Here were six brothers: from the eldest, Fred, Charlie, Bill, Larry, Ed and Al. There also was a baby brother, Howard, who wasn’t in the auto business, and there were four sisters. Howard worked for the family company that managed the joint financial interests. They came from Norwalk, Ohio. Their father was a blacksmith and carriage maker, and his boys became the world’s largest manufacturers of automotive bodies.

The Fisher brothers built millions of bodies for General Motors, each of which wore a tiny badge on the body panel just ahead of the front door. It read: “Body by Fisher.” GM currently has an insignia that it calls the “mark of excellence.” “Body by Fisher” was GM’s first mark of excellence.

Fred was the first of the brothers to come to Detroit. That was in 1902, and he got a job at the Wilson carriage works. Brother after brother joined him in Detroit as each one came of age, and in 1908, they established Fisher Body Co.

From $1,000 to $4 million

Early on, the company struggled, but in 1910, it received an order for 150 bodies from Cadillac and was on its way.

Fred Fisher’s official GM biography reports: “So swift was the Fisher company’s growth that an investment of $1,000 by one of Fred’s sisters was worth $4 million a few years later.”

From the start, Fisher Body built closed bodies — for cars you could drive in the rain and in the winter. In 1916, Fisher Body hooked up with Alvar Ternstedt, inventor of the first practical car-window regulator. Suddenly the windows could go up and down!

In 1922, three years after GM paid $27.6 million for a 60 percent stake in their company. From left: Ed, Al, Bill, Charlie, Fred and Larry.

The Fisher boys in 1922, three years after GM paid $27.6 million for a 60 percent stake in their company. From left: Ed, Al, Bill, Charlie, Fred and Larry.

The Fishers’ futures

But what of the brothers? Fred retired in 1923, and Bill took over as Fisher Body president (general manager after the GM buyout). Bill bowed out in 1934, and Ed ran the show for the next 10 years.

Five of the six became vice presidents of General Motors, and five served on GM’s board of directors — all except Al, who was Fisher Body’s chief engineer.

Larry left the family store. He was general manager of Cadillac from 1925 to 1934. He brought designer Harley Earl to GM, and he was Cadillac’s boss when it introduced the LaSalle in 1927.


Ed, the final survivor, retired from the board in 1969.

A personal note

The Fisher brothers were able to win and retain the lifelong loyalty of their employees. My father was one of them for 37 years. Dad knew every one of the brothers, and I do not exaggerate when I say that he loved every one of them — especially Bill, who hired him in 1916. He and Bill Fisher worked closely together for many years.

On Dad’s watch, Fisher Body grew from a small family-owned operation to a giant corporation to GM’s second-largest division (after Chevrolet). But Dad never felt he worked for any of those outfits.

Asked what he did for a living, he always answered: “I work for the Fisher boys.”

— John K. Teahen Jr.