateur pigeon shot. They were more shocked when, in the shoot-off, the newcomer became champion. It was a dramatic entrance for a champion.

Stories of that match went over the country. Writers dubbed the new champion "the shooting star." One man, in a moment of ecstatic enthusiasm, called him "the Wizard of Spirit Lake," and that name remained with him for the rest of his life.

Of course, some shooters and critics surmised that Fred Gilbert had had beginner's luck. But within a year he had won two more major championships and was established firmly in the ranks of the great shotgun marksmen of all time.

His second championship was the E. C. Inanimate Target Championship. It was held at Guttenburg, New Jersey, in May 1896. The conditions were hard. Each entrant had to shoot at 300 targets, 100 at unknown angles, 100 under expert rules (one man up and five traps down) and 50 doubles. The 300 targets were sandwiched in during four days of shooting.

Gilbert's score for the four days was 266. J. A. R. Elliott, who had won every American live-bird championship except the du Pont Championship, and Ed Fulford, another famous shot, tied for second and third with scores of 261. Rolla Heikes was fourth with 253.

His third championship match proved what kind of shooter Fred Gilbert really was. This match was against J. A. R. Elliott alone. The consideration was the Kansas City Star Cup. Elliott owned the cup. He had defended it many times. He never doubted that he could defend it against Gilbert, for he had everything his own way—live birds to shoot at, his home grounds in Kansas City to shoot on, and his friends and adherents in the audience to cheer him.

This match was held at Exposition Park in October, 1896. There are men still living who recall it as the best shooting match they ever saw. The men each shot at 100 live birds. Of his first 25, Gilbert missed one. Elliott made a straight. Gilbert killed all 25 of his birds the second run. So did Elliott. And while Gilbert was missing two of his third 25, Elliott had again made a straight run. So the score at the end of the

third quarter stood: Elliott 75; Gilbert 72. Not propitious conditions for the new champion.

With bets running ten to one that Elliott would make it a straight 100, Gilbert proved his mettle as a champion. He tightened up. He scored every bird. Then Elliott missed his seventy-ninth, then his ninety-first. If he missed one more, they would be even. In a falsetto voice Gilbert shrilled: "I dare Jim Elliott to miss another."

And Jim Elliott took the dare—but not because he wanted to. They finished with a score of 97-97. In the shoot off Gilbert won 25-24 and took away the Star cup for his own. One writer the next day said in his paper, "Fred Gilbert is one shooter who is never beaten until the last target is shot."

*Sporting Life* for October 30, 1897 devoted most of its first page to the new champion, calling him the "Champion Inanimate Target and Live Bird Shot of the World" and explaining that Fred Gilbert had done what no other shooter had ever done in winning and holding the three major titles at one time.

In 1895, shortly after he had won the first championship, Fred Gilbert was appointed representative of the du Pont Company, with the entire United States as his territory. Part of his job consisted of taking part in tournaments—and this job he performed with alacrity. He took part in hundreds of matches.

One of the difficulties in tracing the life of a champion shot is that there are usually chapters here and there that most champions would like to conceal. These chapters deal with accidental and ignominious defeats by lesser men. To most champions these defeats come. This I discovered when I wrote the life of Capt. A. H. Bogardus.

In my articles (*Field & Stream*, February and March, 1932) I declared that Bogardus had won and defended and retired with the "Championship of America." And then I learned that Geo. W. Rexroat of Virginia, Illinois had really defeated Bogardus for the title, had won the trophy that went with it and still owns it. In no reference I consulted did the name Rexroat appear. It was one of those hidden chapters. So I acknowledged an error, saluted Mr. Rexroat—and resolved in the future to look carefully for hidden chapters.

In writing about Fred Gilbert this precaution has been unnecessary. He did nothing—had nothing to hide. He lost matches occasionally, but not often, and took losses or wins with the same kind of sportsmanship. And the end of the year would usually find him with the high average.

From 1897 to 1919 his average never fell below the 90 mark, save during one year. That was 1898. It dropped then to 89.60. Even more remarkable when this high average over so long a period is the fact that in 1919, when 54 years old, he had the highest average of his career—97.53 per cent on 6,860 targets. But the averages of some of the other years are remarkable also—remarkable enough to give here.

In 1907 he scored 8,817 out of 9,195—average 95.89 per cent. Out of 10,945 targets in 1908 he broke 10,402—average 95.03 per cent. In 1909 he did even better. He averaged 95.14 per cent on 19,310 targets. In 1914 he was ill and shot at only 3,800 targets. But his average was 92.55. In 1915 he averaged 94.88 per cent and in 1916, 95.43 per cent. His average for all the years between 1897 and 1918 was 94.92 percent on a total of 145,895 targets. For eight out of eleven years between 1901 and 1911 he held the high average for the United States.

In 1902 Fred Gilbert broke 200 straight targets. That feat was widely praised. To many followers of shooting it represented the acme of skill, and some doubted that the record would ever be broken. But in 1905 while resting at his Spirit Lake home, he broke it himself, scoring 402 straight. That stood for years. In 1919 it was he who broke it. He made a straight run of 591. That record is still unbroken.

But the high point of his career occurred earlier—in 1901. It was the winning of the British Presentation Cup.

Early in 1901, American and British shooters began discussions in the sporting magazines about what would happen if picked teams representing the two countries were to meet. A group of American sportsmen underwrote the cost of sending a team to England to find out. In May the team sailed from New York.

Twelve men were in that team—twelve champions. Tom A. Marshall was named captain. The other members were J. S. Fanning, C. W. Budd, F. S. Parmelee, Richard Merrill, E. H.

Tripp, J. A. R. Elliott, W. R. Crosby, Rolla O. Heikes, C. M. Powers, Edward Banks and Fred Gilbert.

They landed in England, started in at once to shoot, and won every match. They went to Scotland and did the same thing there. Then they sailed for home, leaving no question about the superiority of American trap shoots.

Before the Americans left England, however, the members of the British team staged a match for Americans only. They offered a handsome trophy for the winner, called the British Presentation Cup. It cost forty guineas (about \$200) and was the largest shooting trophy in the world. Every member of the American team wanted it.

For two days they shot for the British trophy. They must have been nervous, for only two were able to score as many as 22 of their 25. These two were Budd and Gilbert. And when Budd and Gilbert had shot at 14 targets in the shoot-off and Gilbert was ahead, Budd withdrew. Gilbert took the Presentation Cup back to Iowa.

In 1915, the du Pont Company honored Fred Gilbert by holding in his name "The Fred Gilbert Twentieth Anniversary Shoot," celebrating his first twenty years as du Pont representative. It sent invitations to clubs everywhere to hold a "Fred Gilbert Shoot" on their home grounds. Five hundred and thirty clubs in forty-six states and every Canadian province took part, and the 10,300 shooters who faced the line fired 1,159,110 shells in honor of Fred Gilbert. At Wilmington, Delaware there was a banquet in his honor, attended by notables. He appreciated the honor but took it modestly.

Always a vigorous man, an athlete in his youth, Fred Gilbert could stand the rigors of his hard life, travelling from one state to another, attending tournaments and shooting day after day. But in time the strain of competition began to tell. For fifteen years he fought off illness and kept right on traveling and shooting until doctors forbade it. Even then his enthusiasm was unabated. He was never too ill to talk shooting or to watch it.

In August, 1927 after attending a match in his home town of Spirit Lake, he suffered a stroke of apoplexy on his way home. That evening he passed away. He was 62.

When Fred Gilbert won his first victory, writers looked upon him as a phenomenon. In a way he was. But his success was not accidental nor his skill a gift. Behind that day in 1895, when he won first honors, were twenty-five years of shooting experience and practice of the best kind—the practical training of the frontier hunter.

One man is still living who remembers Fred Gilbert in boyhood. This is A. B. Funk of Des Moines. Mr. Funk recalls him as a boy of seven. And even then, he tells me, Fred Gilbert was carrying a shotgun. He used it on ducks, the plover, the snipe and the chickens of the Iowa flatheads. Later on he hunted for the market. Then he turned to the country shooting matches. The Baltimore victory was no accident—it was a reward of years of painstaking self-improvement.

One thing that observers of Fred Gilbert always remarked about was his versatility. He was at home under any and all conditions. Some shooters had weaknesses; he had none. He could cope with any situation. He was a master of the shotgun.

Like all successful shooters, Mr. Gilbert was careful of the details of his profession. Everything had to be just right. He selected guns with care and shot them with precision. He made a science of his sport.

His first big match he won with a gun which he did not even own. Years later the citizens of Spirit Lake presented this gun to him. The gun is now in the Spirit Lake Library with his other trophies.

Shortly after his first match he became traveling representative for one of America's famous gun makers and shot its guns. His specifications are still on file with the company, and the factory even yet receives orders for guns of the "Fred Gilbert specifications." The drop at the comb of a "Fred Gilbert" gun is  $1\frac{3}{8}$  inches, scant; at the heel, 2 inches. Length from trigger to heel,  $14\frac{1}{4}$  inches; trigger to toe,  $14\frac{1}{2}$  inches; trigger to center of butt, 14 inches. The gun has a full pistol grip and 30 inch barrels and is, of course, full choke.

Fred Gilbert made friends easily—and kept them. But with all his kindness and geniality he was a determined man. When he faced the traps, he never let his friendship inter-

fered. He did his best. He defeated the other fellow if he could.

The crowds that gathered at tournaments liked him for his fairness and good humor. Occasionally he indulged in sly jokes on the galleries. The following incident is typical. A curious spectator asked how he happened to miss a target. Very seriously he picked up an empty shell, held it out, pointed to the letter on the primer and said: 'My own fault, carelessness, you know. See that shell? If I had put it in so that the letter on the primer was right side up, I wouldn't have missed.'

During his career, Mr. Gilbert accumulated scores of valuable trophies. At his home in Spirit Lake he built a room for them. One of his greatest pleasures was to show guests his trophy room, and explain how he had won this one and that one.

When Mr. Gilbert was honored by the banquet I have described, one of the officials of his company declared that his fame was known even beyond the range of trapshooting. I think that is truer today than it was when he was alive.

Reprinted from a story in Dec. 1933 *Field and Stream*.

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## Automobile on the Cover . . .

This car is one of Iowa's famous Mason Automobiles which were manufactured in Des Moines from 1907 to 1909. The Mason Automobile Company was then sold to Fred Maytag and moved to Waterloo in 1910. The particular model illustrated marks a major mechanical change in the history of the car. Reluctantly, the company decided to conform to the trend toward four cylinders and Duzenberg's two "lunger" passed quietly from the scene. In order to accommodate this larger and more powerful engine, it was moved up front and under the hood and the old chain drive was replaced with a drive shaft. The Mason Auto is discussed in the following article along with other "Early Iowa Automobiles."

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