

Eli Lilly

Essay prepared by IHS staff

Businessman, historian, preservationist, author, archaeologist, philanthropist-- Eli Lilly was all of these. Lilly's long life included a wide range of endeavors in which he made major contributions. Under his active leadership, the pharmaceutical company he joined in 1907 evolved into one of America's most successful big businesses.

Eli Lilly was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, on April 1, 1885, to Josiah K. and Lilly (Ridgely) Lilly. The patriarch of the Lilly family was Col. Eli Lilly, who organized the 18th Indiana Light Artillery Battery during the Civil War. In 1876 the senior Lilly--an experienced chemist--opened the pharmaceutical company that Eli Lilly eventually developed into an industrial giant.

Lilly spent his boyhood in Indianapolis, enjoying the "small-town" life offered by the Hoosier capital city and vacationing at Lake Wawasee in Kosciusko County--a haven for Eli throughout his life. Lilly attended Shortridge High School and worked in nearly every department at the family's pharmaceutical company on McCarty Street. Like his father, Eli graduated from the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy. Upon his graduation in 1907, he joined the family firm, became head of the newly created Economic Department and married his high school sweetheart, Evelyn Fortune.

In his early years at the company, Lilly was dedicated to finding ways to save money and introduce efficiency. He pushed the company into installing mass production techniques and new initiatives in biomedical research, which brought about a major success with the development of insulin in the 1920s.

Despite enjoying the birth of their only child, Evie, in 1918, Eli and Evelyn's marriage was an unhappy one and they divorced in 1926. Sadness turned to joy, however, as Eli married Ruth Helen Allison in 1927. The couple enjoyed nearly a half-century of marriage--a marriage Lilly said of "unbelievable happiness and satisfaction."

A fishing club known as the Rowdy Revelers, started by his father, was resurrected by Eli in 1916. About 10 men gathered at Lake Wawasee during the last week of April to fish, play cards, sail, talk and engage in practical jokes. Later in life, Lilly's interest in archaeology and history led to lifelong friendships with archaeologist Glenn Black and historian Howard Peckham.

Looking to expand his horizons, Lilly in the 1930s began a plan for "developing a proper outlook on life." He nurtured a passion for prehistoric archaeology that led to significant scholarly publications and to financial and personal patronage that helped bring Indiana archaeology to professional maturity. Later, Lilly also explored the fields of history, historic preservation and Chinese art. His intellectual pursuits ranged from the mysteries of a Delaware Indian narrative called the Walam Olum to the intricacies of character development and moral behavior in children.

During the last three decades of his life Lilly donated millions of dollars both personally and through the Lilly Endowment, quietly becoming one of the major philanthropists of 20th-century America. Some of the organizations benefiting from Lilly's generosity included: Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Children's Museum of Indianapolis, Butler University, Earlham College, Wabash College and the Episcopal church. Lilly died on Jan. 24, 1977, in Indianapolis.