**Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild (FBCG): An Extracurricular, Industrial Arts, Design Competition for Youth, 1930-1968**

**Background**

The FBCG was founded by the famous Fisher family of Detroit as a philanthropic endeavor at the outset of the great depression “to teach boys the art of craftsmanship,” the theory being, that the knowledge and know-how they gained would make them employable in the automotive industry. Whether a depression era miniature model coach builder, or later, a post-war model “Dream Car” builder, this youth outreach program was designed to equip youth with a 3-D resume to get in the employer’s door and get them an apprentice job, and after training, leading to a tool and die maker position, or draftsman, model-maker, clay modeler, engineer, designer. A FBCG coach or model car entry was a calling card and opened doors of opportunity and new horizons for many Guildsmen.

FBCG was organized and operated by the Fisher Body Division, Advertising and Public Relations Department, 1930-1968 and William A. Fisher, the namesake and General Manager of the division, was also the President of the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild. By way of background, the seven (7) Fisher brothers had invented the innovative and highly successful “closed body” for automobiles which made sales a year-round business activity rather than a seasonal, fair weather, sales opportunity. This innovative closed body-type transformed and built the automotive industry. The Fisher Body Company grew and prospered and was acquired by GMC in 1926 for millions of dollars.

The FBCG extracurricular activity was based on manual arts and industrial arts taught in our public schools. Teenagers enjoyed this activity in their spare time at home. The “Greatest Generation” built miniature model (1/18 scale) Napoleonic Coaches - an interpretation of the graphic coach design on the “Body by Fisher” trademark. During the post-war prosperity “Baby Boomers” built 1/12 scale model “Dream Cars” from the imagination, creativity and ingenuity using their innate, amateur skills and abilities. The coaches were all about technical model-making (e.g., blue prints, specifications, accuracy) whereas the competitions of scratch-built model cars were more “free-form” and about “design” and “craftsmanship” (originality, styling, aesthetics and appearance).

In the grand scheme of things, the “Fisher Body Design Contest” (as it was commonly called) was a highly successful General Motors talent search, recruiting tool and public relations program and a good example of what is called today – a corporate youth outreach program. The program was primarily a talent search and entries or “works of art” were scrutinized for a Guildsman’s (1) eye for beauty, (2) aesthetic sensibility, and (3) good taste.

The overall quality both programs demanded was the Guildsman had to be a “perfectionist.”

**Program Tools, Material and Processes**

Guildsmen were introduced to the same materials, tools and techniques used in the automotive industry, but materials and processes were on much smaller scale.

**Coach Builders**

Some tools included the jigsaw, scroll saw, bandsaw, Dremel tool, drill press, flat and curved chisels, wood and metal files; wood materials included mahogany, balsawood, poplar and maple; metals included soft aluminum, strips of copper, brass and steel, molded pot metal and aluminum; tin, molten metal like solder as well as cutting photographic plate glass. Processes included joinery techniques for wheels and spokes, templates for compound surfaces, pattern-making, mold making, the lost wax process, gold leaf applique, room temperature vulcanizing (RTV) rubber for flexible molds, metal stamping and die cutting for repeatable parts like wheel spoke trim, engine lathe for wood and metal turning, sewing, needle point and embroidery skills for the upholstery, alcohol torch, DuPont brushable automotive lacquer paints and thinners.

The coaches were further complicated by working assemblies such as 5th wheel for the front axle, sliding plate glass windows for both doors, door latches and hinges, folding stairs cases (both doors) and rotating coach wheels.

**Model Car Builder**

For the model car, the designs were initially work out in clay from which templates were cut to facilitate the transfer of sculpted surface cross-sections to a solid substrate Some Guildsmen used laminated wood (e.g., sugar pine, popular or balsawood) to carve and shape their 3-dimensional Dream Cars, while others, used plaster, fiberglass or rigid polyurethane. Many of the same materials, tools and processes used for coach builders were employed: wood materials like mahogany, pine, bass, poplar, balsa wood were employed; metals such as brass, copper, tin, aluminum; silver soldering of brass was required to eliminate parting lines, chrome-plating techniques, chrome paint, metal polishing, mold-making, silicone mold release agents, metal working and casting, plaster casting, spray painting with enamels and lacquers, detailed upholstery work, metal working, catalytic epoxy resins, glues and adhesives, as well as heating/shaping acetate and plexiglass plastic.

**Leadership**

Over the decades of the program’s existence, leaders included Walter C. Leuschner (1930 – 1938), Harley J. Earl (VP GM Styling 1940-1958), William L. Mitchell (V.P. GM Styling 1958-1977) and future VP of GM Design), Charles M. “Chuck” Jordan (1986-1992) organized and ran the FBCG model car competitions. Chuck Jordan had been a 1947 national scholarship winner in the program.

**Judging**

At the end of the school year, the model car builders shipped their finished 1/12 scale dream car creations to the Fisher Body Engineering Administrative offices at 12 Mile Road & Van Dyke Avenue, Warren, MI. The program was popular among teenagers and thousands of entries were received annually. The models were scored based originality of design, craftmanship, workmanship, aesthetics, appearance, scale fidelity, practicality, etc.

GM’s Styling Staff (later called Design Staff) scored the amateur styling models in concert with Industrial Arts teachers from the Detroit School System. Together, they awarded college scholarships to national winners, cash awards to state winners, as well as trophies and Certificates of Design and Craftsmanship.

The scholarships were worth thousands of dollars and enabled many of the talented Guildsmen to pursue design training at professional schools (e.g., Pratt Institute of Art and Design, Art Center College of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology (Institute of Design), Rhode Island School of Design) or at similar colleges/universities with Industrial Design programs in Transportation or Product Design. Many had successful careers in the burgeoning field of Industrial Design.

**Design Executives inspired by the Guild**

Because of the opportunities afforded by being a Guildsmen, many lives were changed forever and many Guildsmen came to Detroit to work in the field of automobile design and engineering. Some even got their “dream job” designing the next generation of Corvettes, Camaros or GTO’s. Some were highly successful rising to the Design Executive level including (to name a few): Charles M. “Chuck” Jordan (VP GM Design, 1986-1992), Virgil M Exner, Jr. (Ford Motor Co.), Charles W. Pelly (Designworks USA), Terry R. Henline (GM Design and GM’s Advanced Design Center), Ronald C. Hill (GM Design and Art Center College of Design), Paul Tatseos (GM Design) Ronald J. Will (GM Design, Subaru of America), Geza Loczi (GM Design, VW, & Volvo Monitor & Concept Center), and Thomas H. Semple (Nissan Design America). [Bio sketches shown below.]

**Guild Operations Location**

The site where all the important Guild business occurred (e.g., model scoring/grading, the Annual Guild Convention and the GM VIPs awarding scholarships) was at the GM Tech Center’s Fisher Body Engineering Headquarters Auditorium located at 30001 Van Dyke Avenue (until 1984) in Warren, MI. Although the Guild scholarship program operated from 1930 to 1968, this site is where all the “action” played out from 1955 to 1968. Prior to construction of the GM Tech Center, the GM Building was the center of Guild activity.

**Guild Demise**

It was simply a decision made by James M. Roche, GM Chairman, who in a money saving mentality decided to terminate the FBCG, the Chevrolet Soap Box Derby, the Chevrolet Junior Miss competition, GM’s educational relations section, and GM’s film library for schools. The decision killed all of GM’s youth relations programs for the sake of a few million dollars at the expense of abandoning all positive feelings the youth of America had toward General Motors. It was believed these positive feels were carried though adulthood when the time came to purchase a new automobile. With this decision, GM lost its chance to plant a favorable impression about GM and its products in the minds of our nation’s youth. Mr. Roche apparently failed to recognize that children of today would become the vehicle owners of tomorrow. (Source: Online email communications, dated September 4, 2014, between John M. Mellberg, John L. Jacobus and Richard Herdegen (retired FBCG Field Rep Supervisor).]

**Guild Facts and Figures**

Approximately 387 scholarships were awarded which cost GM about $2.5 million including cash awards. Buoyed by Guild Field Reps making junior high and high school presentations annually across the U.S., 10 million youths enrolled in the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild over the lifetime of the program. About ½ of one percent of the enrollees actually built and entered a miniature scale model. It is estimated that about 32,800 award-worthy coaches and model cars were designed and constructed of which 6,000-7,200 were award-worthy coaches and 25,600 -26,800 were award-worthy model cars. It is estimated GM spent $25-30 million for the FBCG over the life of the program which is less than $1 M per year.

**Caveat Emptor**

Viewers of the model images must be aware that these are the “works of art” of amateurs, boys and young men, ages 11-20. Many people have commented that the Guild models look fresh, modern and even contemporary despite being hand-crafted 5 decades ago. This is because “good design” is timeless. This is no accident as the models were screened by a team of professional designers, a Guild Advisory Board, Industrial Arts teachers from the Detroit school system and top GM Design Executives including various VP’s of GM Design.

**Appendices**

**Some career auto designers inspired by the Guild and the make/models with which they are most associated**

**Virgil M. Exner, Jr.** – **1946** First Junior State Award for Indiana, $150, Regional award, and First Junior National Scholarship, $4000, at age 13, from South Bend, IN. After graduating from Notre Dame with a BA in fine arts and transportation design, he studied fine arts at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, earning a Master of Fine Arts degree by designing and building a sports car. Mr. Exner became a well-known auto designer at several auto manufacturers in Europe and the U.S. He was a Ford Executive Designer, responsible for the 1970 Thunderbird, 1970 Maverick, 1971 Mercury Marquis and the 1971 Pinto as well as the Ford Escort, Granada, and Ford Fiesta. He was the designer of the “Motor Trend Car of the Year” trophy. Virgil M. Exner Jr., retired to Florida in 1988 where he continues to be a design consultant. His father, Virgil M. Exner, Sr., was V.P. Chrysler Styling, 1953-58, and died in 1973. Virgil M. Exner Sr, was inducted into the Automobile Hall of Fame in 1995.

**Charles M. Jordan** - **1947** First Senior State Award for Massachusetts, $150, Regional Award, and First National Senior Scholarship, $4,000 award, age 19 from Cambridge, MA. While a sophomore at MIT, studying engineering and design, he found out about the Guild. He built a model and won First National in the Senior Division. Joined GM Styling as a Junior Designer in 1949, and three years later the Korean War started in 1952. Mr. Jordan served as a lieutenant in Air Force. After the military tour of duty, he returned to GM as chief designer for the Special Projects Studio to work on the Aerotrain and other projects. At the age of 29, in 1957, Mr. Jordan was made Chief Designer of Cadillac. He was then promoted to Executive-in-Charge of all exterior design of GM cars and trucks in 1962. The same year, 1962, Life magazine selected Mr. Jordan as one of the 100 “Most Important Young Men and Women in the United States” for its September issue. Was made Director of Design at Opel (Germany) in 1967. Started his own design group, and ran it for three years and went back to GM as executive in charge of design. Then in 1977, was named Director of Design. 1986-1992 served as General Motors Vice President for Design. Spent 43 years as an automobile designer. As a retiree taught auto design at the high school level and enjoyed his model and full-scale automobile collection. Chuck Jordan was inducted into the Automobile Hall of Fame in 1990. Mr. Jordan died in 2010.

**Ronald C. Hill** - **1950** First Junior State Award for California, $150, Regional Award, and First Junior National Scholarship Award, $4,000 age 15, from Pasadena, CA. Accepted at Art Center School in west Los Angeles, graduated with honors and was immediately hired by General Motors in 1954 as an entry level designer in the Styling Section. Two years later, was Assistant Chief Designer in the Cadillac studio. Then was drafted into the Army where he served two years. As a Chief Designer at Chevrolet, Pontiac and Buick he headed studios that contributed to the designs of the mid-engine Corvette, 1965 Corvair line, large Chevrolet line, and the Chevy Vega among many well-known production models. He was responsible for the 1972 and 1973 Pontiac Le Mans, GTO and Firebird programs; all the 1973 and 1974 Buick Programs and advanced Chevrolet products including the forerunner of the 1977 “B” line, the advanced Buick Project (i.e., Riviera) and advanced Cadillac projects (i.e., Eldorado). Mr. Hill managed groups that designed the forerunner of the 1978 Monte Carlo, the new Camaro/Firebird designs, small cars (i.e. Chevy Chevette) and the original concept vehicle for the Pontiac mid-engine Fiero project (1979-1980) which earned him the Industrial Designer’s Society of America (IDSA) Award for Design Excellence in 1984. After a 31year career at GM, Mr. Hill accepted the position of department chair at the Art Center College of Design, and worked there for 15 additional years before retiring.

**Charles W. Pelly** – **1954** Second National Junior Scholarship, $3,000, age 15, from Los Angeles, CA. After high school went on to graduate from the Art Center School in Los Angeles with a degree in industrial and transportation design. As a distinguished designer and founder of Designworks/USA, and Charles Pelly Design Associates, Mr. Pelly has designed race cars, snowmobiles, farm equipment, campers, and catamarans as well as vehicles for GM, Chrysler, American Motors, Mazda, Subaru, and BMW. He is an Educator and Founder of IDSA. In 2004 was presented with the Eyes on Design, Lifetime Achievement Award for Design. Chuck Pelly was part of the famous Guildsmen from Los Angeles called “Los Angelenos” – the successful contestants from LA who won top scholarship awards like Charles M. Jordan (’47 Whittier, CA), Robert A. Cadaret (‘50N), Ronald C. Hill (‘50N), Gordon Williams (‘51N), Hugh von Delden (‘51N), Charles W. Pelly (‘54N), William A. Moore (‘56N), Charles A. Gibilterra (‘56N), E. Arthur Russell (‘57) and Robert Davids (‘63N).

**Paul Tatseos** – **1956** First Senior State Award for MA, $150, and a Regional award. Age 18, from Boston, MA. **1957** Styling Scholarship Award, $1000.Age 19. **1958** Third Senior National Scholarship Award, $3000, age 20. Attended Art Center School in Los Angeles earning a degree in Industrial and Transportation Design. Was hired by GM after graduation from Art Center, and spent a very productive 37-year career there. Began with the GM Design Staff from 1961-97 as Interior Design Chief for Chevrolet, Pontiac, Oldsmobile and also Buick. Spent 5 years at GM Holden in Australia as Assistant Studio Chief. Now retired, Mr. Tatseos is a design consultant.

**Terry R. Henline** – **1954** entered a model, age 13 from Lincoln, NE. **1955, 1956,** State and Regional Awards at ages, 14 and 15 years respectively. **1957** Styling Scholarship Award, $1,000, age 16. **1958** Second National Senior Scholarship Award, $4,000, age 17. Terry used his scholarship money to attend Art Center School in Los Angeles CA, graduating with a degree in Industrial and Transportation Design. Terry began his 40-year GM Design career as a Student Intern in 1960, upon graduation from Art Center. The first vehicle exterior design created under his total direction was the 1970 Chevrolet Monte Carlo. He was Chief Designer of various GM Studios; Buick, Chevrolet and Pontiac. Head of the Pontiac studios for 17 years, known for the 1988 Pontiac Grand Prix (Motor Trend’s Car of the Year) and Pontiac Grand Am models. Became Director of GM’s Advanced Design facilities in California and was Design Director of the Hummer program. Mr. Henline has retired to Gratiot, MI.

**Ronald J. Will** - **1959** Honorable Mention, $25, age 16, from Hobart, Indiana. **1960** First State Senior Award, $150, and a Regional Award, age 17. **1961** First National Senior Scholarship Award, $5,000. First State Senior Award, $150, and a Regional Award for Indiana. Attended Illinois Institute of Technology graduating with a degree in Product Design. Was hired by GM Styling Staff and worked in the Corvette, Camaro, Olds Tornado and Cadillac Studios. Mr. Will contributed to the mid-engine Aerovette and 25th Anniversary Corvette, as well as many other designs. Left GM after 10 years to become an independent auto designer. He pursued his dream for three years designing and building a sports car called a “Turbo Phantom”. Went to work at Subaru in California as a Designer, Retired as Manager of Product Planning and Design for Subaru of America. Ron created the first Subaru Outback and Subaru Forester designs. He is an independent designer for Turbo-Phantom 3-wheel autocycle project, and designer of the Falcon Future X-Prize 100 mpg car and Solar Clean fuels LLC on environmental projects. Member Phoenix Auto Press.

**Thomas H. Semple** – **1964 First** National Senior Scholarship Award, $5000, age 19, from Portland, Oregon. Graduated from Art Center School with a degree in Industrial and Transportation Design. Worked for GM for 13 years, primarily in the Chevrolet and Oldsmobile Divisions reaching the position of Assistant Chief Designer. Left GM in 1980 to develop Nissan America in La Jolla, CA. He was part of the team that designed the e 1986 mid-year “Hard-body” truck and Pathfinder, the Infinity J30 and the 1993 Nissan Quest. By 1987 he was the Chief Designer at NDI, in charge of the design studio. Mr. Semple retired in 2004 as President of Nissan Design America.

**Geza A. Loczi** – **1965** First National Senior Scholarship winner, $5,000 award at age 20 but made 6 other Guild model entries. Worked at GM Design and then became Design Manager at VW. Worked as a consultant to Volvo while living in California then moved to Sweden in an acting design manager capacity retuning to the U.S. as Director of Design, VMCC (Volvo Monitoring and Concept Center) Camarillo CA. He has been involved in the design of the Environmental Concept Car (ECC), production cars (S80, V70 and S60), the safety Concept Car (SCC) and XC90 SUV designed for the N.A. market.

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