

The “General” Story

The General story begins in 1903, when Harry W. Huthsing founded the National Belting & Hose Company in St. Louis, MO. Two years later the firm was incorporated as the General Manufacturing Co. In 1918 General began to manufacture fire extinguishers.

By 1926, when operations were transferred to a building at 4127 and 4133 Forest Park Blvd. in St. Louis, General’s principal product was motor fire apparatus mounted on commercial truck chassis. The company’s name was changed to The General Fire Truck Corporation

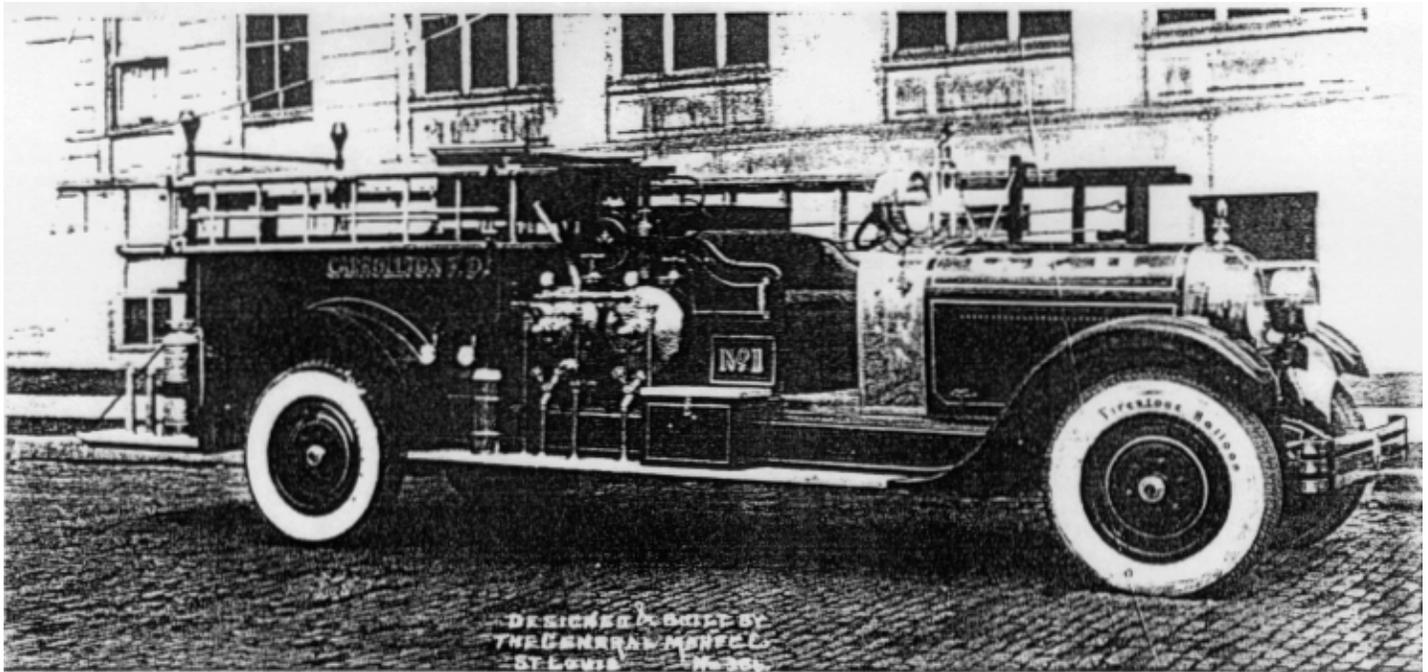
General Manufacturing Company Offices and Factory at 4127-33 Forest Park Boulevard in St. Louis, MO in the late 1920s.

that year -- although the “General Mfg.

Co.”name continued to be used on its motor fire apparatus for some years.

Early in 1927 the company collaborated with Pierce-Arrow of Buffalo, NY in the development of a motor pumping engine built on the Pierce-Arrow Model “Z” bus chassis. The first one of these was delivered to Celina, OH. The Model “Z” chassis was powered by the same dual-valve, six-cylinder T-head engine used in the regal Pierce-Arrow Model 36 Limousine. General also mounted fire apparatus on the Studebaker bus chassis, which was powered by Studebaker’s “Bix Six” engine.





Carrollton, Missouri received ca. 1927 General-St. Louis/Studebaker Two-Tank Chemical & Hose Combination. Note triple-bar bumper and Firestone Balloon whitewall tires.

General pumpers were equipped with Northern rotary gear pumps.

A distinctive feature of General fire apparatus of this era was a polished aluminum cowl surmounted by an Eagle-topped bell in a heavy nickel-plated bracket.

In the early 1930s, General introduced a premium "General Monarch" line built on a classicly-styled assembled chassis. Later models had V-type chrome grilles and skirted front fenders. Most of these handsomely-styled rigs had two-piece windshields and were powered by Hercules six-cylinder engines.

In 1936, the entire General Fire Truck Corporation operation was moved to Detroit. The transplanted company set up shop in a single-story factory at 2200 East Jefferson Avenue at Dubois St. Additional floor space was later added at 2272 East Jefferson.

Most General-Detroit fire apparatus deliveries were on standard commercial truck chassis -- Chevrolet, GMC, Ford, Dodge, Diamond-T, International, Reo (and four Packards) -- but the company continued to offer a line of custom chassis rigs, some of which were powered by Packard V-12 and Super Eight engines.

In 1942 the company changed its name to the General Detroit Corp., although it continued to use the General Fire Truck Corporation name in its advertising. The company had established a West Coast subsidiary in Los Angeles in 1937. This subsidiary was known as the General-Pacific Corporation. General-Pacific built some truly massive custom-chassis pumpers which were unlike anything built back east.

In the booming postwar period, General-Detroit built some apparatus on chassis purchased from the Available Truck Company of Chicago and the Duplex Motor Truck Co. of Lansing, MI., as well as locally-built Federal and Diamond-T.

General's fire extinguisher and hose business now eclipsed its motor fire apparatus business. In 1950, fire apparatus production was transferred to a plant on Little Mack Avenue near Ten Mile Rd. in suburban St. Clair Shores. The last General-Detroit fire engine, a pumper on a 1957 Chevrolet chassis, rolled out of the St. Clair Shores plant in late 1956. The company changed its name to the General Fire Extinguisher Corp.

But that wasn't the end of the story. When General abandoned the motor fire apparatus business, three former General-Detroit employees formed a new company -- the Firemaster Corp. -- which set up shop on Harper Avenue near Mount Clemens, MI. Firemaster built both custom and commercial chassis apparatus. Firemaster later moved into a plant in Mount Clemens and changed its name to Fire Trucks Incorporated. This company, later known as FTI, continued to manufacture motor fire apparatus, including many units for the U.S. military, well into the 1980's.

Thus the General story, under a variety of names, spanned eight decades of American fire apparatus industry history.

Editor's note: The forgoing is a condensation of a photofeature entitled "The General Story: Apparatus From The Motor City" written by Clarence C. Woodard which was published in the Summer 1978-2 issue of *Engine!-Engine!*

-Walt McCall