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New Fields Opened by Appealing to Children

How the Harper-Columbia Bubble Books were originated and what they have done to extend the market for phonographs and records

By R. M. Rhodes

HAVING a healthy curiosity about notable merchandizing successes, I recently sought out the man behind the Bubble Book—the man whose imagination first conceived the idea of combining phonograph records with a children's book—the man who found out how to make records sell phonographs—the man who sings nursery rhymes to deaf children through their hands!

The Bubble Book man is Ralph Mayhew, and I found him sitting behind a roll-top desk in the big delightfully old-fashioned general office of Harper & Brothers down in Franklin Square, New York.

When I mentioned the purpose of my visit—to talk about the Bubble Books—Mr. Mayhew's face lighted up, and I knew at once that there was a real story behind these ingenious little books.

The Bubble Book idea, I soon found, was a combination of two ideas. Mr. Mayhew, who has been connected with Harper & Brothers for many years, was engaged in the exploitation of the Mark Twain books. One day he bethought himself of an ingenious method of bringing these books to the attention of people in a new and novel way. His idea was to make up some little 3-inch phonograph records to be mounted on a booklet or card, in which Mark Twain would be impersonated in a little talk about his own books. These record-booklets Mr. Mayhew planned to distribute broadly. But the idea was soon nipped in the bud, for the price of the records was found to be prohibitive.

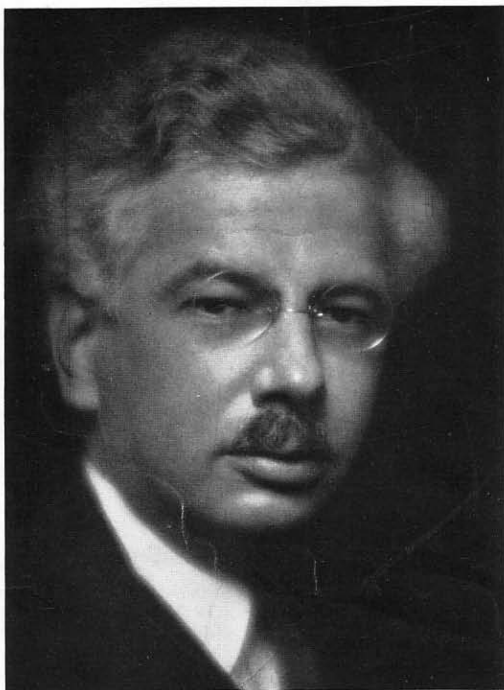
Along about the same time—and incidentally this was back in 1914—Mr. Mayhew conceived the idea of getting out a children's little book of verse, with each verse as an episode

Brothers, Mr. Mayhew was encouraged to develop this idea, and he started to write some verses.

It was while working on these verses that he conceived the idea that developed into the present Bubble Book.

"I had a habit," explained Mr. Mayhew, smiling, "of crawling out of bed occasionally of a Sunday morning, putting a record on the phonograph, slipping back into bed and sitting up with pencil and paper and working on little verses for my Bubble Book. One Sunday morning, while thus engaged, the idea suddenly occurred to me of incorporating small phonograph records in my Bubble Book, with appropriate music to accompany the nursery rhymes. I had never heard of putting a book and records together, and the idea rather struck my fancy."

Mr. Mayhew at once applied for fundamental patents on such a book, which were subsequently granted.



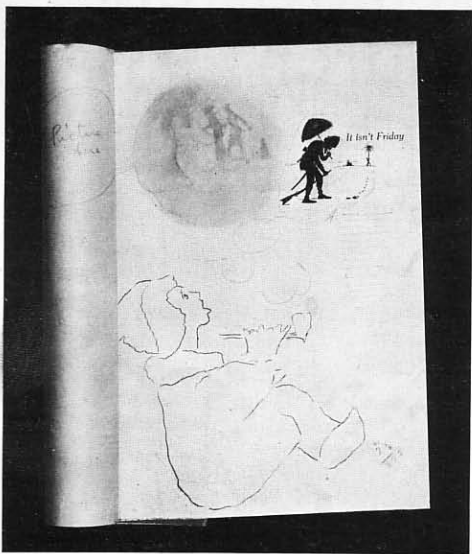
Ralph Mayhew, originator of the Bubble Books, of which more than a million and a half have been sold since 1917.

introducing one of the old nursery rhymes, and with a little picture in color illustrating each episode. In his mind he called it "The Bubble Book," and at the foot of each page he planned to have a child sitting blowing bubbles which ascended and burst into the little pictures and nursery rhymes. There was no thought of using music in connection with this book.

Approaching Colonel F. F. Leigh, at that time treasurer of Harper &

a little dummy book with pages so pasted as to form pockets for the records. This dummy he illustrated and hand-lettered for the purpose of submitting it to some one of the phonograph companies and getting it interested in co-operating in the publishing of the book.

The story of his efforts to get makers of phonograph records interested in his little Bubble Book would consume more space than is available for the whole tale. One



Rough dummy of a page from a Bubble Book, giving an idea of the beginning of one of the finished pages so attractive to children.

company could see in it nothing but a method of filing records, and the executive graciously explained that his company had already worked out a new filing device which was considerably better than this little book. The dummy was shown to the buyer for a large toy store who said that his store might conceivably order fifty or seventy-five copies of this little book if it were put on the market. (Last year this store sold in the neighborhood of 25,000 Bubble Books!) With that information it dismissed the new book without further consideration. Still another company passed it by as ingenious but not salable in sufficient quantities to make it worth bothering with. No one seemed interested.

BUT Mr. Mayhew had not yet lost faith in his idea. If they would not go into this proposition *with* him, he would get them to make records *for* him. But he soon found that here, too, he was up against a stone wall. "We cannot make special records in less than 25,000 lots," was the verdict. Inasmuch as 2,500 would have been a large initial order, that settled the idea of buying the records.

So, after two years of hopes and heartaches, the bubble had apparently burst and there would never be a Bubble Book.

Just about this time, in a conference one morning with his lawyer and his patent attorney, the latter suggested to Mr. Mayhew that a friend of his had recently been made chairman of the Board of the Columbia Graphophone Company and that perhaps the subject could be reopened with that company. Reaching for the telephone, he called up his friend, who promised that if Mr. Mayhew would make an appointment with the general manager, H. L. Willson, and explain the proposition to

bia Bubble Book finally was born. This was in the late fall of 1917. With practical marketing foresight, the Columbia people and Mr. Mayhew, representing Harper's as well as himself, agreed that the new book would have a better chance to make good if it could be launched on the market before Christmas. The time was very short, but it was worth the try. So Mr. Mayhew went back to his office and immediately commissioned Miss Rhoda Chase to draw the pictures for the book and engaged Burges Johnson to go over the verses and whip them into shape.

ALL looked promising, but Mr. Mayhew's troubles were not yet over. For now a practical problem arose: Any paper that was strong enough for making pockets to hold the records, and at the same time had a suitable finish for printing the pictures in color, was too expensive to use in a book that must retail at a dollar.

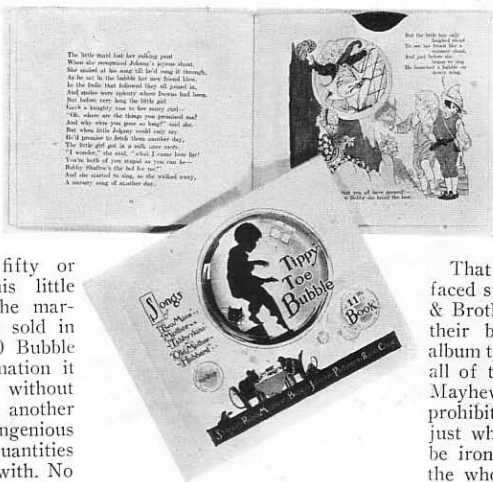
After considerable feverish searching and many experiments, Mr. Mayhew finally decided that the paper used for printing his book publisher's trade list would be satisfactory, provided it could be made in a heavier weight. This was finally arranged for and some of the stock was started through on a special rush order to meet the date on which it was required if the books were to be out before Christmas.

That settled, Mr. Mayhew soon faced still another problem. Harper & Brothers did not have facilities in their bindery for making up this album type of book, and to his dismay all of the album makers whom Mr. Mayhew knew quoted absolutely prohibitive prices on the work. Thus, just when everything else seemed to be ironing out, it looked as though the whole scheme was going to fail because of the cost of making up this odd kind of a book.

Sitting down at his desk one morning, in desperation Mr. Mayhew picked up the classified telephone directory and started in at the top of the list of album makers and called each one in turn and stated his problem. Finally he located one man who subsequently quoted a price which met the requirements. Again was the day saved for the Bubble Book, and by a simple little advertisement.

By this time records had been made, Miss Chase had finished the pictures, the type was set, and the

(Continued on page 90)



The completed Bubble Book, with its whimsical illustrations, its charming verse and the record which sings the song told about in the rhymes.

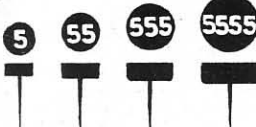
him personally, it would be carefully considered.

So Mr. Mayhew arrived at the executive headquarters of the Columbia Graphophone Co. one afternoon, with his Bubble Book idea plus an inexhaustible supply of enthusiasm. The general manager had merchandizing imagination plus a plant for making records. As generally happens in such cases, the idea "took." Within an hour a deal was closed, and the Harper-Colum-

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ACTUAL SIZES SHOWN



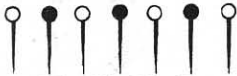
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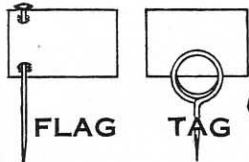
TINY SIZE



SPOTTED



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New Fields Opened by Appealing to Children

(Continued from page 24)

plates were available. Two hundred proofs of the black plates were run off and these were bound up into dummies. Mr. Mayhew then personally hand-colored 175 of these dummies, working every night on them. By working late he could color only four or five a night, but he kept at it until the 175 books were finished and ready for the salesman. On the night when he finished coloring the last book, leaning back in his armchair for a moment, he went to sleep and slept all night from sheer exhaustion.

Everything now being ready, a bindery order was placed for 5,000 copies, and the salesman was started on the road with the hand-colored samples.

THE book that as an idea had gone begging for friends went like wildfire as soon as the hastily colored copies were shown to the trade. Hardly had the salesman gone out when the orders began to pour in. Seven thousand copies were sold from those first crude samples and the edition was increased to 10,000 while it was still on the press!

The first finished sheets came from the press the night before Thanksgiving, and Mr. Mayhew worked until four o'clock in the morning scoring sheets and binding the first copy for the binders to work from.

Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, 9,000 copies of this little Bubble Book were sold, and it began to be evident that there would be a market for another Bubble Book.

Here again the joint publishers showed keen marketing imagination, for while they believed the first Bubble Book would continue to sell, they believed also that in a few months they could sell a second book to the people who had bought the first one. And they were right.

Since the fall of 1917 twelve Bubble Books have been published. Three more are in work and research is now being started on the sixteenth book. It looks as though there would be no end to the number the market will absorb. At first the retail price of the Bubble Book was \$1, but it has been necessary to raise it to \$1.25.

The same persons who worked out the first book, Mr. Mayhew, Miss Rhoda Chase and Burges Johnson, have collaborated on all the other Bubble Books. What started out as the editing of one little book has now developed into an elaborate

study of nursery songs and stories. Mr. Mayhew haunts second-hand book shops and sends all over the world for the different versions of famous old nursery rhymes and tunes. Sometimes as many as twenty-five different versions of one song are collected, and as many different versions of the words. From these this editorial board painstakingly works out what it believes to be the best authenticated version of both words and music. As it sees its task, it is not the mere manufacturing of ingenious little books; it is training child minds, teaching music rhythm and English, and nothing is too much trouble to get things right.

Does this almost fanatical attention to detail pay? In 1919, 450,000 Bubble Books were sold by Harper & Brothers, and last year the sales reached the enormous total of 1,500,000 copies!

Arrangements were recently made to publish the Bubble Books in England and already 125,000 copies have been sold there.

From an advertising and selling standpoint, an interesting sidelight is that the first Bubble Book, having sold already to the extent of a quarter of a million copies, still continues to sell almost as extensively as any of the newer books.

WHILE the story of the development of the Bubble Book idea is interesting, it is no more interesting than some of the things that have followed.

Travelers in Porto Rico and some of the Central American countries have been surprised to find the little native children singing nursery rhymes in almost perfect English, but unable to speak any other English at all. The Bubble Books have done it! They are received particularly well in India, where they are used to teach Hindu children English.

Another interesting development is that recently the head of a deaf-and-dumb children's home told one of Mr. Mayhew's friends that her deaf-and-dumb charges are more interested in the Bubble Books than in anything else they have for their entertainment. The children stand in a half circle, hand in hand, and by grasping the handles of a mechanism connected with the phonograph, they can get the vibrations from the machine. Thus, denied the use of their ears, they "listen" to the rhythm of the Bubble Book songs through their hands!

So remarkably have the Bubble Books fitted into the life of the children of America that Bubble Book parties have now become quite

the rage in the tiny tots' social world!

Phonograph dealers in all parts of the country report that they sell phonographs to many people who explain that they "don't care for talking machines" themselves but that they must have one to play the Bubble Book records for their children. Naturally, having taken the machines into their homes, they overcome their first prejudice and buy other records as well, so that the Bubble Books have actually been a means of stimulating phonograph and phonograph record sales.

Many dealers report also that people who have phonographs in their living rooms come in and buy a smaller machine for their nurseries so that their children may play the Bubble Book records themselves.

Another interesting fact, from a merchandising standpoint, is that the Bubble Books have gone into many classes of stores which never before sold either books or phonograph records, and in some cases the result has been that lines of regular phonograph records have been taken on.

Thus has Mr. Mayhew proved that it pays to fight a good idea through, and to carry it out to the very best of one's ability, even down to the very smallest details.

Salesland Zoology

(Continued from page 88)

How much we all expected from the Lateron! How bright the promise that crowned his brow! Is it time yet to give up hope? How long should a Lateron be fed and watered free of charge?



The Glad-Hander

So called because the Glad-Hander seizes you with its right paw and forces a brown cylindrical object down your throat with its left. Glad-Handers flourished in great numbers during the '90's, but are said to be on the road to extinction. Violent but harmless.

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