

AFD Ep 463 Links and Notes - Gillette [Bill/Rachel] - Recording Mar 12, 2023

[Bill] The extremely annoying American inventor/traveling salesman King Camp Gillette invented disposable blades for the safety razor between 1895 and 1901, apparently with no prior relevant knowledge on the subject, and by 1903 was selling 12 million per year. He retired in 1913 to become a super-donor to the ideological project of promoting Technocracy (governance of society and economic distribution by apolitical engineers) until his passing in 1932. (Source: the Rodney Carlisle Scientific American book on "Inventions & Discoveries" that we used for the microwaves episode.)

Here's where it gets really insane about King Gillette himself:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_C._Gillette#Personal_life

Gillette was also a Utopian Socialist.^[16] He published a book titled [The Human Drift](#) (1894)^[17] which advocated that all industry should be taken over by a single corporation owned by the public, and that everyone in the US should live in a giant city called Metropolis powered by [Niagara Falls](#). A later book, [World Corporation](#) (1910)^[18] was a prospectus for a company set up to create this vision. He offered [Theodore Roosevelt](#) the presidency of the company, with a fee of one million dollars.^[19] (Roosevelt declined the offer.) Gillette's last book, [The People's Corporation](#) (1924),^[20] was written with [Upton Sinclair](#) and later inspired [Glen H. Taylor](#).

More on Taylor:

<http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2019/08/07/lend-lease-9-the-party-in-the-usa-aug-4-2019/>

[Bill] Wikipedia contends that King Gillette came up with the disposable blade safety razor while working as a salesman at the company that invented disposable bottle caps in 1892 in Baltimore, which might have been one of the first major disposable products of the industrial revolution. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gillette> https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crown_cork

[Rachel] While the concept of a safety razor existed, they were basically shortened pieces of a straight razor clamped to a holder. The razor blade had to be stropped before each shave, and over time, the blade had to be honed by a cutler. After Gillette conceived of his disposable blade, it took six years to file a patent and develop a working model. The main challenge was finding someone who could manufacture blades out of thin sheet steel. Gillette finally found William Emery Nickerson, an MIT chemistry graduate. Even after all that, the project floundered until Gillette's friend John Joyce invested the money to get manufacturing off the ground. Production finally began in 1903, and further improved in 1904 after Nickerson built a new blade grinding machine. *During its first year of operation, the company had sold 51 razors and 168 blades, but the second year saw sales rise to 90,884 razors and 123,648 blades*

[Rachel] Between early patents, key contracts, aggressive marketing, and repeated product innovation, Gillette (the company) has often historically been the near-monopoly company in the safety razor market or at least the leading market share company, often with an outright majority even into the late 20th century before it ceased to be an independent company.

[Bill] The ever-present defense spending connection: Although King Gillette himself retired from the company just before World War I, the huge breakthrough in the company's success was the coming war. While the U.S. government did not initially purchase shaving kits for its military personnel, these service members were required to bring their own kits with them. In part because of their patents, Gillette had the most convenient and straightforward design on the

market for filling this enormous new demand, and they somehow got permission to use official logos of the US Army and US Navy on their cases. In 1917, the year the US entered the war, they sold over 1 million razors. (That does mean razors, not blades.) The next year, the military decided to buy the kits themselves for the troops instead of making people buy their own, and Gillette got the contract, selling 3.5 million razors and 32 million blades to the US armed forces. After the war, they featured their wartime supply prominence heavily in consumer marketing campaigns and many veterans continued the habit of daily home shaving.

<https://archive.org/details/cuttingedgegille00mcki> (pp.18-20 per wiki, locked book: "Cutting edge: Gillette's journey to global leadership" by Gordon McKibben, 1998, Harvard Business School Press)

[Rachel] When the patent on the original design expired in 1921, the company introduced a new and improved design they could patent and continue to charge premium prices for, but they also converted the original design into an inexpensive down-market model to dramatically expand their customer base. This marked a significant shift for the company, contrary to popular legend, because up until this point they had been aiming at a premium market and charging accordingly, for both blades and razors, and they had not initially adopted the business model of selling an inexpensive razor to lure in customers who would then pay marked up blade prices on a continuous recurring basis. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Razor_and_blades_model

[Bill] Gillette struggled domestically during the Great Depression but continued to build a lucrative overseas market, although this was soon partly cut off in the 1940s when Germany and Japan nationalized Gillette production lines in those major markets. Toward the end of the Depression the company began linking itself more heavily to American sports, which seemed to boost sales noticeably, and they would later dramatically increase this advertising linkage in the early television sports era. In World War II, steel was rationed for the war effort, but the company managed to develop products that used less steel. Eventually the US government ordered virtually all of Gillette's razor and blade production to be diverted toward supplying US service members, although they also gave them secret contracts to develop special shaving equipment for intelligence operatives behind enemy lines.

<https://archive.org/details/cuttingedgegille00mcki> (pp.39-40 per wiki, locked book)

[Rachel] Gillette had female-focused product lines fairly early on, at least by the mid-1910s. Gillette sold the first women's razor in 1915, and also had the first advertisement for women's razors in 1917, showing a woman wearing a fashionable sleeveless gown and posing with her arms behind her head. The ad is captioned "Without Embarrassment: An Intimate Talk to Women". The ad created a brand new beauty standard, shamed women for not adhering to it, and helpfully provided the immediate solution! During the 1920s, as hemlines rose, a new target for Gillette razors was revealed - leg hair - and advertisements showed modern women showing off their hairless legs. Gillette heavily advertised in summer months when more skin would be showing. Leg hair removal became essential during WWII nylon shortages when women went without stockings, and Gillette came out with an electric razor that made shaving more convenient. By the 1960s, virtually all women aged 15 to 44 removed some body hair. In the 1990s and 2000s, Gillette advertisements focused on shaving even more body parts to be attractive to men. New features that made shaving bikini lines easier started to proliferate, and in 2000, Gillette introduced their Venus razor line. Venus razors were advertised as comfortable to hold and designed with pivoting razor heads that could maneuver over any body part. In the last decade or so, ads have become even more overt, talking directly about shaving the bikini line and even showing women shaving, rather than merely hinting about it.

<https://www.inventiva.co.in/stories/how-gillette-changed-the-hair-scape-for-both-men-and-wome>

[n-heres-looking-at-the-clever-marketing-strategy-by-gillette-that-raked-in-moolahs-for-the-comp any/](#)

[Rachel] However, women have been more vocal about the downsides of compulsory hair removal over the last decade. One big gripe is the “pink tax” of women’s products costing significantly more than men’s. *Razor cartridges marketed toward women were the most expensive product analyzed, costing almost 25% more than those marketed toward men. Razors targeted at female consumers were 9% more expensive, while shaving cream was almost 10% more expensive.*

<https://www.thebalancemoney.com/pink-tax-pushes-prices-up-nearly-13-percent-study-finds-5222209>

[Rachel] Also, hair removal for women has taken a hit over the pandemic. According to a poll conducted on behalf of Dove, one in three women started shaving their armpits less over the pandemic. And of those, 13% said they intend to keep it that way. Along with this poll, there is a lot of anecdotal articles detailing the many stories of women that decided to stop listening to ads that portray body hair as embarrassing. However, an October 2020 article from New York Magazine quoted Procter & Gamble [parent company of Gillette as of 2005] as saying that women’s razor and blade sales were on the rise.

<https://studyfinds.org/pandemic-women-shave-armpit/>

<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/10/the-pandemic-has-men-shaving-less-but-not-women.html>

[Rachel] Also of note from the NY Mag article: Gillette has recently introduced a line of “King C. Gillette” products for beard maintenance, which capitalizes on the fact that more men are growing beards and shaving less in this post-lockdown era.

More on Planned Obsolescence:

<http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2021/01/06/unlocked-jan-6-2021-the-future-of-planned-obsolescence-feat-patrick-from-cycbi-arsenal-for-democracy-ep-339/>