

The Allison Who "Got Away"

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Several years after the establishment of the Allison Coupon Company in Indianapolis, IN, Noah Allison, its founder, died. His wife, Myra, inherited the ownership of the company. Her three eldest sons became directors of the company: Wallace S. Allison serving as secretary, James A Allison as vice-president and Dillmore C. Allison as superintendent. However, James A Allison found himself more intrigued by the rapidly developing field of automobiles and racing. He sold his interests in the Allison Coupon Company back to the company. His timing was very fortunate and it enabled him to become a prominent part of the Indianapolis auto

motive scene. Believe it or not, more than seventy different makes of automobiles were produced in the area, including such classics as the Cole, Dusen-berg, Marmon, and Stutz.

Early "horseless carriages" were essentially usable only during the daylight hours. Some of them were equipped with Kerosene lamps, but these provided little illumination of the roadway and were more like the "running lights" on a boat or airplane today. The introduction of acetylene headlights greatly improved the lighting. It was a messy system in which the acetylene was produced by dripping water onto calcium carbide located in a container on the running board of the car. The acetylene thus produced was then piped to the headlights where it was burned to produce a bright light.

In 1904, Percy C. Avery had acquired a French patent for compressing acetylene in steel cylinders. Acetylene is a gas which is violently explosive when subjected to shock, spark or sudden heating. He took a sample cylinder to Carl G. Fisher, a man whose exploits in promoting the sales of bicycles and cars had won him the nickname of "Crazy Carl." Realizing the potentials of this patent, Carl recruited James Allison as a financial backer for the venture and in September of 1904, "Prest-O-Lite" was formed. Despite a series of plant explosions, the company became very successful and their acetylene cylinders and headlights were soon used throughout the auto industry. The company became the largest calcium carbide customer of Union Carbide. There were 34 branch plants in operation by 1917. Jim Allison and Carl Fisher had already become millionaires. In that same year they sold a

controlling interest in Prest-O-Lite for a mere \$9,000,000. Later that year, Union Carbide & Carbon Company was formed through the merger of National Carbon, Union Carbide Electro Metallurgical, Prest-O-Lite, and Linde Air Products.

On Labor Day of 1905, Barney Oldfield was the winner of the Indiana State Fair Auto Race. Two racing cars produced by the National Motor Car and Vehicle Corporation of Indianapolis broke world records held by French Renaults. It was then decided to stage an assault on the world record for distance covered in 24-hours by automobile. This race was held in November under Jim Allison's management. The 24-hour distance mark was increased from 789 miles to 1094 miles.

As a follow-up to the this race, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway was established in 1909 as a dirt track. Fisher, as the largest stockholder of the speedway firm, served as president. Allison was the secretary-treasurer. The first race held on the new track was halted at 235 miles because of the many accidents and deaths resulting from the poor track conditions. The track was rebuilt, using 3,500,000 bricks as the base for the new track surface. Thus the Speedway got its nickname of "the Brickyard". The first Indianapolis Speedway 500-mile International Sweepstakes Race was held on May 30, 1911. The annual event became the ultimate proving ground for worldwide automotive innovations. Allison became president of the company in 1913 and served in that capacity until Eddie Rickenbacker and his associates took over.

Fisher, Allison, and their associates felt that it would be helpful to set up some racing teams for competing on the Speedway track. The first of these, the Indianapolis Speedway Team Company, was established on September 14, 1915. The second team was called the Prest-O-Lite Team. Perhaps the third was the National Motor Car Team. Late in 1916, Allison became the sole owner of the first team and it became the Allison Speedway Team Company. Fisher kept the Prest-O-Lite Team. Allison then built a new shop near the Speedway, staffed with leading craftsman and mechanics and equipped with the most advanced machines and tools available. With the entrance of the United States in World War I, work on auto racing was terminated, and the name of the company was changed to the Allison Experimental Company. After the war, a winning Indy 500 racer was entered. With that success, Allison abandoned auto

racing for more challenging fields.

Displaying another new name, the Allison Engineering Company, operating as a job shop, took on a wide variety of projects. During World War I, over 20,000 Liberty Aircraft Engines were produced in the U.S. for use in Allied aircraft. Half of these reached Europe, the balance remained in shipping crates at Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio. Several hundred of these engines were produced by Allison. Unfortunately, the Liberty engines had crankshaft and connecting rod bearings which failed after 50-hours or so of use. Norman Gibson, chief engineer with Allison since 1917, developed an improved bearing for these engines, which enabled the Liberty engines to be operated for hundreds of hours. Government contracts to rework the engines crated at Wright Field provided Allison with steady work during the 1920's. These bearings were also used in the engine of Lindbergh's "Spirit of Saint Louis" during its trans-atlantic flight in 1927. The process of making the Gilman bearing was later shared with Rolls-Royce under a licensing agreement.

During the 1920's, Allison Engineering produced twelve high-performance marine engines. This got them involved in the problems of transmitting power from an engine into propulsion. Other projects introduced the engineers to the intricacies of precision reduction gears. Contracts involving the engines on the Navy's Zeppelin-type airships further increased Allison Engineering's involvement with aviation engines.

James Allison's first marriage ended in divorce in June of 1928. On July 29th. of that year, he married his secretary at the Montauk Point, Long Island, home of his long-time associate, Carl Fisher. That week he came down with a heavy cold and while on a business trip to Indianapolis, the illness became serious. The front pages of the newspapers of August 4, 1928, announced his death.

In order to maintain Allison Engineering's value as a going concern, his executor put the company up for sale with the stipulation that its operation be continued in Indianapolis for a ten-year period. The company was purchased by Fisher & Company of Detroit. Eddie Rickenbacker was named as president on January 1, 1929. The two Fisher brothers were members of the executive committee of General Motors Corporation, so it was not surprising to find that Fisher & Company sold its Allison holdings to GM as of April 1, 1929.

In 1934, Allison became a division of General Motors. Under General Motors, the Allison Engineering Company continued to concentrate on the development of the V1710 airplane engine. Prior to, and during World War II, more than 70,000 of the V1710 engines were used in the following aircraft: P-38, P-40, P-51A, P-63, A-36, F-82, FM-1, XP-55, XB-55, XB-38, and XB-42. Up through 1990, an additional 78,000-plus engines of newer and more advanced design were built. These consisted of different versions of turbo-shaft, piston-prop, turbo-prop, turbo-fan and turbo-jet engines. In addition, a number of automobile, truck and small industrial turbines were developed.

Jim Allison certainly would have been proud of the output of the organization he started way back in 1915 as the Indianapolis Speedway Company.