

# EDUCATION

# HIGHER



## MCPHERSON COLLEGE AUTOMOTIVE RESTORATION TECHNOLOGY PROGRAM

*By Jim Spawn*

The shade-tree mechanic is nearly a thing of the past. Which begs the question – “who’s gonna fill their shoes?” Who’s going to know the art and science of antique automobile restoration tomorrow and in the coming years? One answer is McPherson College.

Maybe you’ve heard of McPherson College. The McPherson College Automotive Restoration Technology Program is the only school in the United States to offer an accredited bachelor’s degree. The program offers degrees in Automotive Restoration Technology, Automotive Restoration Management, Historic Automotive Technology, Automotive Restoration Design and Automotive Communications. Students learn nearly every phase of automotive restoration. Graduates go on to exciting careers at major museums, private collections, and some start their own restoration businesses.

Even if you’ve heard of McPherson College, chances are you’ve not been there. The school is located in McPherson, Kansas, a small town (pop. 16,000) in the central part of the state. The college has a beautiful 23-acre campus with total enrollment of 510 students. The Auto Restoration Program has 100 students enrolled, so about one-fifth of the activity at McPherson revolves around auto restoration. Right now 96 of the auto students are male and there are four female students, as well.

The program at McPherson is the direct result of a dream first hatched by local entrepreneur Gaines “Smokey” Billue. In 1975, Billue gifted his own antique auto collection along with a charitable trust to start the Automotive Restoration Technology Program. Within the year many of the collector cars were sold and construction began on Templeton Hall, the program’s home. In mid-1976, the first students were enrolled and the 27,000-square-foot Templeton Hall was dedicated in March 1977.

Although the restoration program is not specific to any one make or model, the Model A Ford has had a strong presence in the program almost from the beginning. Cars that the students restore come mostly from donations. And, Model A's and Model T's have been fairly plentiful in the midwest.

To give you an idea of just how complex and complete the course studies are, here is a list of some classes required for the Historic Automotive Technology major:

Technical Woodworking or Machining	Automotive Paint Restoration
Engineering Drawing	Automotive Trim
Electrical and Electronic Systems	Restoration Assembly Processes
Power and Energy	History of the American Automobile
Engine Rebuilding	American History II
Auto Restoration Seminar	American West
Welding Processes	Technology and Society
Auto Panel Restoration and Fabrication	Chassis Restoration
American Diplomacy	Drive Train Rebuilding
Twentieth Century Europe	

The above are all in addition to McPherson College General Education Requirements. You can get the idea that a graduate of this program will have both the hands-on training and classroom study required to really know the industry.

During my visit, Garrick Green took me on a great tour. Garrick is Department Chair and an Instructor of Technology. He said that all of the instructors at McPherson are graduates of the program themselves, except one. A really nice vehicle that was nearing completion was a 1929 Model A Ford Station Wagon. This particular vehicle was a put-together project, meaning it was assembled from parts of various cars. The body was hand-built in their woodworking department from plans obtained with help from the National Woodie Club.

The Station Wagon made it's way through the maze of departments to near completion. Next stop for it will be an Advanced Trim and Upholstery class where side-curtains will be constructed.

A fair number of Model A Fords have been restored at McPherson College. In 1984, a 1929 Special Coupe they restored won the Antique Automobile Club of America National First Junior Award at Carlsbad, New Mexico.

In 1997, entertainer and auto collector Jay Leno learned about the McPherson College program and has been a supporter ever since. He established the Fred J. Duesenberg Scholarship to provide financial assistance for students. Leno also donates his fee for writing a column in *Popular Mechanics* magazine to provide a full scholarship each year for a restoration student.

Even though Templeton Hall has now grown to over 33,000 square feet (a new state-of-the-art paint booth was recently added), the school has to find homes for their completed project cars. Garrick says the school uses mostly public auctions to sell the cars with the proceeds going back into the program. They have sold project cars at the Barrett-Jackson Auction, including a 1956 Ford Thunderbird convertible that sold to race car driver Tony Stewart for \$65,000.

The school stays quite active in the industry and is always on the lookout for opportunities for internships. In 2003, Mercedes-Benz USA helped two automotive restoration students intern in Fellbach, Germany. Others have worked at museums and private collections to gain valuable experience.

In 1998, the popular TV show, "My Classic Car" came to McPherson College. Host Dennis Gage filmed and aired a segment on the Automotive Restoration Technology program. That exposure resulted in substantial national attention to the program.

In the summer months, people who want to learn specific skills can enroll for week-long sessions aimed at learning about a particular restoration task or area. The same expert instructors and top-notch facility that have made McPherson College's Auto Restoration Program famous are available to hobbyists and professionals. Their Institute Workshops classes are offered over two week-long sessions in June. Among the workshops offered are: Basic Metal Machining, Engine Overhaul (Project engines are supplied by the College), The Finishing Touches, Upholstery and Trim, Casting and Plating, Sheet Metal Restoration, Automotive



A partial view of the well-equipped machine shop.



Trim and Upholstery workshop.



This Model A Ford engine, numbered 41227, dates to early March 1928.

Paint, Carburetor, Ignition Systems, and Tune-up. A new offering for 2009 will be Automotive Electrical.

Enrollment is limited for these classes and they have become quite popular. If you have an interest in attending or would like more details or enrollment instructions for McPherson Institute Workshops, visit their Web site at: [www.mcpherson.edu/technology/institute.asp](http://www.mcpherson.edu/technology/institute.asp)

Garrick says that in addition to car and truck donations they get calls from people offering parts, too. "We never turn down anything. We'll go get the stuff and many times there are treasures." As an example, a lady donated a Model A chassis. It was old and rusty, without a body. Closer examination showed it was an early March 1928 AR model and had many of the rare early AR features. The school is nearing completion of this chassis restoration. Garrett says that they will either try to find a body for it or perhaps sell just the restored chassis.



The early AR Model A Fords had many unique features that are hard to see on a completed vehicle. An example are the running board braces which are quite different than later Model A production.

With all the state-of-the-art equipment and certainly no shortage of manpower, you'd think that the McPherson program would be spitting out restored cars all the time. Garrick explained that just the opposite is true. "Our students are turning over every 90 days or so. Just as soon as they get pretty good at a particular task, they have completed that phase and are off to another class. Then its back to brand-new students and the learning curve starts all over."



Each completed project is a source of pride for both students and faculty.

The 1929 Wagon has already been shown at some local car shows. A perfect ambassador of the McPherson College programs.

There isn't any rush to complete a project unless it is a self-imposed deadline to make a show or sale. As you can imagine, some students take a personal interest in a car or project and put in their own time on it.

Auto restoration is a multi-faceted discipline. On completion, graduates have the career-oriented skills to make contributions to the industry. As an additional aid, McPherson has a National Advisory Board made up of leaders from many areas of the automotive collector industry. Some that you may have heard of, in addition to Jay Leno, are McKeel Hagerty, President, Hagerty Classic Insurance and Craig Jackson, of Barrett-Jackson Auction.



After and in between classes, McPherson offers everything else found in college life: a variety of academic, social and community service organizations, plus sports, music and campus ministry.



The passion and pastime of working on cars is still alive today at McPherson College.



The College Auto Restoration Students (C.A.R.S.) Club, is one of the most active student organizations on McPherson's campus. C.A.R.S. Club produces a very successful car show each spring.

Is the art and science of automobile restoration dying? Who's gonna fill their shoes? Most likely a McPherson College Automotive Restoration Technology graduate!

Photos by McPherson College and Jim Spawn.



Work has already begun on another wood-bodied Model A Ford at McPherson. This one may end up as a Depot Hack or Fruit Truck.



L-R: Department Chair Garrick Green and Assistant Professor of Technology Richard Dove both are graduates of the McPherson program. Each member of the faculty personally owns at least one collector vehicle – most have several.