



A CITY OF PROMISE

1900 - 1909

When The Indianapolis Star began publishing in 1903, it became part of a bustling city whose population had expanded by almost 10 times in the past 40 years. Railroads had produced the boom and by the turn of the century Indianapolis was flush with the belief that the city's time was at hand.

Just a year before The Star's launch, in 1902, the Soldiers and Sailors Monument was dedicated, honoring Civil War veterans. Tens of thousands of people had poured into the city for the dedication of the monument, which had taken nearly \$600,000 and 14 years to build. The master of ceremonies for the day was Lew Wallace, whose book, *Ben-Hur*, had become a best seller. James Whitcomb Riley read a poem he had written for the occasion.

In addition to Riley, Indianapolis could claim several other literary stars of the day, including novelist Booth Tarkington.

In politics, the city had already produced a president, Benjamin Harrison, and in 1904 another Indianapolis resident, Charles W. Fairbanks, was elected to the vice-presidency under Theodore Roosevelt.

The city had also been the birthplace of a new political party when, in 1901, the Socialist Party of America was founded. One of the key players in the Socialist movement was Eugene V. Debs, of Terre Haute.

Photographs of downtown Indianapolis in the early 1900s show sidewalks jammed with people from building to curb, and streets a jumble of horse-drawn carriages and wagons, men on bicycles and streetcars.

Each day hundreds of passengers poured into the city center from 200 trains arriving at Union Station. The wholesale district, just south of Washington Street, was a place where everything imaginable, from household goods to tobacco and candy, could be found. Wagons rushed between Union Station and the wholesale businesses, delivering goods that formed mountains of crates along street fronts.

In 1903, the 450-room Claypool Hotel opened, with rooms furnished with

mahogany dressers and brass beds. At the hotel owner's insistence, each room had a private bath. For many years it would be the city's finest hotel.

Two years later, in 1905, the city's first modern department store, L.S. Ayres & Co., went up on the southwest corner at Meridian and Washington streets. Meanwhile, the Wm. H. Block Co., which started out as a small store on East Washington, had its eye on the southwest corner of Illinois and Market streets for a new building, which would open in 1911.

As significant as the Soldiers and Sailors Monument was to Indianapolis' long-term identity, another symbol of the city's future was being created in a farm field west of the city. It was a test track for the emerging automobile industry and it would become known as the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

The track was the brainchild of Carl Fisher, a poor boy from Greensburg who dropped out of school to go to work at age 12 and who moved to Indianapolis as a teen and joined his brothers in operating a bicycle shop at 112 N. Pennsylvania St. Bicycles weren't fast enough for Fisher, and he was soon racing cars. He opened an automobile showroom on North Illinois Street about 1902 and by the end of 1908 he formed a new venture with James Allison and others to build a race track for testing automobiles.

Automobiles were no longer just a curiosity, but a fortune-making venture, and as the speeds of cars went up, auto manufacturing companies were running out of places to test them. Fisher and Allison weren't planning to create a sporting event, but a place to demonstrate a car's proficiency.

The partners borrowed \$250,000 to build the track and tried to recoup some of their investment through such public events as balloon, motorcycle and automobile races. But the events organized in 1909 were failures, and the original track broke apart under the pounding of speeding cars. Fisher replaced the original track with paving bricks, but after the 1910 races the track was still not a success. By this point the partners had invested more than \$700,000 and needed one spectacular event that would bring crowds to the Speedway each year. As 1910 drew to a close a plan emerged for a 500-mile automobile race to be held at the track on Decoration Day, 1911. The Indianapolis 500 has been a Memorial Day weekend tradition ever since.

Opposite page: Farmers with their horses and wagons peddle produce on Market Street in front of the City Market, circa 1906. At the turn of the century, a large number of people bought fresh produce at the Market.