

Carl Graham Fisher: Mr. Miami Beach and Much More
By Stanley Turkel, MHS, ISHC

Part I

In 1930, the novelist Arnold Bennett wrote “Imperial Palace” and described in unforgettable detail the services rendered to hotel guests. Bennett spreads before us the kaleidoscope of the hotel’s departments – telephone operators, restaurants, bars, linen service, maids, bellboys, porters, handymen, electricians, plumbers, doctors, stenographers, detectives, cashiers, executives and oh-so-many more. Each is like the strand of a spiderweb, converging upon the one all-important center, the guest. But there are a hundred guests, five hundred, a thousand or more! And all these delicate strands must respond simultaneously, if need be, to the mood (no, the very whim) of each guest.

My own experience encompasses the management of large hotels which required the coordination of these many strands. In the course of my work, I researched the hotel pioneers who built the hotels and created the systems to serve their guests. This research led me into the fascinating lives of eleven people who created the hotel industry as we know it.

They are Carl Graham Fisher, Henry Morrison Flagler, Fred Harvey, Ernest Henderson, Sr., Conrad N. Hilton, Howard D. Johnson, J. Willard Marriott, Henry Bradley Plant, Ellsworth M. Statler, Juan Trippe and Kemmons Wilson.

In subsequent issues of Lodging Hospitality, I will excerpt each chapter of my book “Pioneers of the Hotel Industry.”

Carl G. Fisher, Miami Beach developer, stood on the corner of Lincoln Road and Washington Avenue in 1915 watching the jungle of mangrove trees being chopped down and said, “Gentlemen, Lincoln Road will become one of the most beautiful shopping areas in the world.”

Except for Fisher Island, no beach, no highway, no hotels, no speedway is named for Carl Graham Fisher whose accomplishments were extraordinary. For Fisher, the project was always more important than his particular role in it. However, the legacy of Fisher’s accomplishments lives on to this very day:

- Miami Beach, carved from a jungle is thriving as never before.
- Fisher Island was converted from an alligator-inhabited mangrove swamp after the Federal government in 1905 sliced off the southern tip of Miami Beach to make a shipping channel from Miami to the Atlantic Ocean. Fisher bought the island in 1919 from Dana A. Dorsey, a prominent black businessman in Miami who had given up on an effort to build a resort for blacks who were barred by segregation from Miami’s beaches.

- Montauk Manor in Suffolk County has been converted to a high end condominium residence.
- The Indianapolis 500 founded by Fisher, remains the world's premier automobile racing event

The Early Years

Carl Fisher was one of America's large scale land developers – a Bunyonesque figure who envisioned entire new cities springing out of the ground. Born into poverty January 12, 1874, in Greensburg, Indiana he left school at the age of 12, to help support his family. From his earliest years he was blessed with an uncanny ability for salesmanship and promotion. He was as well a gifted athlete and excellent at swimming, diving, and driving anything with two or four wheels. These qualities lead Fisher to his earliest successful business ventures.

Competition bicycling was all the rage at the turn of the century. Endurance races captured the imagination of the public, and spurred on the fledging bike industry. Fisher became a member of one of the best known bike clubs in the Midwest, and made quite a name for himself on the circuit. Realizing the money to be made in selling, rather than riding bikes, he opened his first bike shop at the age of only 17. Within a few years he had done well enough to transform his bike shop into an automobile showroom, the first of it's kind in Indianapolis. Selling Packards, Stutz's and Reo trucks, the Fisher garage became one of the leading auto dealerships in the country.

Fisher's involvement in the early automobile industry lead to an investment that brought his first fortune. Among the many problems of early motoring, was the poor quality of auto headlights. In 1904 a man walked into Fisher's shop who would change the automobile industry, and Fisher's life. Percy Avery was an older gentleman who had bought the patent to a promising French device. It consisted of a compressed gas cylinder filled with acetylene gas and an arc lamp. It gave off an intense light far superior to anything in the car market. The only problem – acetylene gas is extremely flammable, and no auto manufacturer would touch it.

Fisher was a risk taker, and put up the money to begin manufacturing this new, compressed gas headlight. Soon, the Prest-O-Lite was standard equipment for most American autos. The tanks were finally made safe when they were lined with asbestos. Fisher's investment in the company soared. By 1917 Prest-O-Lite was nationwide, and was sold to the Union Carbide Company for the hefty price of \$9,000,000. Fisher's share was a very tidy \$6,000,000! With that bankroll in hand, the 43-year old Fisher began to look for even bigger, and better projects to lavish his considerable skills upon.

Founder of The Indianapolis Speedway

He pursued his dream of building a major American automobile racetrack. On a 1905 trip overseas to compete in 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 and

friends put together \$250,000 in 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. On August 19, 1909, a week after the motorcyclists 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 his associate Arthur C. 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." He drove the first Indianapolis 500 Pace Car in a Stoddard Dayton.

Pioneer of the Interstate Highway System

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 met the road problem like he did any other problem—head on. At a September 1912 dinner party for automobile manufacturers at the Deutsches 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! Lets' 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 secured pledges from the auto officials at the dinner.

On July 1, 1913 the Lincoln Highway Association was created with Henry Joy, of the Packard Motor Company 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." The planned route ran for 3,389 miles,

from Times Square in New York to Lincoln Park in San Francisco, and passed through New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, and California. It was the first link in a national interstate highway system.

As work progressed on completing America's first transcontinental highway, Fisher turned his sights to other projects, especially improving a jungle of swamps to be known as Miami Beach.

Although Fisher had big dreams for the Miami area, his wife Jane was not impressed with the area on their first trip 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 December 4, 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 hundred of millions of dollars to Indiana in the next twenty-five years."

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 in Miami.

Next month, I will complete the story of Carl Fisher, the creator of Miami Beach. Some of this material appeared in the Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly, April 2001.

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