

Colonel Eli Lilly (1838-1898)

Eli Lilly was born July 8, 1838, at Fairmont Plantation on Old Liberty Road in Baltimore, Maryland. Named after his grandfather, he was the first of 11 children born to Gustavus and Esther Kirby Lilly. Eli was still an infant when the family moved to Lexington, Kentucky, and eventually settled on a farm in Gallatin County, near Warsaw, Kentucky, where they remained for more than a decade.

Determined that his children would have an opportunity to acquire the best possible education, Gustavus relocated the family in the spring of 1852 to Greencastle, Indiana, home of a noted Methodist school, Indiana Asbury College (now DePauw University).

From 1852 to 1854, young Eli attended the university, where he completed courses in the school's Primary Department, "designed to furnish young men the means of acquiring a common English education and preparing them for admission to the Scientific or the Preparatory Department." During this time, he also served as printer's devil on *Asbury Notes*, the college newspaper.

In the summer of 1854, the 16-year-old graduate traveled 60 miles by train to visit his Uncle Caleb and Aunt Hennie Lilly in the nearby town of Lafayette. A thriving town in the north-central part of the state, Lafayette was filled with interesting sights and shops that promised an exciting visit. One shop in particular, the Good Samaritan Drugstore, captured his attention.

Reared in a religious home, young Eli Lilly knew the Biblical significance of the sign and was encouraged to take a closer look. He lingered near the front door, gazing at the walls lined with rows of curiously shaped bottles and jars and smelling the strange aromas that wafted into the street. This experience had a tremendous influence on his life, and his short visit turned into a long stay.

The Good Samaritan store made such an impression on him that he told his uncle he would like to get a job there. Uncle Caleb approved, for he knew the proprietor, Henry Lawrence, to be a man of fine character and reputation. He called on Lawrence and, after a brief discussion, the apothecary agreed to apprentice Eli.

The life of a pharmacist's apprentice was not an easy one. Eli cleaned the premises, took care of the fire, washed bottles and other containers, ran errands, kept the shelves stocked, and possibly even took care of the proprietor's horse in spare moments. Payment was probably the customary dollar or two per week "and keep." Evenings were devoted to studying whatever books on the subject of pharmacy were available. After a year or so, Lilly was permitted to mix drugs. Between duties, he found time to join the local militia company, where he was introduced to the workings of local politics.

In 1858, Eli left the employ of Lawrence after earning a certificate of proficiency. He increased his pharmacy experience by working for Israel Spencer and Sons, a wholesale and retail drug business in Lafayette. The following year, he worked as a clerk for the retail drug enterprise of Perkins and Coons in Indianapolis.

In the spring of 1860, Eli returned to Greencastle, where he worked for a short time in Jerome Allen's drugstore. Then, in January 1861, with some financial assistance from his father and his own small savings, Eli opened his own drugstore on the town square. On January 31, he married his childhood sweetheart, Emily Lemon.

President Lincoln's call to arms in the Civil War came in April 1861. Lilly was not eager to leave his new business and young wife, but like thousands of other Americans who had strong convictions about the issues, he put his personal life on hold to answer the call. He locked the door of his drugstore, bade his wife good-by, and joined the infantry.

The 23-year-old soldier enlisted in the Putnam Rifles, 21st Regiment of the Indiana Volunteer Militia, where he received a commission as a second lieutenant. Lilly's regiment was shipped east, but instead of going into battle in Virginia, the unit was sent to Baltimore as garrison for one of the harbor ports. After six months of boredom and inactivity, Eli resigned his commission and returned home with the hope of forming an artillery unit. During his absence, his only son, Josiah Kirby (Josie) Lilly, was born on November 18, 1861.

In early 1862, Eli turned his attention to seeking support for organizing a new unit. Throughout the next few months, he besieged Governor Oliver P. Morton for permission to organize an artillery battery of Hoosier soldiers. "Meanwhile," he wrote, "I studied artillery practice. I recited my lessons and learned the theory of maneuvers." By summer, the governor awarded young Lilly his commission as a captain and granted permission to start a battery. Upon approval to proceed with his new unit, Captain Lilly recruited 156 men. The Eighteenth Indiana Battery of Light Artillery was established on August 6, 1862, at Camp Morton (now the Indianapolis Fairgrounds).

On September 1, the unit was outfitted with guns and horses. The battery consisted of six cast-iron Rodman rifles—a favorite fieldpiece of the Union Army—and Lilly divided the battery into three sections, each with two Rodmans and eight horses (instead of the usual six) per limber. Later in the war, Lilly outfitted the unit with four mountain howitzers pulled by mules, thus earning the nickname of the "Jackass battery." This regiment, serving under Union Major General William S. Rosecrans, became the best-outfitted artillery unit in his command.

The 18th Indiana had exactly three days to train with their new equipment before they were sent into the battle zone. The need was urgent. The entire western Confederate Army under General Bragg was moving north into Kentucky. Louisville was in a state of siege and fortifications were being hastily constructed at Cincinnati. Every available man was being rushed south to meet the threat, and the 18th was caught up in this deployment. Eli Lilly and his battery ate and slept on the move for two weeks.

For the next six months, Lilly's battery fought scattered Confederate forces in Kentucky and northern Tennessee. It was a long period of minor skirmishes, the hardships of daily drills, inclement weather, exposure, and disease. By the end of the year, the 18th Indiana had not participated in a single major battle but had lost more than 30 men to disease and the rigors of the service. But the stringent artillery practice demanded by Lilly paid off. The unit was noticed by a higher command and transferred on December 16, 1862, to join the famous mounted brigade of Colonel (later General) John T. Wilder as artillery support.

In early 1863, Wilder's Brigade—armed with the newest gun, the Spencer repeating rifle—and the Hoosiers trained as they marched on through Kentucky and into Tennessee. Animals, men, and cannons began a wearisome trek that brought them through rain, mud, “Jack-oak barrens,” and several less-famous engagements prior to the historic battle of Chattanooga.

In June 1863, under the command of Union General Rosecrans, Wilder's brigade spearheaded the assault in Tennessee of the Confederate army led by General Braxton Bragg. Rosecrans's initial objective was to capture the Confederate depot at Tullahoma. To accomplish this, Wilder was sent to sweep around the right of the opposing army by passing through a valley named Hoover's Gap. With lightening speed and armed with Lilly's battery for support, Wilder swept Confederate forces aside in the now-famous battle of Hoover's Gap, thus earning the name of “The Lightning Brigade.” The battery expended 350 rounds, disabled at least two Confederate cannons, and suffered no loss of men or guns. Captain Lilly received special notice and was specifically mentioned by General Rosecrans in his memo to Washington, D.C.

The Lightning Brigade, as Wilder's unit was now called, pushed further south, threatening to cut off the railroad link between the Confederates and Chattanooga—their main supply base. A number of skirmishes broke out, but constant rains forced Wilder to retreat. However, the damage inflicted by the brigade was sufficient to force the Confederate army to return to Chattanooga, where it arrived on July 1.

Rosecrans decided to attack Bragg at Chattanooga. Again, Wilder's Brigade swept north to the right of the Confederate army, moving through the hills and valleys north of Chattanooga. The guns of the 18th Indiana Battery were the first and last to fire upon the rebel stronghold. Captain Lilly was one of the first Union officers to enter the town and hoist the Stars and Stripes.

Bragg and his army vacated Chattanooga on September 11, 1863. Wilder's Brigade and the 18th Indiana Battery crossed the Tennessee River and proceeded south to Union headquarters. Wilder was then ordered to take position along Chickamauga Creek. Lilly set up his artillery at Alexander's Bridge and Dyers Bridge. The Confederates massed before them and opened fire on Union soldiers on September 18. The next day, the battle raged. Although the Confederates attacked again and again, the support provided by Wilder's Brigade and Lilly's battery was effective and the Confederates eventually retreated. However, tactical errors by Rosecrans and Wilder resulted in their forced retirement. The 18th Indiana Battery was assigned to General Edward McCook's cavalry division.

Throughout the next six months, Lilly's unit participated in battles at Thompson's Cove, McMinnville, Farmington, Mossy Creek, and Fair Gardens. But Cook's tactics of using the 18th

Indiana Battery to bait and ambush their adversaries didn't set well with Captain Lilly. At Mossy Creek, the battery was nearly captured, Lilly was wounded, and the unit lost six men to death and injury. In the spring of 1864, Lilly resigned his commission in the artillery and assumed new duties as a major in the 121st Regiment of the 9th Indiana Cavalry.

Under the command of Colonel George Jackson, the 9th remained in Tennessee. In September, it received word that a small force of Confederate soldiers was burning bridges by Sulfur Creek. Major Lilly was detached with the 121st Regiment to assist in halting the destruction. The unit was met by nearly 12,000 veteran cavalry soldiers under the command of Confederate General N. B. Forrest and a situation far worse than anticipated.

Forrest attacked and all officers who outranked Lilly were either killed or wounded. Lilly found himself in charge of the garrison. Being hopelessly outnumbered, he asked for surrender terms. Forrest demanded an unconditional surrender, but Lilly held out for terms in which all defenders would be treated as prisoners of war. Anxious to get on to a major operation near Pulaski, Tennessee, Forrest agreed. Unfortunately, he did not honor the bargain he struck with Lilly.

Black soldiers were sold into slavery, and white, enlisted men were sent to a prison camp at Cahaba, Alabama. Lilly and the officers fared better and were sent to a prison camp in Enterprise, Mississippi. Of the 170 men who accompanied Major Lilly to Sulfur Creek, 83 were dead within six months, either in defense of the fort in the Alabama prison or in the explosion of the steamboat "Sultana" on April 27, 1865, which was taking prisoners of war home.

After Lilly was released in a prisoner exchange in January 1865, he returned to duty. He served in Alabama and then at New Orleans, and was stationed in Vicksburg when the war ended. On June 4, a few weeks before his 27th birthday, he was promoted to colonel. After garrison duty in Mississippi for several months, he was mustered out on August 25, 1865.

Upon his discharge, Colonel Lilly remained in the South, where he and a business partner, Caesar Beasley, leased "Bowling Green," a 1400-acre cotton plantation ten miles east of Port Gibson, Mississippi. The owner, Judge Volley T. Stamps, spent the war in Europe and left the plantation in the hands of an agent. The main house was not a mansion; rather, it was a neat, small cottage with a front porch supported by four white columns. Bayou Pierre, then navigable, bordered the plantation. Returning to Greencastle, Colonel Eli gathered up his sister Anna Wesley Lilly, his wife Emily, and five-year-old Josie and escorted them to the plantation.

However, a series of misfortunes plagued the Colonel from the start, and his cotton-planting venture proved disastrous. Drought ruined the crop; his partner made off with their business funds; and Eli, Emily, and Josie suffered bouts of malaria. But the greatest tragedy occurred on August 20, 1866, when Emily died of "congestion of the brain" during her eighth month of pregnancy. Heartsick with grief, Colonel Lilly abandoned the plantation and returned to Indiana. Josie was left in the care of his grandparents and Aunt Anna in Greencastle, while Eli sought employment in Indianapolis.

In 1867, Colonel Lilly obtained a position as a chemist with the wholesale drug house of Harrison Daily and Company at a salary of \$40 per month. Two years later, he joined the

wholesale firm of Patterson, Moore & Talbot, where he stayed only a short time before a new opportunity arose.

Early in 1869, Eli was visited by James W. Binford, of Crawfordsville, Indiana, a former sergeant in the 18th Battery unit. James invited his former captain to enter into a partnership in a drugstore in Paris, Illinois, where he proposed to put up the necessary capital. By terms of the agreement signed August 13, 1869, Colonel Lilly was to run the drugstore and the profits were to be divided equally.

The partners took over the store of D. Isgreg and Sons, situated on the east side of the public square. The Red Front Drugstore—"Binford & Lilly, Practical Pharmacists"—sold patent and veterinary medicines. The shop also had a Tuffts Fountain and made its own syrups for soda water. Their sodas soon developed a reputation for being the best in town, and the business flourished.

November 1869 brought additional joy when Eli married Maria Cynthia Sloan, with whom he became acquainted while singing in the church choir. The newlyweds sent for young Josie, who was delighted to be reunited with his father. Maria proved to be an affectionate and loyal stepmother, and Josie delighted in having a new "mama."

The couple's joy increased when Maria gave birth to their only child, daughter Eleanor Wallace Lilly, on January 25, 1871. Tragically, however, Eleanor died of diphtheria at age 13—only a few years before an antitoxin was developed. In her memory, the Lillys purchased the former home of Judge Walter Q. Gresham, located at the corner of North Capitol Avenue and Ninth Street. In 1895, they donated the property and \$10,000 to the Little Flower Mission to be used as a hospital for children. The hospital was named Eleanor Home of the Flower Mission.

Colonel Lilly remained with the Red Front Drugstore for nearly four years but, eventually, grew restless to start his own drug manufacturing business. A strong desire to expand his skills led him to a new partnership with his friend, Dr. John F. Johnston, an Indianapolis dentist.

An agreement was reached between the two for manufacturing "pharmaceuticals and chemical preparations," and the firm of Johnston and Lilly began business on January 1, 1874. The family moved to Indianapolis and took up residence with Maria's parents at 451 North Tennessee Street. It was not until 1890 that Eli and Maria purchased their own home, across the street, at 454 North Tennessee Street.

While the business did fairly well for two years, Colonel Eli became frustrated by Johnston's lack of interest and participation. Upon discovering that his partner had withdrawn more than his half of the profits, Lilly suggested dissolving the partnership—provided he could recover his initial investment. His share amounted to approximately \$1,000 in cash and \$400 in merchandise—several gallons of fluid extracts. On March 27, 1876, the Colonel took his meager capital and relinquished all rights, title, and interest in the firm of Johnston and Lilly.

Discouraged by yet another business failure, Colonel Lilly applied for a job as clerk to Augustus Kiefer, an Indianapolis wholesale druggist. Surprisingly, Kiefer refused to employ Eli—

believing he was too experienced and too good a manufacturer to simply work for someone else. He encouraged Eli to start his own business, promising to place orders with him to ensure his success. In fact, Kiefer went one step further by soliciting commitments from the other half-dozen local wholesalers to support the new business venture.

Eli gratefully accepted the promised support for a line of pills, fluid extracts, elixirs, and cordials. At the rather mature age of 38, Eli Lilly sought to establish himself in the business of his choice.

Deeply committed to manufacturing high-quality products for use by physicians, Eli rented a small two-story building, 18 feet wide by 40 feet deep, at No. 15 West Pearl Street. He opened the door for business on May 10, 1876. Above the door of the little shop—probably the smallest pharmaceutical plant in the United States—hung a sign that read, “Eli Lilly, Chemist.” Such was the humble beginning of a global corporation that has grown to become one of the world’s leading manufacturers of pharmaceutical and animal health products, Eli Lilly and Company.

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Colonel Lilly lived to see the business that he founded pass safely through the difficult period of the 1890s. Despite the increasing demands of the business, he gave liberally both of his time and funds to civic affairs. His assistance to the community included serving the Indianapolis Board of Trade, organizing the distribution of natural gas to businesses and residents, and serving as founder and director of the Commercial Club, a forerunner of the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce.

Colonel Eli died June 6, 1898, after a year’s illness. At the time of his death an Indianapolis *News* editorial paid him tribute as follows:

“In the death of Colonel Eli Lilly, the state and the city lost a brave and gallant soldier, a distinguished citizen, a generous, public-spirited, and benevolent man. All good causes were sure of ready sympathy when presented to him. He loved Indianapolis; and everything that helped to build it up, to improve its condition, to make life easier and better for the people, won his loyal and unwearying support. He freely gave of his means; he gave more freely still of his personal endeavor.”

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