

unstoppable

THE SUPPLE OPERATOR

The Fixible Co, not very well known outside the US,
did its quiet bit to usher in the age of modern buses



Edition 18 of a special CV series by

APOLLO TYRES



The *Flexible Co.*, (1913-1996), was a motorcycle sidecar, funeral car, ambulance, intercity coach and transit bus manufacturing company based in the United States which went out of business in 1996.

In 1913, Hugo H. Young and Carl F. Dudie founded the *Flexible Sidecar Co.* in Loudonville, Ohio to manufacture motorcycle sidecars with a flexible mounting to the motorcycle. The flexible mounting allowed the sidecar to lean on corners along with the motorcycle, and was based on a design patented by Young.

After low-priced automobiles became available in the 1920s, the motorcycle sidecar demand dropped and in 1924, *Flexible* turned to production of funeral cars (hearses), ambulances, and intercity buses, which were primarily manufactured on Buick chassis, but also occasionally on Studebaker, Cadillac, and Reo chassis.

In 1953, *Flexible* absorbed the bus-manufacturing portion of the *Fageol Twin Coach Company*, and accepted its first order for transit buses from the *Chicago Transit Authority*. In 1964, *Flexible* purchased *Southern Coach Manufacturing Co.* of Evergreen, Alabama and built small transit buses at the former's *Southern Coach* factory until 1976. *Flexible* was purchased by *Rohr Industries* in 1970, and a new factory and corporate headquarters were built in Delaware, Ohio in 1974, with the original factory in Loudonville, Ohio being used to manufacture parts and sub-assemblies. *Flexible* was sold to *Grumman Corporation* in 1978 and became known as *Grumman Flexible*. The name reverted to *Flexible* when *Grumman* sold the company in 1983 to *General Automotive Corporation*. In 1996, *Flexible* declared bankruptcy and its assets were auctioned. The last *Flexible* vehicles produced were eight 35-foot long CNG-fueled metro buses.

Flexible was incorporated with the help of *Kettering*, who then became president of the company and joined the board of directors. *Kettering*



APOLLO TYRES LTD.

unstoppable

Never wary of progress, never skeptical about success,
Never scared of challenges, never tired of trying,
Every step of the way we travel with our customers,
On the "unstoppable" journey to success.

provided significant funding for the company in its early years, particularly after 1916, when *Kettering* sold his firm, the *Dayton Engineering Laboratories Company (Delco)*, to GM for \$2.5 million. *Kettering* continued to serve as president of *Flexible*, until he became chairman of the board in 1940, a position he held until his death in 1958. As a result of *Kettering's* close relationship with both GM and *Flexible*, many GM parts were used in the production of *Flexible* vehicles. For example, most *Flexible* ambulances, hearses, and buses from the mid-1920s to the early-1940s were built on Buick chassis, and *Flexible's* 'Airway' model buses of the mid-1930s were built on a Chevrolet chassis.

OUTSIDE THE US

Flexible's intercity buses were very popular in Mexico and in Latin

American countries. However, high import duties into these countries limited sales. In the early 1960s, *Flexible* began licensing a producer in Mexico, *DINA S.A. (Diesel Nacional)*, to manufacture *Flexible* designed intercity coaches, and this continued until the late 1980s. In 1965 and 1966, *Flexible* also licensed its 'New Look' transit bus design to *Canadiar Ltd.*, an aircraft manufacturer in Ville St-Laurent, Quebec.

In 1994, *Flexible's* parent company, *General Automotive Corporation*, and three other American companies, *Roger Penske*, *Mark IV Industries*, and *Carrier*, entered into a joint venture with *Changzhou Changjiang*, a Chinese manufacturer in Jiangsu, to produce buses based on the *Flexible Metro* design and with the *Flexible* name. The resulting company, *China Flexible Auto Corporation*, manufactured buses in a variety of lengths, from eight meters to 11 meters. These buses, which include both front and rear engine designs, and share only their general exterior appearance with the American-built *Flexibles*, are used by many transit operators in major Chinese cities, including Beijing and Shanghai.

FLXIBLE OWNERS INTERNATIONAL

Flexible Owners International was founded in the mid-1980s as an offshoot of the *Family Motor Coach Association*, and is dedicated to the preservation of buses and coaches produced by *Flexible*. The organization holds a rally in Loudonville, Ohio every even year, normally in mid-July, where many preserved *Flexible* coaches and buses may be seen. The majority of vehicles owned by members are of the *Clipper* series (*Clipper*, *Visicoach*, *Starliner*) that were produced from the 1930s until 1967. Most of these vehicles have been converted to motor homes; however, there are still a few examples of seated coaches belonging to members.