

# Safari News

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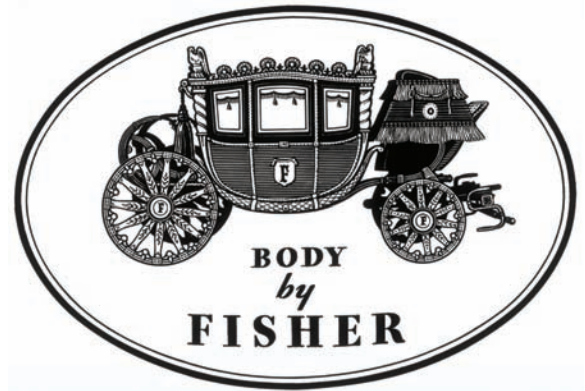
*Custom Safari Chapter*  
Pontiac Oakland Club International



# On The Road With Fisher Body

By Dennis Dana

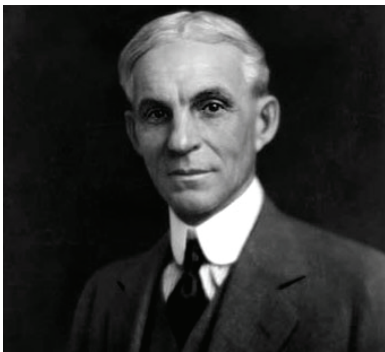
*"Fisher Coach History: The widely recognized coach symbol came into use in 1922. At the time, only the most prestigious coachbuilders affixed their nameplates onto their custom bodies. General Motors, in a groundbreaking move, decided to lend a touch of class to the Fisher bodies. To create the new trade symbol, Fisher's advertising agency chose to emulate Napoleon's ornate "Sacred Coach", used at his coronation. But by being too complex for line drawing, they combined features of this coach with the less-fanciful "LaTopaze" wedding coach used when Napoleon married Marie Louise. By combining styling from both coaches, the Fisher Body coach was born."*



The early 1900's witnessed an ever-increasing clatter of wagon-style wheels on America's primitive road surfaces. As the bizarre new creatures shuddered down the road, each was followed by a cloud of smoke, belching from its noisy engine. Horses, in sheer terror, jumped out of the way as wealthy horseless carriage owners, with death-like grips on their tillers, were catapulted down the road at breakneck speeds of up to 15 miles per hour. At the time many people were asking: "What is this new-fangled beast and where did it come from?"

## IN THE BEGINNING

Detroit, Michigan. Only a perfect world could provide a more ideal location to become the Motor City. Nestled on the banks of the expansive Detroit River, in the center of the Great Lakes region, Detroit was, and still is, the perfect gathering place for the nation's raw materials and the steady stream of job-seeking workers needed to build the vehicles that Americans would soon hunger for.



The beginning of the American Auto Age can actually be traced to an area of Detroit called Milwaukee Junction. This area's quagmire of railroad tracks and switches belonged to the Detroit and Milwaukee, and the Chicago, Detroit, and Canada Grand Trunk Junction railroads. These two major lines imported the necessary raw materials and workers, then exported the newly minted vehicles to the rest of the country. Before long, Detroit had more open shops than anywhere else in the country.

The auto pioneers, then as now, were a close-knit bunch. In 1903, Detroit boasted a population of 285,000 residents, with most working within the auto industry. During these early years dozens of auto companies began springing up, with most being smaller concerns and merely assemblers. Meaning, they bought their parts from suppliers on credit, hoping to generate a profit and grow – some did, most didn't. Baked into this mix of mom and pop style automakers were some destined for greatness.



Henry Ford, (*above left*), began his empire on Piquette Avenue in 1903, with the introduction of his Ford A, the forerunner of his famous Model T. The year 1908 marked the beginning of the Model T's 15 million plus unit run. This accomplishment, along with his perfecting the automotive assembly line, brought him the honor of being named the man who "put America on wheels." This same year, William "Billy" Durant, (*left*) announced that on September 16<sup>th</sup> he would gather Buick, Cadillac, Oakland and Oldsmobile under one roof by forming the General Motors Corporation. All of these automakers, large and small, had one common need: A steady supply of bodies.

# On The Road With Fisher Body

*By Dennis Dana*

At first, the major supplier of Detroit's auto bodies was the C.R. Wilson Company. In the 1870's, Charles R. Wilson founded his company with the intent of becoming the world's premier coachbuilder. At that time, New Haven (Connecticut) and Boston were the undisputed coachbuilding capitals in America. It was Wilson's goal to change that – and change it he did.

In 1902, at 24 years old, Fred Fisher, oldest of the 7 Fisher brothers and co-founder of the Fisher Body Company, moved to Detroit at the behest of his father's brother, Albert, owner of Detroit's Standard Wagon Works, located in the downtown area at Fort and Sixth Streets. By the time Fred arrived, the C.R. Wilson Company was not only the recognized world leader in the manufacture of horse-drawn carriage bodies, they began branching out into the car body business as well. Fred was immediately hired as a draftsman by Wilson, and paid \$20 a week. Wilson recognized Fred's talent and within a few months Fred was running the entire drafting operation while concurrently taking correspondence courses from New York's Andrew F. Johnson Technical School. The Wilson name as a body builder flourished. They built bodies for Cadillac, Elmore, Ford, Oldsmobile and Peerless, to name the best known.



In 1904, Charles Fisher (left. Fred's immediate younger brother and co-founder of Fisher Body) moved to Detroit when Fred offered him a job at Wilson. Things were going along swimmingly. The brothers immersed themselves in learning and perfecting the art of body construction (and would later fine-tune at Fisher Body). For the next four years they continued honing their skills as the future founders of an innovation-rich body building empire. An empire that would espouse the principles they learned from their father, combined with their experience gained at Wilson.

Charles married, and started a family in early 1908. He soon realized that his wage wasn't adequate to support a wife and growing family. He discussed the prospects of a \$5-a-week raise with Fred – who was less than optimistic that it would be approved. By being a supportive big brother, he told Charles, "If they won't give you a raise, I'll quit, too." Fred was right – Charles' request was denied. So both brothers quit. Charles Wilson actually did them, and the rest of the world, a favor. Had Charles received his raise, the Fisher Body Company might not have been born.

To finish the Wilson story after the brothers left, Charles Wilson continued operating his body company until 1924, when he sold out to Murray's Allan Shelden. Then through a banker named Keane, Shelden also bought the Lincoln body supplier, Towson Body Company, and J.C. Widman and Company, a major supplier of door glass and windshields. These three companies were absorbed into the Murray Body Corp. which later evolved into the Murray Corp. of America, a major Ford body supplier.

## THE BEGINNING OF AN EMPIRE

After leaving Wilson, the brothers gratefully accepted employment at Uncle Albert's Standard Wagon Works. Albert had some previous body building experience; Henry Ford contracted with him to build 50 bodies. When Fred and Charles joined Standard, Albert was making car seat frames for his longtime friend, Henry Ford. (The L. Fisher Carriage Factory on Benedict Ave., Norwalk, Ohio is seen below on the left. Here the brothers learned the art of woodworking from their father, Lawrence Fisher.)

The brothers soon convinced their uncle to partner with them in forming their own body company. So on July 22, 1908 the Fisher Body Company began its reign. This new company was funded with an initial cash investment of \$50,000. Albert supplied \$30,000, Fred and Charles supplied the balance. They opened up shop at Plant One in Detroit, on the corner of St. Antoine and Piquette at 1368 St. Antoine Street. Originally a five-story building, the sixth floor was added in 1914, (seen below on right circa 1919).

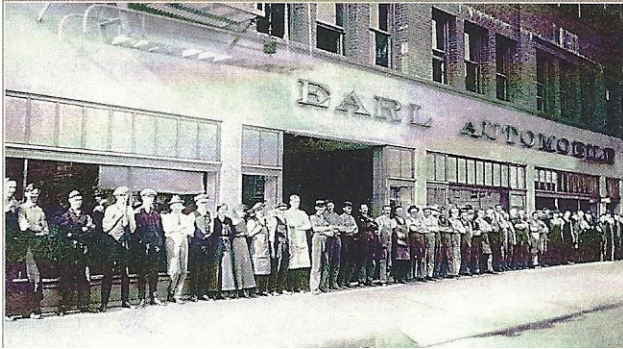


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Fred and Charles enjoyed a close friendship with automaker Hugh Chalmers of Maxwell-Chalmers; it was his expertise that helped set up the Fisher Body Company. Due to a recession in 1907, business was sluggish at first, but the new body company persisted. By 1909, the economy was looking up and they began building bodies for E-M-F (the forerunner of Studebaker), Ford, Herreshoff Motor Co. (named for the yacht-building family), and Oldsmobile.

## THE CAR BUG BITES AMERICA



From 1908 on, the vehicle manufacturing industry exploded. Not only did that year see the opening of Fisher Body, GM's incorporation, and Ford's launching of his Model T, out in Los Angeles, California, Harley Earl's father, J.W., updated the name of his carriage works to Earl Automotive Works (left circa 1910). And between 1910 and 1920, Detroit's population doubled.

By 1919, America's appetite for automobiles was in full swing. Cars were no longer considered a rich man's hobby. John and Jane Q. Public were experiencing the allure of private vehicle ownership. Even with President Eisenhower's

interstate highway system still some 35 years away, the Lincoln Highway (named for President Abraham Lincoln) and Route 66 were well on the way to knitting the country together. Families, hoping to satisfy their wanderlust, took to the road in droves, and they needed automobiles to help them see the USA. To quench America's thirst for travel, the auto industry continued to expand.

General Motors' car sales were escalating monthly. They consisted of 75 percent in the open touring car body styles, and 25 percent in the new all-weather closed body style, designed and built by Fisher. With closed body demand on the rise, Durant and his associate, Walter Percy Chrysler (of Buick), soon realized GM's production capabilities were inadequate, and as their needs grew they couldn't possibly accommodate this new rising market. They needed to expand or get left behind.

Over at the Fisher Body Corporation, by 1919 it was recognized as the world's leading body supplier, with no less than 18 automakers as customers, including Ford and GM. That year they shipped out over 135,000 bodies. Their closed body was the talk of the industry, and by all appearances the world was the Fisher brothers' oyster.

Fisher Body's meteoric rise to the top of their field didn't happen by accident. True, they were in the right business at the right time, but it was more than that. It was due primarily to their advent of the affordable closed body. All-weather bodies were being built at the time; but only by the high-end custom coach trade which catered to the country's affluent. But so far, closed bodies were out of reach for production automakers. Fisher, in 1910, brought the closed body within reach of middle America. To accomplish this goal, however, their journey into notoriety actually began two years earlier.

## AMERICA BEHIND GLASS

When the Fishers opened their body company they had grander visions than simply stamping out open touring car bodies. Among their many innovations, there were dreams of offering a closed body. This vision was enhanced by their friend and partner in E-M-F, Walter Flanders, when he suggested that they design and build the industry's first affordable mid-market closed body. The brothers already believed closed bodies were the wave of the future, and Flanders' suggestion served to confirm their theory.

Albert, however, didn't share his nephews' vision, and wanted no part of their hare-brained scheme. Henry Ford was opposed to closed cars. He told Albert, "no one in his right mind would ride behind that much glass." Ford's comment only fanned Albert's flame to distance himself from all that glass. He issued the brothers an ultimatum: "Either buy me out or sell out to me by..." (noon of a specific date).

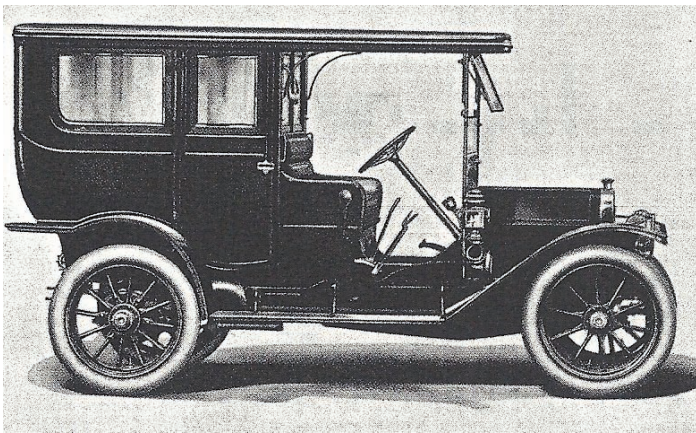


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Unable to fund the buyout themselves, they enlisted the help of a Detroit businessman, Louis Mendelssohn, a major stockholder in the Herreshoff Motor Company, and a customer of Fisher Body. When Louis asked about Albert's price, Fred answered, "\$30,000 by noon (on the specific day)." Louis was quoted as responding, "Alright, come around that morning and pick up a certified check and hand it to him just before noon." Through this act, Louis not only helped the brothers by paying Albert off in 1909, he bought a slice of the soon-to-be famous Fisher Body pie. His contributions included assuming the role of Chairman of the Board, and handling all financial matters, including brokering the eventual merger of Fisher Body and General Motors.

With Albert out of the picture, the brothers could focus on the future. Fred clearly announced their intention to create an affordable closed body by declaring: "If you strive to build what the public wants, you'll find the way to build it. The public wants the closed car and we're going to find the way to give it to them."



In 1909, the brothers began designing their new closed body. They (rightfully) believed car buyers, especially women, wished to be shielded from inclement weather – something the open bodies were incapable of. Their dedication paid off in 1910, when Cadillac placed an order for 150 closed bodies – the first and largest order of its kind in America. Walter Flanders followed suit with a similar order for E-M-F. Before long, closed body orders were being placed by other automakers as well – including Ford. In response, the Fisher Closed Body Company emerged in December of 1910. The new staff included a designer, trim engineer, blueprint checker, and a staff of various other engineers and draftsmen. The new all-weather car was a sensation – but it was meeting with some resistance.

## KEEPING IT AFFORDABLE

Now the brothers had a new problem – the automakers were pricing the new car at nearly double of their open bodied counterparts. This problem not only affected closed body sales, but made it difficult for lower income families to afford an all-weather car. Fisher tried convincing the profit-hungry automakers to lower their prices, but their pleas fell upon deaf ears. Eventually, due to increasing closed body demand, and more streamlined part manufacturing and assembly processes, Fisher was able to lower their body prices further. And they passed these savings onto their customers.

A perfect example of Fisher's dedication to lower prices involved Walter Flanders of E-M-F and Charles Fisher. In 1941, a reporter for the Detroit Free Press recounted a years-earlier story of how Charles met with Flanders in his office to change E-M-F's contract, in about 1910. Naturally assuming the worst, Flanders launched into a tirade. After calming down, Charles assured him that he wasn't there to increase prices, but to lower them! To Walter's complete dismay, Charles was quoted as saying, "We have made enough of these bodies now to judge the price more accurately. The trouble with the price is that it's too high. We are making too much money on the job. We want to tear up the old contract and give you a better figure. All we want is a fair profit." Word of E-M-F's contract change spread throughout the industry. Through Fisher's honesty, word of mouth became their best salesman; they never had to hire any.

Finally, in the early 1920's, automakers responded in kind by lowering their prices to only a few dollars more than an open body. The company that began this trend was Hudson, with their low-priced Essex line.

## A MYSTERY SOLVED

The early days of the Fisher Body Company continue to be an enigma. But slowly, answers present themselves. During our last excursion into this company via "[On Safari With the Fisher Men](#)", the two-stage

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buyout by General Motors was touched upon. At the time it was a mystery to me just why the Fishers consented to sell the majority interest in their empire to GM. Then one day while I was studying the 1949 U.S. v. duPont DeNemours and Company court case for a different project, the answer became clear: For both to remain industry leaders, a close symbiotic relationship had to be formed.

## FISHER NAMES A PARTNER

The Fisher Body Corporation was on the grow. Mendelssohn combined Fisher Plant Number One and Two with their Canadian operation to form the Fisher Body Corporation on August 22, 1916. By 1919 they boasted 40-plus buildings, with floor space totaling 3,700,000 square feet. The demand for closed bodies was growing to that of touring car bodies, and in a few years would surpass open body sales.

As the juvenile auto industry was growing into long pants, over at GM Billy Durant was planning his next move. Because General Motors had several divisions, their body needs were larger than most. This created production problems because they had to wait in line for their bodies along with the other automakers. This simply would not do. What they needed was their own exclusive body supplier who would cater to their needs first. As Durant soon found out, he wasn't the only one with this insight. This fact came to light when he approached the Fishers about joining the General Motors family of fine cars. To his surprise, he discovered Ford and Studebaker were also pursuing a Fisher partnership. As we all know, and to Durant's relief, Fisher made the wise decision to partner with General Motors.

In the contract GM agreed to purchase all of the closed bodies Fisher "was able to handle now and in the future", at the rate of cost plus 17.6 percent per body. To facilitate the buy-in, Fisher elevated its capitalization from 200,000 to 500,000 shares. GM purchased the newly created 300,000 shares at the rate of \$92 per share. For the \$27.6 million, General Motors gained 60 percent ownership and control of production and finances.

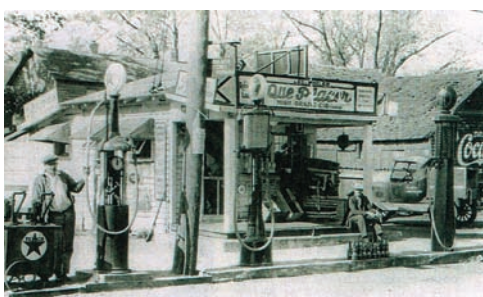
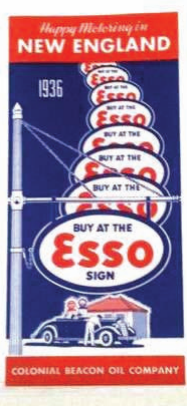
Even with GM owning the majority interest, the 6 brothers retained firm control over daily operations. This control was guaranteed through a 4-member voting trust set up during this late 1919 buy-in, with 2 members representing Fisher Body, and General Motors represented by the other 2. The newly acquired Fisher stock was also placed in this trust, and the brothers agreed to a 5-year contract for their continued services at Fisher Body. Their contract and the voting trust were slated to expire in 1924.

Once all of the details were ironed out, and the contract signed, this history-making alliance was announced to the stockholders of both companies. Each reported that, "The association of the two assured both a continuity of demand and supply for the Fisher Body product." In essence, GM now had a consistent source of supply, and Fisher had an outlet for all of the closed bodies and the beginning-to-dwindle demand for open bodies that they could handle. The perfect symbiotic relationship.

## AMERICA TAKES TO THE ROAD

Even with a more dependable road system under development, many streets were still little more than occasionally-graded wagon paths. The more traveled routes were slowly being paved with a new surfacing material call "macadam", named after it developer, John Loudon MacAdam (1756-1836) of Scotland.

By 1914, drive-in gas stations were being built in America's larger cities by such companies as Gulf, Standard Oil (ESSO), and Texaco (seen on left). These stations, Gulf being the first, also provided the growing motoring masses with free road maps to guide them along their way. Maps were first introduced in 1910, by Boston's own George Walker, but his maps only covered a few popular roads.





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(It is noted that in the late 1950's the General Drafting Company of New Jersey produced the ESSO maps. Their exact length of tenure as map producer for ESSO — initials for Standard Oil — is unknown.)

Rand McNally then took the reins of roadmap making. Already famous for railroad maps, McNally began assigning numbers to highways for ease of traveling, and numbered their maps accordingly. Beginning in Wisconsin in 1920, each state numbered its own roads, which made Rand McNally's job much easier. In 1924 Rand McNally released its first national road atlas. By 1925 75,000 miles of highway had official U.S. route numbers.

Road trips were becoming more popular. So just prior to World War I, autocamps began to appear; which morphed into auto courts, then motels. Obviously the road-weary travelers needed a bite to eat before bedding down for the night or continuing on their journeys. This need sparked the creativity of one Patrick Tierney in 1905, so he began fabricating diners at his New York factory. With railroad travel being popular, he fashioned them in the style of the elegant railroad dining cars (sans the elegance). The purchase price included delivery and setup on the customer's property. These diners first appeared in urban areas, then slowly crept out onto the highways.

With the desire for vehicle ownership spreading, automakers answered the need by establishing nationwide networks of brand-specific dealerships. To assist with their purchases, in 1905 Americans were offered the luxury of auto financing. This convenience brought together more automobiles and customers, since few could afford the full cash price of the vehicle of their dreams. Then in 1919, GM formed the General Motors Acceptance Corporation (GMAC). Through the use of their "Thrift Guard Plan", buyers of GM vehicles could utilize in-house financing to make their purchases. The formation of GMAC gave General Motors a leg up on their competition because they could offer lower interest rates; a definite incentive to buy GM. By 1929, sixty percent of all car purchases were financed.

The new car buying public breathed a sigh of relief in 1922. All-weather car prices were falling. A major contributor to this shift was Hudson's introduction of their low-priced Essex line, priced only \$300 more than their \$1,100 open touring car. In July 1922 the price dropped to \$1,295, with further reductions to come. The Essex, a Fisher Body product from 1918-22, contributed greatly to Fisher's commitment to lower retail prices.

## FINAL NEGOTIATIONS BEGIN

General Motors completed the Fisher Body buyout in mid-1926. That same year, GM trumpeted Pontiac's arrival – available only in a closed car. All Buick operations shifted from Detroit to Flint in November 1926. Buick remained at the plant until its closure in about 1992. But the biggest news of 1926 happened when General Motors yielded to pressure from the Fisher brothers to complete the buyout of their company.

The plan to complete the buyout actually began nearly four years earlier. In late 1922, the Fishers were seeking a closer relationship with General Motors. To further ingrain themselves into the GM fabric, the brothers' idea was to swap their Fisher stock for shares in General Motors. At the time, Fisher Body ownership broke down as follows: GM owned 60 percent, the brothers owned 20 percent, Fisher allies owned 10 percent, and the final 10 percent was owned by various individuals.

General Motors president Pierre Samuel duPont III and Alfred P. Sloan Jr. believed a completed merger would benefit everyone involved. This plan also met with the approval of the GM board and executive committee. Fred Fisher, already a GM board member, was being considered for a position on the Executive Committee – a position he did accept in 1922. But due to the contract they signed in 1919, all 6 were obligated to continue directing Fisher Body operations until 1924, when their contract would expire.



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Upon expiration, GM and the Fishers agreed that Fred, Charles, and Lawrence would transfer to the General Motors offices, while William, Edward and Alfred would remain at Fisher Body. Fred and Charles made their move on October 1, 1924, and began their new careers as GM directors and executive committee members. Lawrence left 7 months later, and on May 1, 1925, he assumed H.H. Rice's place as president of Cadillac. William became president of Fisher Body, Edward was vice-president in charge of production, while Alfred became vice-president in charge of engineering. Youngest brother Howard never worked at Fisher Body; his duties consisted of managing their vast real estate holdings. Later his duties would include managing their pride and joy, The Fisher Building.

## A LETTER FROM PIERRE

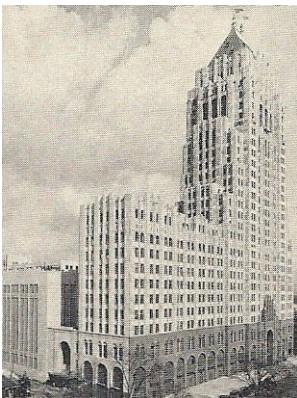
In October 1924, as Fred and Charles were settling into their new offices, GM board member Sir Harry McGowen, received a letter from Pierre duPont. It described the months of negotiating with the Fishers in the hopes of finding a solution to the problems between GM and the brothers. DuPont felt that: "interesting two members of the Fisher family [Fred and Charles] directly into General Motors will have a very beneficial effect in breaking up a line of separation of the two companies' interest that has not been altogether wholesome. For lack of knowledge, the two sides have tended to criticize each other, without good result. Hereafter the Fishers will better understand GM problems and difficulties, and I think, GM men will better appreciate the Fisher problems."

"We all feel that the settlement of this business will prove very beneficial. Messrs. [messieurs, the French plural of Mr. – remember, the duPonts are French] Fisher are very happy over the solution of the problems, and for some time they have been fearful lest failure to get together would necessitate the breaking up of relations, perhaps a break in the Fisher family, concerning which they naturally have great pride, as they have been phenomenally successful in the cleanest kind of business enterprise."

## GM's FISHER BODY DIVISION

After GM's 1919 buy-in, Fisher built few bodies for non-GM customers. One of the select was Walter Percy Chrysler – Fisher built his 1925 and 1926 open and closed bodies. This created a problem for General Motors – their body needs were escalating. Because Fisher Body wasn't a wholly-owned division of GM, the Fishers could sell to whomever they pleased – a reality which irritated GM. To add to their frustration, they needed deeper discounts to remain competitive. But because they were under the weight of a ten-year contract, further discounts were out of the question. (It is possible the brothers were applying pressure by not renegotiating GM's contract, in hopes of spurring GM into completing the buyout.)

To relieve the pressure, on June 30, 1926, the buyout of Fisher Body was completed. As the brothers proposed in 1922, GM traded (according to court documents) 1,600,000\* shares of common stock for the remaining 40 percent interest in Fisher Body. To complete the deal, GM borrowed 250,000 shares of their common stock from the duPont Company, which at the time owned 23 percent of General Motors. In 1926, the market value of the GM stock was reported to be \$208 million. With the completion of the buyout, Fisher Body was finally a wholly-owned division of General Motors. Altogether, GM paid a grand total of \$235.6 million for their newest division. Now the entire production output belonged to General Motors exclusively.



## FISHER'S GOLDEN TOWER

The brothers wasted no time in putting their money to work. The groundbreaking for the Fisher Building was on August 27, 1927 (see picture in "IN MEMORY OF..." section), and completed in 1928, at an estimated cost of \$9 million.



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*By Dennis Dana*



Designed by Joseph Nathaniel French, of Detroit's legendary Albert Kahn and Associates, this 30-story Art Deco masterpiece stands majestically on the corner of West Grand Blvd. and Second Avenue.

Often called "Detroit's largest art object", many believe this building to be Albert Kahn's crowning achievement. The exterior composition is limestone and granite, while 40 different marbles adorn the inside lobby. Its 21 elevators serve office and retail space, the 2,089 seat Fisher theatre and 3 radio stations. The oldest station, WJR radio, first leased space in December 1928. As stipulated from the beginning, in exchange for nominal rent, radio hosts are still required to frequently announce that they are broadcasting "from the golden tower of the Fisher Building".

The name "Golden Tower" was coined because prior to World War II, the front façade was originally adorned with gold-gilded tiles. Not wishing to become a possible target for air attack during the war, the golden tiles were replaced with green terra cotta tiles, then lit at night, beginning in the 1980's, to give it a golden appearance. Then once a year in honor of Ireland's patron saint, green lights flood the Fisher Building on St. Patrick's Day. Another interesting feature, there is an

underground walkway linking the Fisher Building to the GM building – now called "Cadillac Square".

Through the years, 3 honors have been bestowed upon this building: A Silver Medal in architecture was awarded in 1929 by the Architectural League of New York; on October 14, 1980, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places; then it was declared a National Historic Landmark on July 29, 1989. Today the Fisher Building stands just as proud as it did when it was built 85 years ago, and remains a testament to its founders.

## FRED AND CHARLES RETIRE

The news of Fred's and Charles' retirements came about in 1934, after 26 years in the body building business. In 1924, to manage their hard-earned fortune, the brothers created Fisher and Company. Charles retired first to personally guide their independent holding company and investment firm (it was created to handle the fortune generated by the GM buyout). A short time later, Fred retired at age 56 saying, "I'd always said I'd make my millions before 55, then quit."

When they retired, Alfred left Fisher Body to head up GM's Quality Standards Department. Then Edward moved up to Fisher's general manager, while William was elected a GM vice-president and board of directors member. Lawrence accepted a position in GM staff activity after leaving Cadillac on June 1, 1934, when Nicholas Dreystadt took his place. Edward, a few years later, was elected a vice-president and board member while continuing with Fisher Body.

## THE FINAL FOUR RETIRE

Early August 1944: A spokesman for the Fisher brothers distributed new pictures of the quartet to local newspapers. This act in itself was newsworthy, because for 36 years the Fishers avoided publicity. To give an example: Several years earlier a national magazine wanted to publish a feature about the Fishers. After much debate, they agreed, but with a stipulation: They had to approve the story. When the completed account was read to them, Charles exclaimed, "There isn't anybody who is that good." They bought the story to keep it from being published. Now that's classic humility!

The day after picture distribution, General Motors Chairman of the Board, Alfred P. Sloan, made the shocking announcement that "with great regret", the Fisher brothers are retiring after 25 years of "active service" as key GM executives. Soon after, the four brothers held their first-ever press conference from their posh 27<sup>th</sup> floor offices high atop their Fisher Building. About 30 reporters peppered them with questions, but little was learned. They did, however, reveal that they have been planning to retire for the past 7 years, but only

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decided 6 weeks ago to do so. They also stated the parting was completely amicable. Edward then stated how they all felt, and how they lived their lives, "We started together, and we want to finish together." So on Monday, August 14, 1944, Lawrence, William, Edward and Alfred, ended one chapter to begin another. Lawrence and Edward did remain GM directors though.

They had flirted with the idea of building complete cars for years. To satisfy this desire, they attempted a buyout of Hudson, which proved unsuccessful because the news of their visits to the Hudson offices and factory circulated on Wall Street. Investors saw these visits as promising, which drove stock prices sky-high. This turn of events caused their offer to come up short, so they lost interest in Hudson.

Another phase of their retirement plan was to devote time to their beloved Fisher Building. The brothers were also great philanthropists. They donated millions of dollars to schools, churches, and other charities. They also founded nursing and old age homes, and wherever possible, participated as directors for these organizations.

The Fisher fortune was among America's largest, with a worth north of \$250 million. They also held the distinction of being the second-largest holders of GM stock (behind the DuPont Company's 23 percent).

## IN MEMORY OF...



Fred's retirement only lasted 7 years. On July 14, 1941, Fred passed away at age 63. The following year tragedy struck once again: On April 13, 1942, youngest brother Howard died at 40 years of age. Lawrence passed away next on September 3, 1961, at 72 (Lawrence P. was the first Fisher brother to be born in Norwalk, Ohio, home of their father's original carriage works on Benedict Avenue, where they learned the woodworking trade). Next, at age 83, Charles passed away on August 8, 1963. Two months later, Alfred, 70, passed on October 9, 1963. Six years later, William passed away in December 1969, at 83. Edward was

the last to join his famous brothers on January 17, 1972, a month before his 81<sup>st</sup> birthday of February 23<sup>rd</sup>. And then there were none. Of the 7 brothers, only Fred and Lawrence remained childless. The others had 17 children among them. *"This rare photo of all seven brothers was taken at the rainy groundbreaking of their Fisher Building on August 27, 1927. From left to right: Alfred, Lawrence, Charles, Fred, William, Howard and Edward."*

## THE DEMISE OF FISHER BODY

The year 1984 brought about the reorganization of General Motors. It was understandably met with mixed feelings: Some loved it, some didn't, but ultimately it benefited GM.

All of the car divisions were hemorrhaging money. The components divisions of Delco Remy, Fisher Body, Guide Lamps, Packard Electric, etc. were all well in the black. Under then-current policy, General Motors averaged the car divisions' losses with the components divisions' huge profits, so financially, everything looked rosy. But it wasn't.

Another problem was a policy called "transfer pricing". When conceived, this policy probably worked great. But after several years, it allowed the divisions to charge each other higher prices than they were charging their respective dealer networks. Example: Chevrolet charged Pontiac more for the Ventura than they charged the Chevy dealers for the Nova, causing huge losses for Pontiac. This policy had to change and reorganization was the most viable solution.

Even with these major issues threatening GM's destruction, this step was not taken lightly. Top GM brass agonized over dismantling Fisher Body and reorganizing the other divisions – because once undone, they couldn't be reassembled. Ultimately, it was done. Fisher Body and the General Motors Assembly Division (GMAD) was broken apart and divided amongst the divisions. The reorganization granted some level of efficiency over their previous policies, but it spelled the demise of Fisher Body Division.



# On The Road With Fisher Body

*By Dennis Dana*

## THE FISHER NAME LIVES ON

The brothers' descendants are making their own way in the transportation and safety industry. They head up such operations as Fisher and Company and Fisher Dynamics, which manufactures seat mechanisms and frames.

Their newest endeavor, Fisher Coachworks LLC, was established on July 22, 2008, exactly 100 years after the Fisher Body Company was founded. The CEO is Alfred's grandson, Gregory. Their ambition (according to my latest information) is to develop and build a 40-foot hybrid-electric GTB-40 transit bus. Built of a new stainless steel alloy called "Nitronic", and supplied by Autokenetics of Rochester Hills, Michigan, this bus promises to be half the weight of a standard transit bus while achieving twice the fuel mileage.

Through innovations such as this, this generation of Fishers is committed to following in their predecessor's footsteps. The BODY by FISHER name and coach no longer greets new car buyers, but through the efforts of current relatives, the Fisher name will continue to spell innovation, craftsmanship, quality and integrity; just like it did with the original Fisher Six.

*Lastly, once again a hearty thank you to Len Sokol for all of his help. And to Rich Pye for his encouragement and for publishing this story.*

\*It should be noted that other sources claim GM traded 664,720 shares for the final 40 percent of Fisher Body, However, I am inclined to believe the court documents since General Motors submitted the figures. The correct amount could even be 1,664,720 shares of GM stock traded for the final 40 percent.

## REFERENCES

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- 3) Discovering America's Past, by the Readers Digest Assn. Inc. 1993
- 4) Pontiac – They Built Excitement, by Tom Bonsall
- 5) Special Interest Auto Magazine, June 1978, "Body by Fisher"
- 6) [www.FisherDynamics/Heritage](http://www.FisherDynamics/Heritage)
- 7) [www.Time.com/1944Fisherarticle](http://www.Time.com/1944Fisherarticle)
- 8) [www.Wikipedia/org/FisherBuilding](http://www.Wikipedia/org/FisherBuilding)

## PICTURES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1) Napoleonic Fisher Body coach: SIA, June 1978 page 20
- 2) Henry Ford: The Internet
- 3) William Durant: The Internet
- 4) Charles T. Fisher: SIA, June 1978 page 19
- 5) Fisher Carriage Factory: SIA, June 1978, page 19
- 6) Detroit, Plant One: The Story of Fisher Body (1969) page 5
- 7) Earl Automotive Works: Cars and Parts magazine, February 2005 page 18
- 8) 1910 Cadillac: The Story of Fisher Body (1969) page 4
- 9) Esso Maps: eBay
- 10) Early gas station: Reminisce magazine
- 11) GMAC Advertisement: Automobile magazine, November 2011
- 12) 192? Essex closed car:
- 13) Fisher Building: Wikipedia – Façade detail page 2; SIA, June 1978 page 23
- 14) Fisher Brothers: Fisher Dynamics/Heritage

# Member Roster

First Name	Last Name	Address	City	State	Zip Code	Telephone #
Tony and Helene	Bardelli	109 Stonefield Dr	Cranberry TWP	PA	16066	724-779-0085
Ted and Kelley	Barkei	374 Hoyer Ct	Naperville	IL	60565	630-983-9899
John and Connie	Bonoyer	314 East Ave	Harrisville	RI	02830	401-568-4989
Jim & Sandy	Bowers	7924 S. State Rd 61	Monroe City	IN	47557	812-743-2949
Louie & Carolyn	Brown	102 Morningside Dr	Wichita	KS	67218	316-685-0540
Lou & Paulette	Calasibetta	913 Main St, P.O.Box 46	Stillwater	NJ	07875	973-383-7014
Harold & Carol	Cary	2315 19th SW	Mason City	IA	50401	641-424-2663
Robin	Clark	7254 San Francisco St	Highland	CA	92346	909-862-4305
Steve & Andrea	Cook	16565 Lancaster Est.	Grover	MO	63040	636-458-6729
Victor Dennis	Dana 91601	1200 Prison Rd	Lovelock	NV	89419	
Warren & Dianne	Daniels	3517 Carlene Ln	Stem	NC	27581	919-479-8433
Dan & Carla	Dickey	1591 E. Island Lake Dr	Shelton	WA	98584	360-426-3156
Noel & Starr	Evans	10 Church Hill Rd	Washington Depot	CT	06794	860-868-7723
Rich & Pam	Gabrielson	PO Box 353	Hornbrook	CA	96044	510-794-4334
Bob & Cindi	Garacochea	1360 Morningside Way	Venice	CA	90291	310-396-6830
Daniel	Gaudet	3227 Gilmore Rd	Port Hope	Ontario, CA	LIA-3V7	289-979-8632
Susan and James	Gestwicki	855 Blackbird Landing Rd	Townsend	DE	19734	302-653-8010
Larry & Julia	Gorden	12501 East Ave H	Lancaster	CA	93535	661-946-1646
Paul and Margie	Gore	13 Southpark	Dalhart	TX	79022	806-333-2597
Michael & Bernice	Green	11 Amber Sky Dr	Rancho Palos Verdes	CA	90275	310-377-6900
Lee	Hadley	PO Box 427	New Matamoras	OH	45767	740-473-2444
Lloyd & Shirley	Hahn	6468 Highway 83	Swan Valley	MT	59826	406-754-2228
William & Oda	Hanners	15168 Sam Snead Ln	N. Ft Myers	FL	33917	239-543-3510
Bert	Hansen	PO Box 60005	Boulder City	NV	89006	702-294-4040
John & Vickie	Hartman	4204 Highland Hills St	Bakersfield	CA	93308	661-392-7904
Jack	Johnson	15525 S. Rolling Ridge Dr	Cordes Lakes	AZ	86333	602-576-6512
Mike and Lee	Johnson	512 Hilbert Dr	Fallbrook	CA	92028	760-723-8286
John and Sylvia	Kaminsky	1916 Ewa Drive	Schenectady	NY	12303	518-356-2851
Wilf & Wendy	Kaszanits	PO Box 192	Washago	Ontario, CA	LOK2BO	705-689-5900
Tom and Linda	Kelly	5502 Academy Terrace Dr W	University Place	WA	98467	253-564-1136
Randy	Kerdoon	5737 Kanan Rd. #404	Agoura Hills	CA	91301	818-665-9113
Chris and Kathleen	Koch	6917 N. Oceanbore Blvd.	Palm Coast	FL	32137	904-461-8707
Luke & Kathy	Miller	11933 County Rd G	Caledonia	WI	53108	262-835-4767
Marvin	Morton	622 Avenue C	Redondo Beach	CA	90277	310-540-4621
Michael & Suzanne	Nible					
Tim and Donna	O'Donnell	3421 North El Dorado Dr	Long Beach	CA	90808	562-430-4925
Gary & Dee Ann	Parker	63 Sandstone Dr	Spencerport	NY	14559	585-352-1293
Mark & Robin	Petry	2806 Scarlett Dr	Augusta	GA	30909	706-736-3392
Ronn & Pat	Pittman	1024 S Raddant Rd	Batavia	IL	60510	630-879-7393
Aspen	Pittman	1547 Truman St	San Fernando	CA	91340	818-512-4500
William	Platt II	6158 2nd Avenue S	Saint Petersburg	FL	33707	727-344-2992
Ray	Pose	54 Harrison St	Staten Island	NY	10304	718-981-7801
Rich & Paige	Pye	436 LaDue Rd	Brockport	NY	14420	585-637-2720
Chris	Rogers	1393 Story Rd	San Jose	CA	95122	408-295-6318
Alan	Rogers	1012 NE Shady Ln	Kansas City	MO	64118	816-436-9008
Daral	Travis	312 Marks St. N	Thunder Bay	Ontario, CA	P7C4G1	807-622-1949
Edward	Vassar	PO Box 171	Dunnigan	CA	95937	530-724-0154
Ray & Lynn	Vickers	800 Echo Lane	Farmington	NM	87401	505-327-9406
Dennis & Sharen	Wagner	16 White Bear Ave S.	St. Paul	MN	55106	651-731-0061
Jay and Trish	Ward	1182 Rimer Dr	Moraga	CA	94556	510-685-1422
Edward	White	621 Garfield Ave	Heidelberg	PA	15106	412-445-3858
Jack & Jill	White	64 Castle Heights	Deep River	CT	06417	860-526-9748
Kelly and Robin	Wood	280 N. 1275 E	Layton	UT	84040	801-544-9714
Tom	Young	204 Acacia Lane	Newbury Park	CA	91320	805-375-1320
Barry	Zalesky	9626 Edengrove Ct	Boynton	FL	33473	561-735-9351
Michael and Sandy	Zarbolias	PO Box 1886	Missoula	MT	59806	406-251-2502



# Safari Search

## Cars for Sale

**1955 Pontiac Safari:** 144K miles, same owner since 1971 averaging less than 2K miles/year. Garage stored for 14 years. Near all original with very little rust and only minor dings. Paint almost through to primer from polishing. Interior fair, no carpeting. Extra parts available. December, 2010 Old Cars Report Price Guide values a #3 - 1955 Custom Safari at \$26,100. Price is negotiable but close to guide value. Contact Louie E. Brown, 316-685-0540 H, 316-393-9362 C, or L\_EBrown@att.net



**1956 Pontiac Safari:** Solid, stored in a warehouse for 25 years, 99% complete, \$7500, (864) 862-4427. See pictures at: <http://www.classiccarsofsc.com/2011/03/1956-pontiac-star-chief-safari-wagon/>

## Services

**1955-1957 Pontiac Safari:** Rear upper liftgates. straightened and triple plated to beautiful fit and finish. Satisfaction guaranteed or your money back. Best you will find. Will straighten your liftgate only, if you prefer to use your own chromer. Also available rear liftgate gas struts to help open liftgates after torsion rods are removed. All safari/nomad interchangeable parts including window trim. Please call or email. michaelbakotich@ca.rr.com (310) 528-0482 - Mike

## Parts for Sale

**1957 Pontiac:** Front Brake Drums complete with Backing Plates, Shoes, Wheel Cylinders and Wheel Bearings, \$100 each; also Two Radios with Speaker Boxes, one Maroon and one Green, \$150 each; Complete Rear End Differential with 3.23 Gears, \$100; 5 Hub Caps Good Condition, \$100..... call Bill Hanners @ 239-543-3510, FL.

**1955 Pontiac:** Parting out a 2 door Chieftain. email Rich Pye @ rpye@rochester.rr.com or phone 585-637-2720 with needs.

**1957 Pontiac:** NORS rear wheel bearings, new in box, with updated retainer collars. Pair, \$85 inc. shipping. **1957 Transcontinental:** aluminum side panels & wheel well trim most pieces available in various conditions. Sorry, no short rocker molding extensions. Let me know your needs. **1958 Pontiac Star Chief:** cast chrome door pillar paint divider moldings, set of 4, fair chrome, \$45 set, inc. shipping. Contact Tom Young at [pontiactom@ix.netcom.com](mailto:pontiactom@ix.netcom.com)

## Wanted

**1955 Pontiac:** OEM side view mirror (#519802) ? and a OEM Non-Glare rear view mirror (#521170 or #988647) ? for a '55 Safari. Not sure about the correct part #'s. NOS is not necessary but would like to find something in good to very good condition with minimal pitting.

**1956 Safari:** Information needed to how to replace rear leaf springs. Contact Cary Birenbaum @ mrpontiac@mindspring.com

**1957 Safari:** Stainless Spear, front of gas door. Trim under the tail lights. Donn Fallenbuchel, (928) 855-5494.

**1957 Safari Car Wanted:** If you have any leads on one, please contact Dwight at dwhitmire3153@charter.net or call cell 770-851-1010 or work 770-531-1010.

**1955-56-57 Pontiac station wagon,** Exterior Tee handle for liftgate on with as many attached parts as possible. Steve Cook [jumbodog54@sbcglobal.net](mailto:jumbodog54@sbcglobal.net) or 314-795-4700

**1957 Pontiac (Any Model):** Air Conditioning components that mount to the engine, brackets, compressor, condensor, etc. Rich Pye, rpye@rochester.rr.com

**1957 Pontiac:** Rust free, stock 14-inch wheel rims, contact Tom Young at [pontiactom@ix.netcom.com](mailto:pontiactom@ix.netcom.com)

**To place a free ad to sell a car or parts or to place a want ad, send your request to Rich Pye @rpye@rochester.rr.com. Your ad should be related to 1955-58 Pontiacs, and it is recommended to include photos.**

# POCI Chapter #10

[www.customsafari.org](http://www.customsafari.org)

The Custom Safari Chapter is an official international chapter of the Pontiac Oakland Club, International, Incorporated. The POCI headquarters address is: P.O. Box 539 Victor, NY 14564

Annual Dues are \$21.00. Renewals are due January 1st of each year. New member dues are pro-rated quarterly from January 1st. Applicants must be a current member of POCI prior to joining the chapter. Send payment to Robin Petry.

The Safari News is a quarterly publication produced by the chapter. Volume 1, Number 1 was distributed in December of 1993. A limited number of back issues are available. Write for further information.

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