

Fisher Body Craftsman Guild - Napoleon coach model

by Tom Kleinschmidt

The Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild instituted a national auto design competition sponsored by the Fisher Body Division of General Motors for teenagers to compete for college scholarships by designing and building scale model "dream" cars. It was held from the 1930s through the 1960s.

A personal connection

This is the story of one young man who entered the Fisher Craftsman Guild scholarship contest in 1931 and the model he left behind.

While helping Bruno, my best friend since the fourth grade and best man at our wedding, prepare his family home of 61 years to be sold, we eventually got to the attic via the pulldown stairway in the garage. Bruno was aware of the crated coach model in the attic as his father had shown it to him and his brother Rodney with great pride in the mid-1960s (when they were around nine and six respectively). The back story of the Fisher Craftsman Guild however for them is not as vivid. When the crate was extracted, there was no question of its provenance based on labels on each end, and on its contents. In a suitcase of memorabilia, also in attic, was the certificate confirming contest entry. In various locations around the house there were original photos too!



One of the shipping labels from the crate

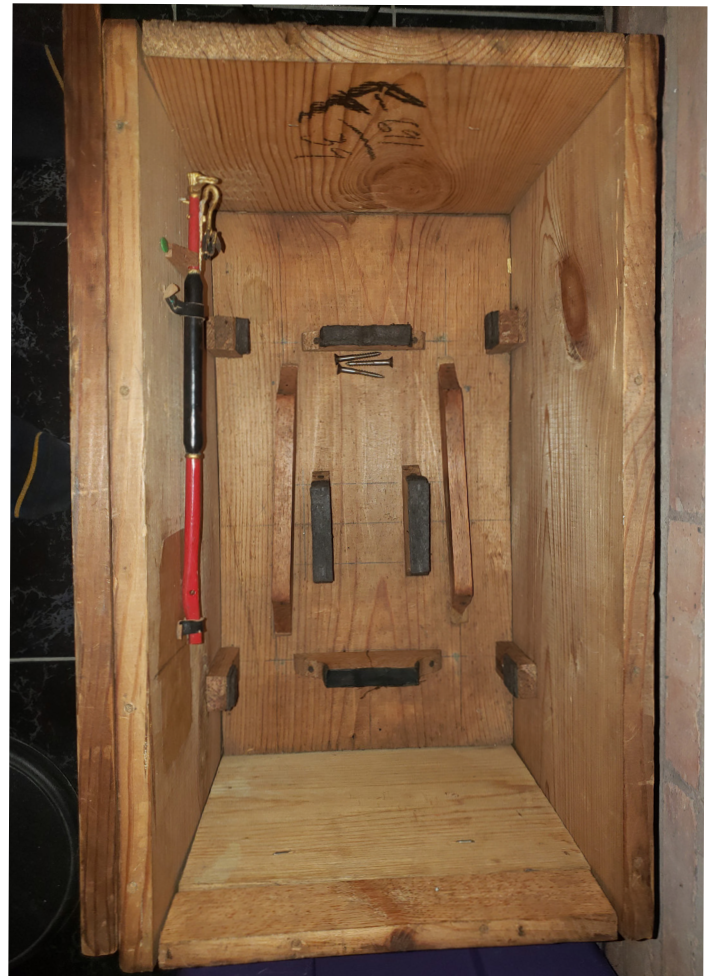
Bruno and Rodney's Dad, also named Bruno, was born in Hartshorne, Oklahoma on July 28, 1911. In 1931 he turned 20 years old. Some accounts have the Fisher competition allowing male only contestants to the age of 19, others to age 20. In any case, based on the Guild certificate date of *Second day of July, 1931*, Bruno was 19 when he submitted his model Napoleon Coach. Bruno went on to become a chemist for Universal Oil Products in Des Plaines, IL.

The lid of the crate was held on by only one screw when stored, however there are a series of holes on the crate's perimeter from multiple screws when packed for shipping.

Evidence of a mouse visit was apparent with fortunately no lasting damage. Some of the coaches' parts had self-selected to fall off from glue or leather strap failure. Those are awaiting re-installation. Overall, it is in remarkable condition for a 90-year-old wood, leather, fabric and metal model that went through at least 61 years of heat, high humidity and cold.

Included with the detailed plans to build the coach are also plans to build the shipping crate - the superhero of our preservation story. The Napoleonic coaches' passenger compartment is suspended from the chassis' upward facing curved leaf springs via leather straps. The crate features blocking that lifts the passenger compartment load from the leather straps and a pad on the inside lid that clamps it down, capturing it. The wheel hubs are constrained side to side by blocks. The crate blocking has felt lining to protect the coaches' painted surfaces. This was all done for the coach to survive shipping to the regional and national competitions.

There are the remains of five labels on the lid of the crate; four look to be from shipping to and back with the fifth likely another *fragile* label as the one shown. Enough



Looking down into the shipping crate.

of one remains to indicate it was probably from the Railway Express Agency. The coach made a trip to a regional and another to Michigan for the national, based on the quantity of labels.



Coach next to ruler for scale - approximately 18" end to end



Working doors



This close-up of the interior shows the remarkable attention to detail. It looks like an actual coach!

The coach itself sports chassis suspension, four rotating wheels, steering front wheels (as on a child's Radio Flyer wagon), hitches for a team of four horses - the hitch for the front two horses remains in the crate - a rabbit fur carpet in the fully upholstered interior, opening doors, opening door windows via pull straps, fold down stair wells below the doors (the stairs are missing), a cushion for the coachman, a postilion, (the driver or chauffeur in contemporary speech) and a platform for two footmen in the rear. Truly a *Full Classic* of its era! At least it was good enough for Napoleon.

GM's Fleetwood body division in Fleetwood, PA built two full size coaches for Fisher Body before the completion was launched. They were used to create student Guild member model plans and subsequent model starter kits. In 1987 one full size Napoleon coach was in GM headquarters in New York the other at GM in Detroit. Whereabouts now are not known to this author.

The plans were of sufficient detail to build the entire coach from scratch, or participants could opt for a kit of parts. Judging points were lost for coaches using kit parts. To build from scratch required skills in wood working, metal casting - eagles and related parts - sewing, painting and more. One account had a contestant taking a year off from school to build his coach. He invested 2000 hours - a full-time job! (An eight hour per day five-day work week is 2080 hours per year).

The US model competition ran from 1930 to 1968. The Fisher Body logo that inspired the Napoleon Coach and the simplified Traveling Coach for younger contestants in select years were the only models accepted from 1930 to 1937. Starting in 1938 a coach or custom car of the contestant's own design could be entered. The program went on hiatus during World War Two. Postwar, both the coach and car submissions continued until 1948. In 1949 the coaches were dropped.

GM Fisher Body was looking for craftsmen and Industrial designers. The focus to industrial design gradually became the primary motive with the likes of Virgil Exner Jr. winning in 1946. GM put the \$5000 scholarship winnings in trust for the student's college to draw from for tuition and books. In 1968 half of the GM design department were alumni of the Fisher Craftsman Guild. Membership of the Guild peaked at 300,000 in the 1950s, rivaling the Boy Scouts.

Building a model was not a requirement to be a member of the Guild. Only a very small percentage of Guild members attempted and submitted models. Starting in 1934 members received a periodic magazine called *The Guildsman*, later called *Guild News*. GM tracked their promising students in order to hire them when they graduated. The *FIRST Robotics* program that I was very involved with uses the same model

of getting young people interested in technology careers from kindergarten through high school. The notion of a farm team, guild or apprentice is still valid.

Many of us have seen pictures of coaches or actual ones in museums. It is the rare opportunity to be the custodian, albeit temporary, of a Fisher Napoleon Coach. The detail shared on the program and its successful participants is much richer than that described here. There is a sampling of great information sources listed in the references section below.



A proud Bruno with his Coach

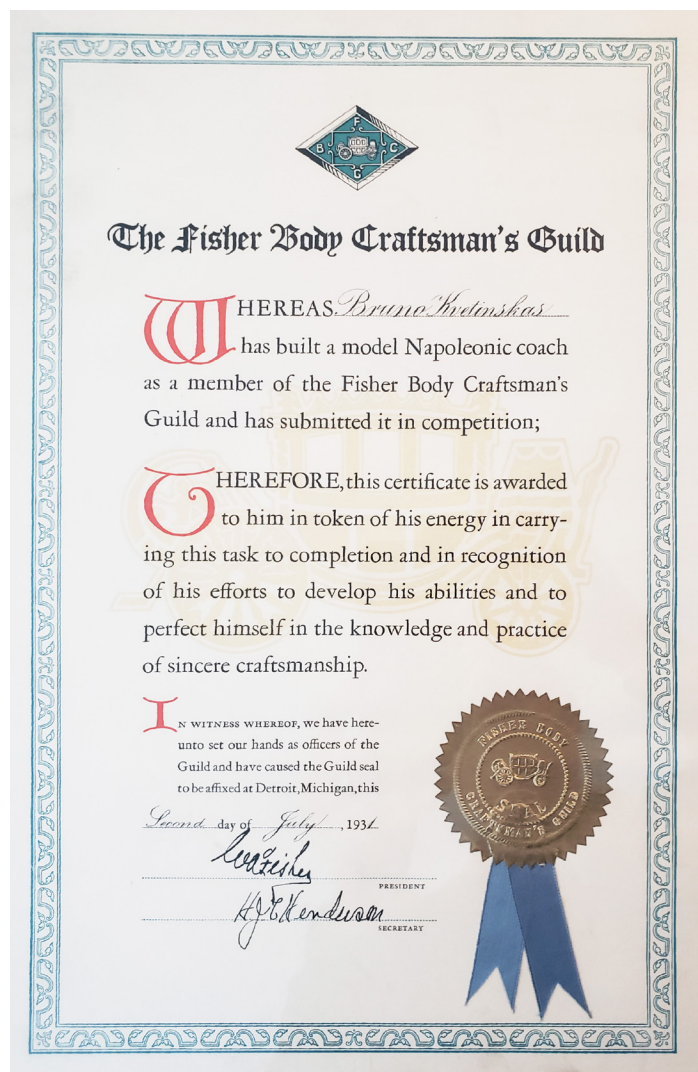
References

1. Book: *The Fisher Body Craftsman Guild: An Illustrated History*; John L. Jacobus; ©2005; ISBN 0-7864-1719-6
2. Periodical: *Automobile Quarterly*, Vol 25. No 2.; *Once & Future Craftsman: A Fisher Guild Scrapbook, 1930 to 1968*; John L. Jacobus; ©1987
3. Web site: <http://www.jitterbuzz.com/fisher.html>
4. Web site: <https://fisherguild.com/articles/005/index.php>
5. Web site: <http://web.archive.org/web/20091027080840/http://www.geocities.com/sponcom26/index.html>
6. Web site: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coach_\(carriage\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coach_(carriage))

Additional notes on the Guild

The Napoleonic coach that had served as Fisher Body's logo since 1922 became the cornerstone for the Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild (1930-1968) that was established by the successful Detroit automotive industrialists as a philanthropic project during the Great Depression. The competition invited boys and teenagers ages 11 to 20 from across the country to build miniature model Napoleonic Coaches (1930-1948) in 1/18 scale from plans provided by the Guild. In addition, from 1937 to 1968, winners from that competition and other contestants were asked to design and submit models of their futuristic "dream" car in 1/12 scale. Thousands of dollars in scholarships were awarded to three winners. In 1934, the top prize was a \$5,000 college scholarship, a very valuable prize at the time.

By the 1950s, many young men understood that winning the competition could lead to a career opportunity with a major auto design studio. In the late 50s, the Fisher Body Division employed over 200 Guild graduates in their engineering department; at GM Styling, 35 percent of the stylists were Guild graduates. Ford, Chrysler, independent design studios, and contract body builders like Budd and Murray in Detroit also employed Guild graduates.



Note that the certificate is signed by W (William) A Fisher, President of Fisher body.

