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GILFILLAN BROTHERS, INC. – RADIO MANUFACTURERS



GILFILLAN ENGINEERING DEPARTMENT IN 1940

**GILFILLAN BROS. INC.**  
Radio Manufacturers

By FLOYD A. PAUL

Gilfillan Brothers, Inc., was one of the first, one of the best known, and one of the largest radio manufacturers in the West. The company brought several technological innovations to the market place. The company was flexible and durable, and this story tells of their growth and success as a radio manufacturer.

In 1912, Sennet W. Gilfillan graduated from Stanford and purchased the assets of his uncle's smelting and refining business in Los Angeles. After some financial difficulties as a fledgling business he invited Jay G. Gilfillan, his younger brother, who had been in Cuba selling his uncle's products, to join him as a partner.<sup>1</sup> The company refined and sold precious metals including gold and platinum products to dentists and jewelers.

By 1914 the firm became the Gilfillan Brothers Smelting and Refining Company. In 1917 they incorporated under that name. The firm had some bumpy roads but grew with S. W. Gilfillan as president and Jay G. Gilfillan as vice-president.

Shortly after 1915,<sup>2</sup> it became apparent that the automobile business had vast potential, and the Gilfillan brothers started production of automotive ignition components. A manufacturing facility was established at 11th and Wall Street under the supervision of Howard Goedemeister. In their search for a suitable material for distributor covers, the brothers recognized the feasibility of a moldable plastic compound invented by the Belgian scientist, Dr. Baekeland. Quantities of the plastic powder were ordered, molding presses were purchased, and Gilfillan became the first plastic manufacturer on the West Coast. The product line, under the management of Johnny Leslie, expanded to include distributor caps and blocks, contacts, magneto brushes and points, automobile electrical tools, storage battery terminal clamps, taps and dies, wrench kits, and generator brushes.



S. W. Gilfillan



Jay G. Gilfillan

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Mrs. Jay G. Gilfillan recalls that there was a severe recession in 1920 and 1921. Sales were off for the company. The results of an earlier trip to the Orient by her husband and herself brought orders and sales for automotive parts from Java, Australia and New Zealand that probably saved the company from closing its doors. In 1921 they changed their name to Gilfillan Brothers, Inc. The company had been making quality molded bakelite products and electrical parts for the automotive trade and was beginning a twenty-six year era of radio innovation, design, production and marketing efforts.

The company changed its name to Gilfillan Corp. in the 1950's. The company was sold to International Telephone and Telegraph Corp. (ITT) in 1963 and exists today as ITT Gilfillan, a producer of Command and Control Systems and Air Traffic Control Systems, with their related radar sensors.

The following listing shows that throughout its history Gilfillan has made an extensive and very diverse line of products:

- Smelting and refining of precious metals,
- Precision electrical contacts,
- Aircraft turnbuckles for Jenny Trainers,
- Electric drills, grinders and motors,
- Auto ignition parts,
- Precision bakelite moldings,
- Auto spotlights and tools,
- Tap and die sets,
- Radio parts,
- Radio kits,
- Battery radios,
- AC radios,
- Automobile radios,
- Inertial shaver
- Radio-Phonograph combinations,
- Home sound motion picture systems,
- Household refrigerators,
- Aircraft mechanical and hydraulic parts,
- Television receivers before WW II,
- Ground Control Approach (GCA) Radar,
- Sophisticated Long Range Surveillance Radar Systems.



Balance scales used by Jay G. Gilfillan, Sr. circa 1912. Used to measure the weight mass of gold, platinum, etc.

The company had a rich life and this article describes products, activities, events; identifies key people; and shows the role Gilfillan Brothers, Inc. played as a radio manufacturer between 1922 and 1948.

The founders, S. W. and Jay G. Gilfillan, continually adapted the company product line to the economic conditions of the time. It is estimated that Gilfillan Bros., Inc. profitably sold 1,500,000 radio receivers between 1924 and WW II. In addition, the Gilfillan product line was technologically innovative with:

- Introduction of the Neutrodyne in 1924 (West Coast),
- Shielded, constant gain Neutrodyne in 1926,
- Economical compact midget set in 1929-30,
- Television receiver sales in 1939 (West Coast).

**Gilfillan Radio People**

Key names identified as contributors to the Gilfillan radio era are many. Mr. William W. Lindsay, Jr. was Chief Radio Engineer in the 1920's. He continued with Gilfillan for some decades and worked on the first Ground Control Approach Radar design in the 1940's.

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Courtesy of Steve Dichter

Giffilan Bros. also made house brand radios (complete radios, not just chassis) for J. W. Robinson (Autoerat), Sears, Barker Brothers (Invincible, later called Templestone), and Western Auto Supply Co. (Western Air Patrol). Western Auto Supply Co., with headquarters in Kansas City, was founded and owned by George Peppardine. He bought complete radios from Giffilan and marketed them through his Western Auto Supply Stores in the West. Mr. A. Jennings Brown estimates well over 100,000 sets being made and sold to them during the 1930's.

#### 1930's Product Line

Midget designs (also called mantel or compact) characterized the first part of the '30's. The new midgets halved the average price of a radio in one year. Cathedrals were also a popular styling. Short wave designs showed up in the early '30's, multiband sets were made in both compact and console design. Auto radios were added to Giffilan's line in 1936. Ornate cabinets showed up in the last half of the decade. Wood cabinets were made by furniture contractors in the early '30's. Some of the suppliers include Burnham Mfg. Co., the Ray McNeely Co., and Angeles Furniture.

Mr. Joe Miles<sup>10</sup> recalls it was about the year 1937 that Giffilan started its own radio wood cabinet shop of some 15,000 square feet in a separate building. From that time on, Giffilan built its own cabinets in house.

Receivers featured motorized and pushbutton tuning, electric eye tuning and remote control. One unique styling that was experimented with in the 1934-35 time period was mirrored table models. They were first made by Troy Radio, followed by Giffilan<sup>8</sup>. The top, sides and front of the radio were made from beveled panels of slightly tinted Belgium glass. Colors varied from a subtle purple to a darker blue. Sandblasting etched the panel to label the knob, dial scale functions and Giffilan logos, and also etched out the speaker grille lattice.

<sup>7</sup>In 1939, S. W. Giffilan, impressed with the increasing quality of programming from television station W6XAO, decided the time was ripe for a Giffilan television receiver product. The company commissioned the Hazeltine Corporation to provide the drawings for a complete



Model 105 Console, 1929. \$187, 9-tube Screen Grid Set.



Compact Mirror Radio, 5-tubes, circa 1934.

receiver and for Hazeltine to assist with engineering support. Sennet then called Bill Myers into his office and announced, "We are in the television business." Myers was asked to assemble a TV laboratory in 90 days. The model G.12 was first announced in a *Los Angeles Times* ad by Barker Brothers on December 10, 1939. It was particularly pioneering for a small company to venture into the complexities



Model 5, 1933 (\$31.95) 5-tube Super-hetrodyne.



Model 63X, All-Wave, 3-band, 1936.

and economics of television receiver manufacturing. Only the largest Eastern companies (RCA, Dumont, G.E., Andrea and Westinghouse) attempted to market receivers.

#### Giffilan Employee Memories

From Roy Culver, retired, living in Glendale, California, came the following: Roy went to work for Giffilan in 1936 and left in 1939. He was a receiver assembler. He tells of the assembly line in 1936 to 1939 when he was a lead man on

Model G12  
Radio/TV Receiver,  
1939.

