

The Fisher Brothers Distinguished Citizen

St. Paul and the City of Norwalk will be forever indebted to Lawrence and Margaret Fisher. It was from that marriage that seven brothers and three sisters were born. Forever, those boys would be known as the Fisher Brothers of Detroit.

The remarkable story of how this family not only changed Norwalk but also the auto industry began in 1848 when Andreas Fischer came to America from Baden, Germany. He settled in Peru, became a member of St. Alphonsus Ligouri Catholic Church and continued his occupation as a wagon maker. He would marry a parishioner, Stephana Rummele. The family home in Peru Hollow, near the "Store That made The Cheese Famous", stands to this day. One of the sons born to that family was Lawrence, the patriarch of the Fisher Brothers, first of Norwalk and then of Detroit.

Lawrence worked in his father's shop for eight years before leaving for employment at the Kinsman Carriage Factory in Sandusky. It was in Sandusky where he met and would marry Margaret Theisen. Their first two children, Frederick and Charles, were born there.

Lawrence and Margaret would move to Norwalk in 1880, taking up housekeeping at 7 Maple Street. The ever-growing family would move to 68 South Linwood in 1910. The other nine members of the family Anna, Mary, William, Lawrence, Edward, Alfred, Loretta, Clara and Howard in that order, would follow Frederick and Charles. The family belonged to St. Paul Catholic Church and the children were schooled there.

All of the boys worked in the two Benedict Avenue carriage factories. The first a rented building at 70 Benedict and the second at 77 Benedict, a building named the Lawrence Fisher Body Shop.

Unlike earlier open carriages, the Fisher models were moving toward a fully enclosed body, keeping the driver and passengers out of the elements. Andrew, a brother to Lawrence, would join the firm as a blacksmith and is known to be the only family member to continue to keep the letter "c" in the family name.

Frederick, the oldest of the brothers, left home at age 14 to work in coach factories in two other states. After graduating from a business school in 1901, he joined his uncle Albert in Detroit at the Wilson Body Shop.

Eventually, Fredericks along with his brother Charles and uncle Albert, would form Fisher Body. Within a few years, all seven brothers would become partners of the firm although the youngest, Howard, after graduating from Notre Dame, was best noted for over-seeing the building of the Fisher Building in Detroit.

It was an order for 150 closed bodies in 1910 by the Cadillac Corporation that is said to have given the firm the boost needed to kick-start a true financial giant.

Frederick, the first of the brothers to leave Norwalk for Detroit, told a friend before departing, that by age 50, he hoped to be worth \$50,000. As it turned out, by the time he was 50, he was worth \$50-million.

In 1924, Frederick, Charles and Lawrence left active management in the Fisher Body firm to join General Motors. Over the years, that firm employed 65,000 and had 24 plants. The family fortune would peak at \$1.3-billion.

The first known financial gift locally of the Fisher Brothers (there could have been many that were never publicized) came in 1921 when the brothers donated \$282,000 for the building of St. Paul High School.

William, the fifth member of the family, would be one of the two individual brothers who would remember their home town with other financial gifts. Married to Norwalkian Laura Titus, the couple in 1957 donated \$1-million toward the building of Fisher-Titus Hospital. In the 10 years that followed, they would add another \$500,000 to that total. They also had made it possible for the Norwalk Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution to have their own Chapter House at 63 West Main Street.

Laura (Titus) Fisher, in 1960, also gave a generous donation in memory of her parents toward the building fund of the First Presbyterian Church.

Time and again, Edward, the last surviving brother, was responsible for gifts to St. Paul Parish. In 1971, he gave \$100,000 toward the remodeling of the church.

Previously, in the 1920's, his stipends along with his brothers financed the Parish House, the rectory, the



convent and the gymnasium.

Lawrence and Margaret Fisher also gave the money that built the Sorrowful Mother Shrine on West Main Street. It was considered a gift in memory of her parents. That shrine stands on the original site of St. Peter's Church, the first Catholic Church in Norwalk. The parents of Lawrence Fisher are buried in the cemetery behind the shrine.

The Fisher Brothers and their extended families endured more than their share of sickness. A number of the family members died relatively young, many of them from pneumonia.

Because of their wealth, they and their families were in constant fear of being targeted like the Lindbergh baby. The Pinkerton Agency was often hired to guard against such happenings.

The brothers and their families visited Norwalk often, many times driving from Detroit. On occasion when several brothers and their families made the 120-mile trip, they used the rails and then were picked up by chauffeur-driven vehicles and delivered to their destinations.

It was in 2006, when the Norwalk Kiwanis Club completed a memorial to the brothers at the site of the second carriage shop on Benedict Avenue.