Carl Fisher

Essay prepared by IHS staff

Fifteen-year-old Indianapolis resident Jane Watts was walking along Meridian Street one fall afternoon in 1908 when she noticed something strange. All traffic on the street had stopped and people were craning their necks upward. Following their lead, Watt stopped, looked up, and was stunned to see a giant hot-air balloon floating by with, instead of the usual wicker basket, a Stoddard-Dayton automobile. Sitting in the car she saw, for the first time, the man she would marry--Carl G. Fisher.

Wild stunts were a regular feature of Fisher's career. Besides the balloon/automobile caper, the man one editorial writer claimed possessed the "lavish imagination of a poet," perpetrated such promotional gimmicks as riding a bicycle over a tightrope stretched between two tall buildings in downtown Indianapolis, and throwing a bicycle from the capital city's tallest structure and giving a new one to the person who returned it to his cycling shop.

Regarded as a promotional genius for most of his life, Fisher, responsible for turning Miami Beach from a mangrove swamp into America's favorite resort, also played an important role in Indiana's early automotive history. Although the one-time millionaire was nearly penniless upon his death in 1939, his stamp had been put on such impressive automotive achievements as the Prest-O-Lite Storage Battery Company, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, and the Lincoln and Dixie highways. Fisher, more than anyone else, according to Hoosier writer John Bartlow Martin, "symbolized the glorification of the automobile in Indiana."

The man Will Rogers described as doing "more unique things even before he had heard of Florida than any man I ever met" came into the world on 12 January 1874 in Greensburg, Indiana, the second of three sons born to Albert H. and Ida Graham Fisher. His parents separated when Fisher was young and his mother moved the family to Indianapolis. Suffering from severe astigmatism, Fisher quit school when he was twelve. According to his future wife Jane, who produced a biography of her husband titled *Fabulous Hoosier*, Fisher got a job in a grocery store, took a bundle of groceries home to his mother, and boldly announced: "From now on, I'm supporting this family."

In the coming years Fisher held a number of jobs, everything from clerking in a bookstore to working as a "news butcher" hawking newspapers, tobacco, candy, and other products on trains leaving Indianapolis. In 1891 the seventeen-year-old Fisher and his two brothers opened a bicycle shop in Indianapolis where they repaired flat tires for just twenty-five cents. Fisher managed to be in the right place at the right time with his new venture as a bicycle craze swept the country. An Indianapolis Zig-Zag Cycling Club member, Fisher participated in the organization's Sunday rides to such Hoosier cities as Columbus, Danville, Franklin, Greenfield, Lebanon, and Shelbyville. Joining Fisher on those rides were James Allison and Arthur Newby, future founders, along with Frank Wheeler, of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Hoosier journalist and poet William Herschel, reminiscing about the bicycle club's activities for the *Indianapolis News* in 1931, noted that Fisher was nicknamed Crip (short for cripple) by his bicycling buddies "because he frequently, in bursts of speed, took a spill and ended with many bruises and cuts." Herschel recalled that on one Sunday ride Fisher suffered a severe crash between Noblesville and Indianapolis. Stopping at a farmhouse to ask for the use of its well water to wash their bloodied friend, the bicyclist's were greeted by a farmer's wife who decided to lecture them on failing to keep the Sabbath. One of the riders had a quick answer: "Am I my brother's keeper?" he asked. They got the water.

Although handicapped by his poor eyesight, Fisher managed to participate in a number of bicycle races, slugging it out wheel to wheel with the likes of champion racer Barney Oldfield, later a skilled racecar driver. Fisher had better luck with his Indianapolis shop than his bicycle racing, managing to convince George Erland, a leading Ohio bicycle manufacturer, to supply him, on credit, with $50,000 worth of merchandise. With little cash on hand for advertising, Fisher turned to promotional stunts to help him sell his product. Wearing a padded suit, he rode a bicycle across a tightrope stretched over Washington Street; he built and rode a twenty-foot-high bicycle; and he released a thousand toy balloons, one hundred of which contained numbers that meant a person received a free bicycle. At only nineteen years of age, Fisher, said his wife, "owned the finest bicycle shop in all of Indiana."

As the bicycle craze died down in the state at the turn of the century, another technological marvel burst onto the scene to take its place--the automobile. Fisher, like his fellow bicycle enthusiast Oldfield, immediately embraced the new means of transportation, telling the champion racer, "I don't see why the automobile can't be made to do everything the bicycle has done." Fisher converted his bicycle shop into an automobile repair/sales facility. Along with Oldfield and his other friends from the Zig-Zag club, Fisher barnstormed through the Midwest with a group that was billed as having "the world's most daring automobile racers." And, despite his poor eyesight, the man known as Crip managed to steer an automobile to a world's record time for a two-mile course (two minutes and two seconds) at the Harlem dirt track in Chicago in 1904.

The product may have been different, but Fisher used similar tricks to promote automobile sales as he had used for bicycles. Along with his Stoddard-Dayton balloon trip, he once again used Indianapolis's building tops as the stage for his unusual advertising. While his brothers waited on the street below, Fisher shoved a seven-passenger car off a building's roof. When the car safely reached the street, one of the brothers started the car and Fisher drove off with the crowd's cheers ringing in his ears.

In planning his stunts, Fisher left nothing to chance. Before dropping the car off the roof, he had carefully deflated its tires so that it wouldn't bounce too high and tip over when it smacked the pavement. Even his automobile/balloon ride had a trick up its sleeve. Jane Fisher said that the car her husband drove into town upon the flight's conclusion was not the same one that had been tied to the balloon. To make the Stoddard-Dayton light enough to lift, he had torn out its engine. His brother Rolly had driven a similar car out to

the landing site for Fisher to use for his triumphant return to Indianapolis. "It always puzzled Carl," said Jane Fisher, "that no one had been suspicious enough to follow his flight and that the public, press and police had been so easily hoaxed."

The Fisher fortune, however, would not be made with wild gimmicks, but with a little luck. In 1904 Fred Avery, holder of a French patent for a method using compressed gas as headlights for automobiles, convinced Fisher (who brought in Allison) to market his invention. The result was the Prest-O-Lite company, which soon had factories in Indianapolis (later moved to Speedway), Cleveland, Omaha, New York, Boston, and Chicago. The only problem was with the often unstable chemicals employed in the process; the plants kept blowing up. Jane Fisher remembered that Fisher and Allison employed a code to keep secret their plant's fragile nature. For example, when the Omaha factory exploded, a wire was sent reading: "Omaha left at four thirty." The tanks were finally made safe when they were lined with asbestos.

An idea man who was often fuzzy when it came to details, Fisher had a simple method for doing business: "I have a great many men working for me who I consider have more brain power than I have, and I always try to get this type of men to aid me. It pays well in any sort of business to know all your employees, from the truck drivers up--and to stick by them in any sort of trouble." With Fisher's ideas and Allison's good business sense, Prest-O-Lite prospered. In 1911 Union Carbide bought the company for nine million dollars. Allison took his money and invested it, telling Jane Fisher he was going "to be the goddamnedest laziest man in the whole goddamned universe."

Throughout his career Fisher always had time for pleasure as well as business. His Indianapolis attorney, Walter Dennis Myers, described his client as a "shrewd, hard-working young fellow," but also noted Fisher's "genius did not extend to women, wise as he was in the ways of this world." While he was Fisher's lawyer, Myers handled ten breach of promise suits brought against Fisher by ten different women (he finally got married on 23 October 1909 to the fifteen-year-old Jane Watts). It was unfortunate, according to Myers, that the auto magnate had ever learned to write. "Breach of promise cases must be predicated on a promise and breach thereof," he noted. "Such cases are hard to defend when the promises are alleged to have been made orally; it is hell and high water when they are put on paper, however deficient the writer may have been in describing romance."

Fisher, however, did more than chase women. He also pursued his dream of building a major American automobile racetrack. On a 1905 trip overseas to compete in the James Gordon Bennett Cup Races in France, Fisher was stunned by the European cars superiority over the United States models, noting that they could "go uphill faster than the American cars can come down." To help improve the automobile industry back home, Fisher conceived of a proving ground where cars could be tested, and raced. In 1909 Fisher, Allison, Newby, and Wheeler put together $250,000 in capital to form the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Company and transformed the Pressley Farm on Indianapolis's westside into a two-and-a-half-mile oval that became synonymous with automobile racing.

Cars, however, were not the first machines to race at the Speedway, which was originally paved with crushed stone. Instead, motorcycles tested the new track's fitness. The motorcyclists didn't know what to make of the facility when they came to Indianapolis in August 1909. Used to smaller board tracks, the two-wheel daredevils seemed intimidated by the Indianapolis raceway's long straight-aways and monstrous curves. On 19 August 1909, a week after the motorcyclist's had tried their luck, the first automobile races were run at the Speedway. The results were deadly; six people were killed, including three drivers and two spectators. Although scheduled for 300 miles, Fisher stopped the race after 235 miles had been completed.

With the crushed stone track proving to be unsuitable for racing, Fisher returned to the drawing board. He convinced Newby to pay for repaving the track with 3,200,000 ten-pound bricks and "The Brickyard" was born. The new surface stood up well in the 1910 racing season and Fisher promised bigger things to come for the next year. On Memorial Day 1911 the Speedway hosted the first in a long line of five hundred mile races. Ray Harroun, driving an Indianapolis-made Marmon Wasp, won the race with an average speed of 74.59 miles per hour. Fisher had helped inaugurate an event that became known as "the greatest spectacle in racing."

Fisher next turned his relentless energy to a problem that had plagued the automotive industry for years--bad roads. Driving an automobile in those days was a real adventure as motorists not only had to deal with inadequate roads but also a lack of directional signs. Drake Hokanson, in his Lincoln Highway history, pointed out that the 180,000 people who registered motor vehicles in the United States in 1910 had only 2.5 million miles of road to drive on (with only seven percent improved in any manner).

"The highways of America," Fisher wrote his writer friend Elbert Hubbard, "are built chiefly of politics, whereas the proper material is crushed rock or concrete." Fisher had first-hand knowledge about road problems. In campaigning for better roads, he often told a story about an automobile trip he made out of Indianapolis with a few friends. Caught in a rainstorm at night, Fisher and his companions had reached a fork in the road and were unsure about which way to proceed. Sighting a white sign on a telephone pole, Fisher stopped the car and proceeded to climb up the pole in an effort to see whether it could tell him which road to take. The sign offered no assistance; its message read: "Chew Battle Ax Plug."

Fisher met the road problem like he did any other problem--head on. At a 1 September 1912 dinner party for automobile manufacturers at Das Deutsche Haus in Indianapolis, Fisher unveiled his plan for a highway spanning the country from New York City to California. "A road across the United States! Let's build it before we're too old to enjoy it!" Fisher urged the auto executives. His idea was to build a coast-to-coast highway in time for the May 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. Fisher estimated that a transcontinental highway would cost ten million dollars and sought pledges from the auto officials at the dinner. Just thirty minutes after his talk, Fisher received $300,000 from Frank A. Seiberling of the Goodyear company, who pledged the amount even without first checking with his board of directors.

A few months after the Indianapolis dinner, Fisher received a letter from Henry Joy, Packard Motor Company president, pledging $150,000 for the proposed roadway. Joy, a leading force behind getting the coast-to-coast highway built, also suggested that the road be named for Abraham Lincoln. On 1 July 1913 the Lincoln Highway Association was created with Joy as President and Fisher as vice president. The association's goal was to "procure the establishment of a continuous improved highway from the Atlantic to the Pacific, open to lawful traffic of all description without toll charges: such highway to be known in memory of Abraham Lincoln, as `The Lincoln Highway.'"

Fisher, as he had for his other ventures, employed a very direct method for raising money. He wrote one Lincoln Highway Association official that it was easy to get contributions from people. "You should first give them a good dinner, then a good cussing, whenever you want money," Fisher explained. Although this technique worked with most people, it did not work with one of America's leading automobile manufacturers--Henry Ford. Despite help from United States Senator Albert Beveridge, Thomas Edison, and Hubbard, all close Ford friends, and a personal appeal from Fisher, Ford refused to give any financial assistance to the Lincoln Highway. He declared it was the government's responsibility, not industrialists, to build better roads.

Despite this setback, Fisher remained undaunted. While the Lincoln Highway Association was taking shape in July, Fisher was absent from its deliberations. Instead, he had started out on another great adventure, setting out from Indianapolis with a group of Indiana-made automobiles--American, Apperson, Haynes, Marmon, McFarland--on a tour to the west coast. Calling themselves the Trail-Blazers, the Hoosier auto tour was greeted enthusiastically by Western cities and towns. Each community, it seemed, wanted the Lincoln Highway to pass through its borders. Although it generated great publicity, the tour did not produce many concrete results. "The Hoosier Tour of 1913," proclaimed Hokanson, "did little for the Lincoln Highway other than create confusion about the intended route and set the stage for misunderstandings."

The association announced the Lincoln Highway's intended route at the annual governor's conference in Colorado Springs, Colorado in late August 1913. The planned route ran for 3,389 miles, from Times Square in New York to Lincoln Park in San Francisco, and passed through New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, and California. The association, when it publicly released the route in September, was immediately besieged by letters from communities who, thinking they had assurances from Fisher that the highway would pass through their town, wanted the route changed. The association, however, stood firmly behind its planned highway and its direction remained essentially the same as when it was first announced.

As work progressed on completing America's first transcontinental highway, Fisher had turned his sights to other projects, especially improving a jungle of swamps to be known as Miami Beach. This switching from one project to another was a familiar Fisher trait.

"He was the catalyst, the spark plug, the idea man. The details could be left for others to complete--he had to keep moving," Hokanson wrote describing Fisher.

Although Fisher had big dreams for the Miami area, his wife Jane was not impressed with the area on their first trip there in 1912. Mosquitoes blackened the couple's clothing and Jane "refused to find any charm in this deserted strip of ugly land rimmed with a sandy beach." Carl, however, had a grander vision: "Look, honey," he told his wife, "I'm going to build a city here! A city like magic, like romantic places you read and dream about, but never see."

Florida, as Fisher envisioned the state, could be the perfect vacation spot for Midwestern automobile executives and their families tired of frigid winter weather. But in order to get vacationers to his resort, Fisher, the "father of the Lincoln Highway," had to use his promotional talents once again to nurture another highway's birth. On 4 December 1914 he wrote to Indiana Governor Samuel Ralston suggesting that an interstate highway be built from Chicago, Illinois, to Miami, Florida. Fisher argued that the Dixie Highway would "do more good for the South than if they should get ten cents for their cotton." The highway could also "mean hundreds of millions of dollars to Indiana in the next twenty-five years."

Ralston, who believed strongly in good roads, quickly acted on Fisher's proposal. The Indiana politician invited his fellow governors from the effected states--Illinois, Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia--to a meeting about the highway, which was held in Chattanooga, Tennessee, on 3 April 1915. At the meeting, Ralston stated that the Dixie Highway could act "as an advance agent of social intercourse, mutual understanding, and national unity and good will." The other governors agreed with Ralston's vision and pledged their support. Fisher also offered his unique promotional skills on the road's behalf, leading fifteen cars from Indianapolis to Miami on a Dixie Highway Pathfinding Tour. In September 1916 Fisher and Ralston attended a celebration in Martinsville opening the roadway from Indianapolis to Miami.

Fisher's grand dreams, which sprang to reality with such projects as the Indianapolis Motor Speedway (sold in 1927 to World War I flying ace and former racecar driver Eddie Rickenbacker), the Lincoln and Dixie highways, and Miami Beach, came crashing down with those of many other businessmen in the 1929 Wall Street crash. He had sunk millions of dollars into a new development at Montauk on Long Island's eastern tip and, with the Great Depression's onset, had to sell his Miami property in order to satisfy Montauk bondholder's claims. Even when he sold his huge Miami Beach house, the indomitable Fisher spirit remained intact. "Hell," he said about the house, "it was too far for me to walk to the front door [anyway]."

The Indianapolis attorney who represented Fisher in his many breach of promise suits, Walter Myers, remembered the last time he saw his former client. Visiting Miami Beach on business after the Great Depression, Myers spotted Fisher standing with one foot on a park bench. Stopping his car, Myers walked up to Fisher, shook his hand, and asked him how he was doing. The answer Myers received was not encouraging:

I can tell you in a few words. The bottom dropped out of the sea. New York and Long Island took everything I had. I'm a beggar--dead broke, no family to fall back on. Yes, the bottom dropped out of the sea and I went with it.
You know, I promoted Miami Beach here. The grateful people got up a purse, five hundred dollars a month for me. That's what I live on.
I used to make dreams come true. Can't do it anymore. I'm only a beggar now. The end can't be far away.

Fisher died from a gastric hemorrhage on 15 July 1939 in Miami Beach. Jane Fisher, divorced from Fisher in 1926 and remarried, never forgot her life with a man some Hoosiers had labeled "crazy." Living with her first husband, said Jane Fisher, was like "living in a circus: there was something going on--something exciting going on--every minute of the day. Sometimes it was very good; sometimes it was very bad. Still, it was living. It was excitement, aliveness, that I never found again."