

A HISTORY OF THE FERRIS AUTOMOTIVE DEPARTMENT  
by  
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In keeping with the philosophy of what was then Ferris Institute, of training young people to become employable, a decision was reached to offer a course in Automotive Service. Based on the recommendations of the Automotive Industry and the Vocational Education Conference the course would provide practice and study necessary for the development of skilled tradesmen in the Automotive Service and Repair field.

The first class was offered in September of 1952 and enrollment was limited to 12 students. The course was to run for six quarters and each quarter was to stress certain items. The first quarter was devoted to Elementary Shop Practice covering use of tools and familiarization with common hardware. The second quarter was Engine Theory and Practice; 3<sup>rd</sup>, Electricity; 4<sup>th</sup>, Chassis & Welding; 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, Advanced Auto theory and Practice.<sup>1</sup>

When the class met for the first time, it had only 7 students who enrolled for the first quarter. As there were no adequate classrooms on the campus, the course was conducted in a rented garage in Big Rapids. There was only one instructor, Arthur Oettmeier, and from the size of the class, the students must have had much individual instruction.<sup>2</sup> There were 40 hours of class a week as veterans had to attend that many hours to qualify for the GI Bill. Also, a student could enroll today and be in class the next day. He could leave anytime and get a certificate certifying that he had completed 'x' number of hours.<sup>3</sup>

In order that the students have as near an actual situation as possible, the shop worked on privately owned vehicles rather than mock-up units as much as possible. One problem

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<sup>1</sup> Ferris Institute Bulletin 1952-1953

<sup>2</sup> Ferris Torch, Oct. 30, 1952

though, in getting your car fixed. was the fact that your car had to have the particular problem the class was studying at that time. In other words if your car had brake problems and the class was studying steering that week, you would have to wait until they got to brakes before you could get anything done.<sup>4</sup>

In September of 1953 the Automotive Service course underwent some revision. It was felt that the students should get more educational background along with the practical aspects. With this in mind the quarters were broken down into a schedule which required that all students take physical education. In addition they were required to take courses in Economics, Small Business Management and some electives in their 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> quarter.<sup>5</sup>

At this time the course was also laid out so that each quarter required the student to take certain courses rather than lumping the quarter under a general heading. This made for an orderly progression through the 6 quarters and the awarding of a certificate to those who attained at least a "C" average.<sup>6</sup>

Another instructor, Herbert Parsons, was added to the program in 1954.

At the opening of fall term in 1955, the course underwent additional changes. A basic program of four quarters was offered. At the end of the fourth term the student had the option of finishing the course either in Auto Suspension or Auto Testing. Auto Suspension stressed steering, brakes, shock absorbers and springs. Auto testing went more into Tune-Up and Electrical Troubleshooting.<sup>7</sup>

Also in the fall of 1955 a four-quarter program was offered in Filling Station Management. This was a course to enable a person to become familiar with the operation of a

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert Parsons-Personal Interview

<sup>4</sup> Ferris Torch, Oct. 30, 1952

<sup>5</sup> Ferris Institute Bulletin, 1953- 1954

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

modern filling station. The first three quarters were spent in a basic program of General Auto Service. The fourth quarter consisted of courses related to Filling Station Management such as: Foremanship, Management and Labor, Tune-Up and a management course tied in closely with the operation of a filling station. Evidently this course was not too well received for it was dropped after one year.<sup>8</sup>

After four years in rented or makeshift quarters, the Automotive Service course was about to move into deluxe surroundings. They had been housed in the former Studebaker dealership which was located on the site of the present Southland parking lot and a barracks type building behind the Alumni building.<sup>9</sup> During 1955-1957 a \$1,400,000 Trade & Industrial building was erected. This building included a modern laboratory for the teaching of Automotive Repair. It had hydraulic hoists, wheel aligning equipment and a dynamometer to mention a few items. Also were included separate classrooms and labs for the teaching of welding, brakes and suspensions, transmissions and final drives, and fuel and electrical.<sup>10</sup> At that time the building was intended to house the Radio and Television, Machine Tool, Air Conditioning, Drafting, Refrigeration and Printing as well as Auto Service, which moved into one wing over Christmas break 1955-1956. As enrollment increased a third instructor, Mathias Brejcha was employed in 1957.

Part of the Auto Service Program had been housed in a barracks type building near the Trade & Industrial Building. When this was vacated a new Automotive program moved into the quarters. This program was known as the Heavy Equipment & Diesel Repair curriculum.

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<sup>7</sup> Ferris Institute Bulletin, 1955-1956

<sup>8</sup> Ferris Institute Bulletin, 1956-1957

<sup>9</sup> Herbert Parsons Personal Interview

<sup>10</sup> Ferris Institute Bulletin, Jan. 1956

With one instructor, John Smith, its purpose was to provide training to young men who intended to make a career of heavy equipment maintenance and its related fields.<sup>11</sup>

For the first two years all work was done on diesel engines obtained from Government surplus. The related courses such as brakes, transmission, fuels and electrical were taught by auto service instructors. The classes relating to injection systems were taught by the Heavy Equipment instructor.<sup>12</sup>

In 1958 an additional instructor, Hubert Motry, was employed and customer work was then solicited in order to give the students actual hands on experience. At this time, all the courses related to the Heavy Equipment field were taught by the two instructors.<sup>13</sup>

The Heavy Equipment Repair course was a six quarter course. The students spent 25 hours a week in the shop with five hours of lecture regarding the shop operation. In addition they spent ten hours per week in other courses such as Welding, Electrical, Math, Communications, Physical Education, Service Management and Foremanship Training. These courses were strongly emphasized and were required to qualify for graduation.<sup>14</sup>

The Heavy Equipment & Diesel program grew with such rapidity that in 1960 the shop operation moved from the campus facilities to a larger building off campus.<sup>15</sup> At this location it was possible to bring in cranes, tractors and bigger equipment than before the move. Also, a separate fuel injection room was set up to handle repairs and instruction on injection system components. Again in 1963 because of program growth new and larger quarters were provided and a third instructor, Wesley Merriman, was hired. The new building

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<sup>11</sup> Hubert Motry Personal Interview

<sup>12</sup> Hubert Motry Personal Interview

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> "Michigan College Trains Mechanics", *Michigan Roads and Construction*, March 2, 1961

was located on East Maple Street on the edge of Big Rapids and provided a large field for testing of repaired units.<sup>16</sup>

In 1965 because of another large increase in the number of students the program was changed from six major shop periods to three major shop periods and a number of minor – 2 hour – lab and lecture periods. The students were taught Fuel & Electrical, Final Drives, Brakes and Suspension and Diesel Engines in the minor labs. In addition a number of other related courses such as Physics, Social Science, Communications and Political Science were required.<sup>17</sup>

During the next two years three more instructors, John Stager, James Brand and Leroy Larson, whose field was fuel injection repair, joined the program. Mr. Larson was responsible for the entire fuel injection training program. This made three instructors at the off-campus location in the shop, one at the fuel injection lab and the fifth was on-campus teaching diesel courses.

In the spring and summer of 1968 a major remodeling was done on one wing of the Trade & Industrial Building – now renamed the Trade & Industrial Center – and in the fall the Heavy Equipment and Diesel program was moved again to even larger quarters, this time on campus. At this time the injection lab was moved into new facilities in the Trade & Industrial Center.

In the fall of 1969 1 new instructor, Keith Cripe, was hired to work in the shop area. This freed one man to work on course revision and to assist in a study of a contemplated 4-year course leading to a BS degree in the automotive field. As far as course revision, another shop period was dropped and more minor lab courses added. These were a Shop Practices

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<sup>16</sup> Hubert Motry Personal Interview

<sup>17</sup> Hubert Motry, Instructor

course and a Hydraulics course. In the summer of 1970 the program name was changed from Heavy Equipment & Diesel Repair to Heavy Equipment Service.<sup>18</sup>

In the early 1970's, it was determined that the HES program should be moved due to a number of problems on campus. No area for testing of heavy equipment and storage of equipment to be worked on were two of the problems. An empty furniture factory on Madison Street on the other side of the Muskegon River was renovated as a temporary home for the program. It was not particularly a good building for the purpose, but was made to work by the hard work and innovation of the faculty and the students.

This building was to be a temporary facility and planning started on a permanent structure for the Heavy Equipment Service program. The initial plan was to have the building finished for use by 1976.<sup>19</sup> However, as the financial condition of the State of Michigan rose and fell, so did the hopes for a new building. It wasn't until Fall of 1984 that the program moved back on campus and that was into the newly constructed General Services building which was temporarily altered for the Heavy Equipment Service program. Planning continued for a new building and that was finally achieved when they moved into a new \$7,000,000 facility in the Fall of 1986.

The Body & Fender Repair course was first offered in the fall of 1955. The subjects covered were Sheetmetal Work, Construction of Automobiles, Front End & Frame Alignment, Selecting & Mixing Paints and their application. There was also much emphasis given to welding, both arc and acetylene. The course was set up for four quarters and in addition to the subjects mentioned above the students also had to take Math, Physical

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<sup>18</sup> Ferris State College Bulletin 1970-1971

<sup>19</sup> *Equipment Maintenance Magazine* May, 1974

Education, Business correspondence, Foremanship, Everyday Law and Body Shop Management.<sup>20</sup>

The first quarters for the new course was the former Packard dealership building on Maple Street just west of the post office. The program continued here until winter term 1957. At that time it was moved to the Trade & Industrial Building and shared quarters with the Automotive Service Program. The building was not completely finished at the time and the problem of getting vehicles in and out of the shop was made quite difficult by the mud around the new construction.<sup>21</sup>

In the fall of 1956 the curriculum was lengthened to six quarters and more related courses were added. Again, as in the Heavy Equipment & Diesel course these consisted of Communication Skills, Political Science, Social Science and Physics.<sup>22</sup> The program continued in this fashion until 1963 when a second instructor Joseph Brodowski, joined the program. At this time a second classroom lab was located in a former garage on State Street. This allowed for more students and a chance for specialization by both instructors and students.<sup>23</sup>

In 1967 a third instructor, William Unger, who had extensive background in the repair of plastic bodies came on board. He shared the off-campus facilities with one other instructor until 1968 when the entire program was moved on-campus and shared a wing with the Heavy Equipment Service Program. A state of the art paint booth was located between the two programs. In 1970 the name of the program was changed from Body and Fender Repair to

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<sup>20</sup> Ferris Institute Bulletin, 1955-1956

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Brodowski, Personal Interview

<sup>22</sup> Ferris Institute Bulletin, 1956-1957

<sup>23</sup> Robert Severson, Personal Interview

Auto Body Repair. When the Heavy Equipment Service Program moved to Madison Street the Auto Body Repair Program expanded into the empty space.

Maintenance of automobiles, trucks and off road equipment often requires the reconditioning of engines and other parts. Some reconditioning can be accomplished by replacement of worn parts. However, in many cases the original item must be reworked. Examples include: reboring cylinders, grinding valves, machining heads, grinding cranks and camshafts and turning drums.

Because of a demand for trained automotive machinists, a course was initiated at Ferris in 1957. This was an offshoot of the Automotive Service Department and taught by Automotive Service instructors.

The program started in 1957 with 5 students, a minimum of equipment, with Robert Kirchner as instructor. The first classes were conducted in a room off the Automotive Service lab. Later, in 1961, the facilities were moved to the temporary barracks building behind the Trade & Industrial Center. In 1964 a second instructor Claude Pepper, was hired and in 1967 the program moved back into the Trade & Industrial Center in a room formerly occupied by the Printing Department program.<sup>24</sup>

The course was designed to be four quarters. For the first four years the first quarter of shop work was divided between 15 hours in the Auto Machine shop and 10 hours on the Machine Tool department.<sup>25</sup> Later, all the time was spent in the Auto Machine shop as Machine Tool classes became more crowded. Over the years the equipment was brought up to date and more purchased through State and Federal funds. Eventually the shop could do

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Kirschner Personal Interview

<sup>25</sup> Claude Pepper Personal Interview

almost any job that a commercial establishment could handle.<sup>26</sup> As demand for graduates increased and Robert Kirchner retired, in 1972 two instructors, George Kelsh and Michael Hachman were hired so three sections could be taught,<sup>27</sup> The students spent 25 hours per week in the shop. In addition they also took related courses in Math, Communications, Physical Education, Foremanship Training and Social Science.

On November 5, 1969 the Committee on Instruction approved a proposal for a four-year curriculum in Automotive and Heavy Equipment Technology leading to a Bachelor of Science degree. This would be a continuation of the present six quarter program.<sup>28</sup> The proposal was sent to the Michigan State Board of Education for approval. It provided an opportunity for a student to continue his program of study beyond the two year level in a service-oriented curriculum. The new course required the acceptance of a 2 year certificate as a prerequisite. Courses in Distribution, Accounting and Management as well as advanced Automotive and Heavy Equipment courses were included in the new program. The course was approved by the State Board of Education in February 1970 and implemented in 1971.<sup>29</sup>

Warner Forsyth was the first instructor in the new program. He taught many of the business courses and Automotive faculty taught the technical offerings. In 1974 William Lackey joined the program and in 1977 as the program grew, Newell Johnson became the third faculty member of Automotive and Heavy Equipment Technology.

The program was extremely popular and graduates had many job opportunities upon graduation. The combination of hands-on experience plus marketing and business courses made the graduates prime candidates for managerial positions.

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<sup>26</sup> Claude Pepper Personal Interview.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Committee on Instruction Minutes, November 5, 1969

<sup>29</sup> Letter to Gerald Faverman, Legislative Fiscal Agency from Victor Spathelf June 7, 1971

In January of 1958 a continuing series of weekly practical workshops was conducted on campus for the automotive industry. The main thrust of these sessions was front-end alignment and suspension training. This was a self-sustaining program sponsored by the Michigan Automotive Wholesalers Association in conjunction tire companies, John Bean, Ammco Tools and Jobbers Associations from many states. These workshops attracted people from all over the U.S. as well as overseas.<sup>30</sup>

In the early 1960's, these on-campus workshops began to be phased out and a Mobile Training program began. This program continued to be self-sustaining with the Michigan Wholesalers Organization being the main sponsor. A van was purchased and equipped and the instructor would set up a meeting place, usually at a repair shop and dealers would send mechanics in for training. At first the emphasis was on front-end alignment and suspension and later expanded to tune-up, fuel injection and electronic ignition.

The instructors were Ferris employees, but their salary and the program was funded by the Michigan Automotive Wholesalers and industry. Charles Bourland was the first instructor and when he retired, Herman Luhrs took over. Maurice Shotwell entered the program in 1970 after Herman Luhrs started teaching in Automotive Service.<sup>31</sup> In 1976 a grant was obtained to teach school bus brake maintenance. Another instructor, Doyle Johnson, joined the program as the load was becoming too heavy for one instructor. Many of the students at the school bus brake training sessions were Michigan State Police troopers as they had been mandated to inspect school busses.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Board of Control Minutes, April 5, 1960

<sup>31</sup> Ferris State College Bulletin 1970-1971

<sup>32</sup> Doyle Johnson Personal Interview

Occasionally when the requests for training became numerous, some Automotive Service instructors would conduct some of the sessions.<sup>33</sup>

Over the years, in addition to dealer mechanics, the Mobile Training program had also trained mechanics for Consumers Power and the U.S. Army in Lansing. When the school bus grant ran out the entire Mobil Training program was discontinued sometime in the early 1980's.<sup>34</sup>

This has been an attempt to give an overview of the beginnings and early expansion of those programs pertaining to the Automotive Industry at Ferris Institute, Ferris State College and finally, Ferris State University. Many, many people, other than those mentioned, helped those programs to grow and prosper.

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<sup>33</sup> Clifford Samuels Personal Interview

<sup>34</sup> Charles Rathjen Personal Interview

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