



Bro.: Elias J. Jacoby  
Instrumental in formula for 33 cars  
starting each "Indy 500" race.

## **THE MASONIC ORIGIN OF 33 CARS IN THE INDIANAPOLIS 500**

by  
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Ever since I was a young boy, I would watch The Indianapolis 500 on television, which is often dubbed as "The Greatest Spectacle in Racing." It wasn't until many years later, that I learned that my mother's cousin George J. Riedl, 32°, of Indianapolis watched many "Indy 500" races in-person, when he was a youngster and later when he became an adult. He knew race-statistics and names of drivers, pit-crews and car-owners by name. My late father John William "Bill" Marples, 32°, a Knight Templar and a Shriner, was a farmer and a mechanic in his later years. My dad wasn't a car-racer, but somehow I always admired my dad's ability to drive cars in any terrain ---- whether it was the Great Plains of Kansas or Nebraska; or in the steepest of mountains in Colorado --- he always had a steady hand on the steering-wheel and knowledgeable hands with the wrenches in his toolbox.

Most people today are aware that Bro.: Sam Hornish, Jr., is a three-time winner of the Indianapolis 500 and he is a Mason and a Shriner. Bro.: Hornish was born in 1979; and by then I was already a member of DeMolay for over two years before he was born. It was while I was in DeMolay that during our DeMolay projects {for lack of a better name} we studied the Masonic profiles of men such as Frank S. Land, Frank Marshall, as well as improving our knowledge of the superstructure of Freemasonry, including Appendant Orders, Concordant Orders, and the "fun orders" such as the Shrine and Grotto, whose membership was predicated upon Masonic membership, and allied with Masonry, but not part of traditional Masonry-proper. As DeMolay boys, we studied car makers who were Masons such as Bro.: Walter P. Chrysler; Bro.: Henry Ford; Bro.: Ransom Olds, and Bro.: Andre Citroen the French car maker. It also has been reported that the tire manufacturer John Boyd Dunlop (who patented the first pneumatic or inflatable tire) {of Dunlop Tire fame} was initiated into The Lodge of Harmony in Belfast {now Northern Ireland}.



When I was in Sunflower Chapter of DeMolay, I bought my first copy of a book "Parade To Glory, The History of The Shriners and their Caravan with Destiny." It spoke of Bro.: Elias J. Jacoby, being a prominent Mason in Indianapolis. It also mentioned Bro.: Eddie Rickenbacker, The World War I Flying Ace. Bro.: Jacoby joined Masonry in Indiana; while Bro.: Rickenbacker joined Masonry in Michigan. Initially, I thought there was no connection between them. Yet, it was many years later that I discovered the early connection between the two men, being centered at Indianapolis --- and at the Indianapolis 500.

The principal man credited with getting The Indy 500 started as a noteworthy event was Carl Fisher. To my knowledge, Mr. Fisher was not a Mason. He was, however, a prime investor in the company "Prest-O-Lite" and with James Allison used the patent to produce acetylene headlights which sold nearly every headlamp on every car in America. In the year 1913 the Company "Prest-O-Lite" was sold to Union Carbide for \$9 million dollars --- an enormous sum for those days.

That new found fortune allowed Fisher to build the Indianapolis 500 speedway, nicknamed "The Brickyard." The most pivotal aspect of this was that in the pre-WWI years: Bro.: Rickenbacker was a race car driver for.....none other than Carl Fisher's "Prest-O-Lite" team !!!! Rickenbacker raced not only in Indianapolis, but also Sioux City, Kansas City and Omaha racetracks. The Omaha racetracks heaped lavish praise on Rickenbacker.

Initially, The Indy 500 track was originally made of gravel-and-tar, but asphalt-breakage caused two fatal accidents, which induced Carl Fisher to re-pave the track with 3.2 million bricks. Hence, its nickname of "The Brickyard." The track has been paved-over in modern times with only a small token strip of bricks {for sentimental reasons} near the start-finish line. A few years ago, I personally drove The Indy 500 track, on "Community Day," the one & only day out of the year when officials permit private people to drive their personal vehicles on the track, escorted in small clusters, with a lead car; then several ordinary people driving their personal cars; then a follow-up escort car to insure safety. I was delighted to drive the World Famous track; albeit I would have liked to have been able to pep-up more speed !!!!! Yet, I was glad for the experience. The steep-banking of corners is much more pronounced than a person sees on television. So, it was probably wise that I {and others} drove at a slightly slower speed. At any speed, the tall concrete walls are something to behold.

I knew ever since I was a kid that The Indy 500 track is an 2.5 mile oval track. At the beginning of each race, after the formalities such as an Invocation prayer, a flyover, a rendition of the song "Back Home In Indiana" and the playing of The National Anthem: the call goes out--- "Gentleman, start your Engines !!!" {or Gentlemen and Ladies, if such is the case}. Then the roar of engines of cars which file into three rows of three cars abreast: making a total of 33 cars as "starters" for each race.

After several years of making inquiries with no response --- just a few days ago, I was very pleased to be contacted by Mr. Donald Davidson of The Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum. He disclosed that 40 cars started in the year 1911's '500'. He said back then "AAA, the sanctioning body, decided 40 was too many. A formula was devised after considering the question: 'If all of the starting cars were to be spaced equally around the track, what would be the safe distance to have between each?

"The magic number (for whatever reason) was determined to be 400 feet."

"Four hundred feet 'goes into' 2 and 1/2 miles 33 times." That became AAA's requirement for



1912, but in the meantime, Carl Fisher set the Indianapolis 500 limit at 30 (cars). It was not until 1915 that he increased it to 33 cars. Just to complicate matters, the limit was increased during the Great Depression years, topping out in 1933 when 42 cars started at the opening wave of the green flag.

"The maximum of 33 was reinstated for 1934", according to Mr. Davidson.

Much of the credit for the legendary "33 cars" starting each Indianapolis 500 race is due to Bro.: Elias J. Jacoby in his interactions with Carl Fisher and driver (later owner of The Speedway itself). Bro.: Eddie Rickenbacker, 33°, Knight Templar, and a Shriner.

Fisher excelled at entrepreneurial inventions and promotions. Bro.: Elias J. Jacoby excelled at banking, mathematics and Masonic symbolism.

Bro.: Elias J. Jacoby's Masonic Record and biography is impressive ---- He was born on a farm near Marion, Ohio. He was a Master Mason in Mystic Tie Lodge #398 in Indianapolis, Indiana. He was High Priest of Keystone Chapter # 6 of Royal Arch Masons and Grand High Priest of the Grand Chapter of R.A.M. of Indiana in 1910. He was Illustrious Master of Indianapolis Council # 2 of Royal & Select Masters in 1907. He was also Grand Sovereign of the Order of the Red Cross of Constantine in 1924. He was also the fifth Potentate of Murat Shriners in Indianapolis.

When the Railroadmen's Savings Association company was formed in 1877, Bro.: Jacoby became its attorney and director. He later became President of that financial institution which was one of the largest of its kind in the United States; and the absolute largest financial institution of any kind in the entire State of Indiana. Consequently, Bro.: Jacoby and Carl Fisher began a long-term association...not just purely financial, but also for the betterment of the Indianapolis community in-general. Carl Fisher the entrepreneur succeeded in part because of Bro.: Jacoby the lawyer and financial advisor. And, Bro.: Jacoby's knowledge of Masonic Brotherhood and symbolism carried-over to the up-and-coming Landmark: The Indianapolis 500 Speedway; including the mystique and pageantry surrounding the Indianapolis 500 race itself. Bro.: Jacoby believed that a competitive race with significant prizes and national acclaim would transform an otherwise bland car race into the national fixture it is today, with 'Winners' known throughout the land and trophies that are highly treasured and coveted for what they symbolize.

Bro.: Jacoby wasn't alone in his efforts. Bro.: J. Worth Baker another devout Mason and Shriner was an enthusiastic supporter of The Indy 500. Today, the Indianapolis 500 Festival is a month-long celebration featuring city-wide programs and features during the month of May. Four men started the dance and ball associated with the "500 Festival" back in the year 1957. They were: Howard Wilcox; Joe Quinn; Indianapolis Mayor Alex Clark; and Bro.: J. Worth Baker who was then Potentate of Murat Shrine Temple and later was Imperial Potentate of all Shriners in North America. Largely due to Bro.: Worth Baker's efforts, Murat Shriners continues their visible presence {and promotion} of "the 500 Festival Parade."

Being a consummate mathematician, Bro.: Elias J. Jacoby knew that 400 feet could be translated into "yards." And, 400 feet equals 133.33 yards. Here again, that significant number of "33" appears. It isn't mysterious or coincidental. It was convenient, yet deliberate Masonic Symbolism. And, thus, the traditional field of 33 Starting Drivers begin each Indianapolis 500 race. It is comforting that the "twin checkered-flags" signals the Winner of "The Greatest Spectacle in Racing." Quite fittingly, the winner celebrates the "win" with a 'libation' of milk.



Interestingly, the origins of the checkered-flag are lost in the mists of history. However, one commonly heard theory states that it was rooted in the horse races in the American Midwest whereby it was a signal that the race had ended and the meals would begin. So a large checkered tablecloth was waved. Another possible explanation touted by historians is that the checkered flag was more visible on early dirt-tracks and thus was more easily seen by the driver. Nowadays, the checkered-flag has come to symbolize the completion of almost any major endeavor, even including the downloading of some computer software programs.

The Indianapolis 500 has numerous aspects of Masonic symbolism incorporated in its heritage. And, it, in turn, has spawned traditions and symbolism that have made a positive effect upon our American Culture. Due to the hard work of Masons as car drivers, car owners, track-owners, pit crewmen, announcers, and promoters --- The Indianapolis 500 and its starting lineup of 33 cars continues to be "The Greatest Spectacle in Racing." So Mote It Be.

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Sources / Acknowledgements / Recommended Readings:

- Parade To Glory: The Shriners and Their Caravan To Destiny, 1969 edition.
- Archives: Indianapolis 500 Museum
- Personal electronic communication between Donald Davidson of the Indianapolis 500 and Frater James A. Marples in a message dated 12 February 2014 in which Mr. Davidson addresses "33 Starters in 500 {Race}." The author also wishes to acknowledge the good help of Linda Price in The Indy 500 ticket-sales office for facilitating this interesting communication.
- Archives: Masonic Grand Lodge of Indiana
- Archives: Scottish Rite Cathedral of Indianapolis.
- Archives: Grand York Rite Masonic Bodies of Indiana.
- Archives: The Supreme Council, 33° noting the 33° membership of Bro.: Eddie Rickenbacker, 33°
- Archives: Omaha World Herald.

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About the Author:

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He is a Regular Member of The Allied Masonic Degrees; Grand College of Rites; St. David Conclave of The Red Cross of Constantine; Shawnee County Kansas Square and Compass Club; and Holyrood Council #61 of Knight Masons (Nebraska).

