

Tony Hulman, Retro Riley May 2023

When he bought the Indianapolis Motor Speedway from World War I flying ace Eddie Rickenbacker and associates in 1945, prominent Terre Haute businessman and philanthropist Anton “Tony” Hulman took a risk. The dilapidated track, idle for most of World War II and in disrepair, was slated to be torn down to become a housing development. As the new owner, Hulman invested in numerous improvements to the track and grounds to launch the first Indianapolis 500 race under his leadership in 1946. The investment paid off and the crowds flocked to the Speedway that year and ever since. The Memorial Day Holiday weekend and the Indianapolis 500, “the greatest spectacle in racing” and one of the most widely recognized and heaviest attended sporting events in history, has evolved into a tradition that forever links the hearts of motor sports racing fans everywhere thanks in large part to Hulman’s vision and leadership.

The late 1940s saw Riley Hospital for Children on the verge of venturing into a new and exciting phase of growth, one that would propel the hospital into being able to do world-class research in childhood diseases. It was a time of change in leadership at the Riley Memorial Association. Hugh McKennan Landon died in 1947; Landon had served as Association President since 1924. Perry Lesh was tapped soon after in 1947 to serve as the Association’s second President until 1974. Wise choices of leadership continued when Tony Hulman was named in April 1949 by the Association to head a Centennial Research fund campaign (to honor the centennial of James Whitcomb Riley’s 1849 birthday) to raise a million dollars to support Riley Hospital’s new research wing and laboratories. In accepting appointment as chairman of the Fund, Hulman said, “I am proud to play what part I can in exploring the possibilities of tearing away the mysteries surrounding so many of the diseases that strike children as well as adults.” At the time of Hulman’s appointment, Perry Lesh, Riley Memorial Association President, reported that advance work for the campaign already has been done in several Indiana counties. Lesh said permanent research projects to be carried out will include studies in children’s heart disorders, especially rheumatic fever; transplantation of nerves, endocrine gland disorders, and establishment of so-called “bone banks.”

Choosing Hulman followed in the tradition of the founders and owners of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway (Carl Fisher, Frank Wheeler, James A. Allison, and Arthur C. Newby, 1909-1927) all who were supporters of Riley Hospital for Children in its early years. For generations, the relationship between the Indianapolis 500 and the hospital was no more evident than when race car drivers visited children and families at Riley Hospital every May leading up to the race. The new medium of television also played a role in accelerating statewide recognition of both the Indianapolis 500 Race and the Riley Hospital campaign. In late May 1949, the Indianapolis 500 was broadcast for the first time by local television station WFBM (now Channel 6) for the first time and thousands of Indianapolis homes tuned in. “The Perfect Memorial,” the first Hoosier-made film to be televised in Indianapolis was broadcast by WFBM to climax the drive for \$1,000,000 by the Riley Centennial Research Fund at the end of June 1949. The 26-minute color and sound film highlighted plans for the establishment of a research foundation for the study of children’s diseases as a major part of the hospital’s future.

The campaign was set to take place during the month of June 1949. While Hulman served as statewide chairman, business and civic leaders from 12 areas across Indiana were designated as district chairman supervising 70 volunteer county committees. Money raised through this campaign was to be used to

support equipment and research in children's diseases to be carried out in specialized laboratories of the Riley Research Wing that was built by the State of Indiana in support of this effort.

The June 1949 campaign with Hulman at the helm was successful. By the end of June, a fully equipped laboratory for research into child diseases was assured with the release by the Riley Memorial Association of a report stating that it now had the money to carry out the project. The campaign, however, was far from over. The Riley Research Fund also needed to be able to finance operation of the Research Wing after its completion so fund-raising efforts continued to support this long-term goal.

Tony Hulman's grandson, Anton Hulman "Tony" George, is a Life Governor of the Riley Children's Foundation, an honor so designated because of his contributions to the hospital during his service on the Foundation's Board of Directors.

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Anton “Tony” Hulman:

<https://indianamemory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/IMS/id/13412/rec/131>

Tony Hulman, ca. 1940s



<https://indianamemory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/IMS/id/7935/rec/187>

Wilbur Shaw and Tony Hulman in AAA Tire Test Car, 1946

