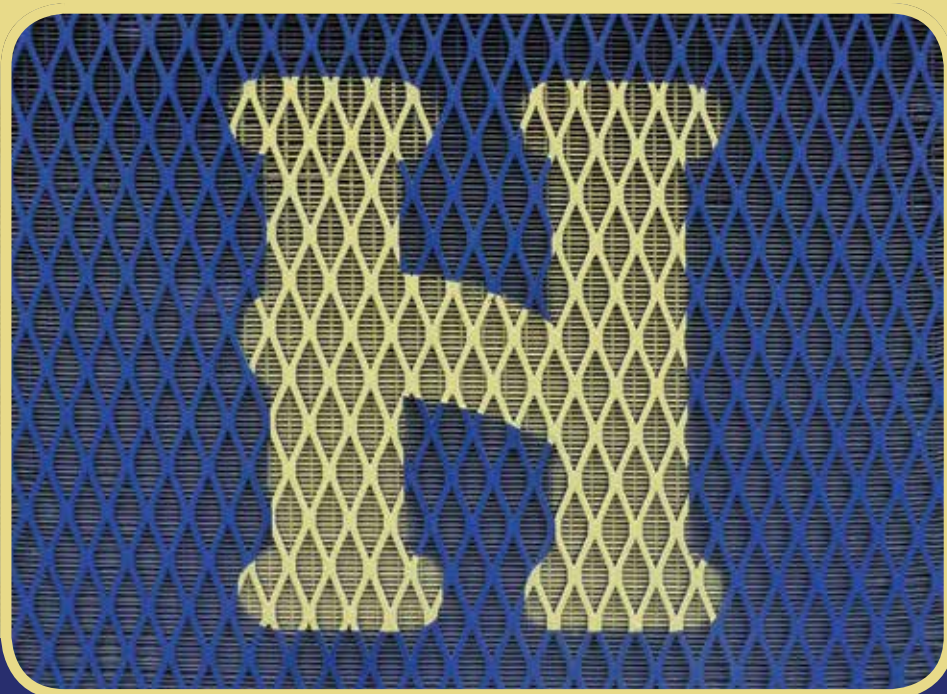


Twin Coach At The Helms

by Candace Brown



Owner Sandy Olson next to his restored Helms Bakery truck

WHENEVER SANDY OLSON takes his restored 1931 Twin Coach Helms Bakery truck out in public—whether to a national event or a gathering of classic cars at his local Port Orchard, Washington, drive-in—it magnetizes the crowd with novelty and nostalgia. Sandy believes fewer than two dozen still exist. He knows of only one older than his, a 1930 that is completely untouched.

“All these people come up, and they’ve got all these stories to tell you,” Sandy said. “I’ve talked to some whose fathers were driving for Helms when World War II broke out and all the people came to California to work in the shipyards. One

guy said, ‘My father sold two truckloads of baked goods a day and had to cut his cakes in half to have enough to go around.’”

He heard about an old delivery truck for sale back in 1998, but a year passed before he saw it and realized he’d found a treasure behind a house in Gig Harbor, Washington, 17 miles from his home. It took another year to buy the little “coach” and much longer to actually drive it. Exposed to the rainy Pacific Northwest weather since 1972, it had rust on the bottoms of the doors and fenders, dirt and mold all over, and a bad paint job—which had actually helped to preserve it. None of that mattered. It was solid and complete, including the original 4-cylinder

Hercules OOB engine, wheels, tires, customized interior cabinetry, and virtually everything else but the whistle that once announced its arrival.

Helms Bakery opened in Culver City, California, in 1931. It provided home delivery throughout Los Angeles, all over Southern California, and as far north as Fresno until 1969 when the business closed. By 1963, their 800 trucks drove a total of 75,000 miles a day. They set their record for stops at 250,000 per week. Plenty of folks remember how the driver, called “the Helmsman,” handed out broken cookies and day-old donuts to neighborhood kids along his route while mothers bought bread and desserts.

The 1931 Twin Coach Helms Bakery truck restored to its stock glory



1931 Twin Coach

Fageol family inventions change transportation

The Twin Coach Company of Kent, Ohio, was founded in January 1927 by brothers Frank R. and William B. Fageol. They had previously built trucks, tractors, a few automobiles, and a revolutionary multi-passenger vehicle called a “Safety Coach,” under the name Fageol Motors Company in Oakland, California. Their exciting original idea of building a bus with twin engines to provide the necessary power to carry more passengers would manifest and succeed grandly under the name Twin Coach. They had other ideas as well.

On August 16, 1927, William “W.B.” Fageol filed for a patent on a one-ton

truck with a 96-inch wheelbase that was designed for home delivery routes. Patent No. 1,777,966 was issued on October 6, 1930. It featured a 199ci 4-cylinder Hercules OOB motor with a 3¾-inch bore and 4½-inch stroke, a 4-speed transmission, and a rear end gear ratio of 5.34:1. Brake horsepower was 37.5 at 2,000 rpm. In addition to the accelerator, it had a single—but dual-purpose—foot pedal controlling both the clutch and hydraulic brakes. The company’s catalog describes how “the initial travel of the pedal releases the clutch and then applies the brakes” for safety.

The Fageol family’s proud legacy includes a century of involvement with

transportation and 174 patents between 1900 and 1994. Like so many Fageol inventions, this one succeeded by meeting the needs of bakeries, dairies, parcel delivery businesses, and others. Twin Coach sold more to Helms than to any other customer, and a page in their catalog showcased the bakery as an example of how the trucks contributed to success. They were practical and built to last.

John D. Fageol, W. B. Fageol’s grandson, said, “The delivery [truck] was engineered using many of the same materials, suppliers, and engineering techniques as the larger motor buses. The components were designed and built to run forever; 300–500 thousand miles,

This 1931 Helms truck preserves the legacy of both the Helms Bakery and the Twin Coach Company.



Twin Coach sold more

with overhauls over the years, could easily be achieved.”

In 1933, a patent dispute arose between Twin Coach and Continental-Divco but was resolved in 1936 when Twin Coach’s route delivery truck division and Continental-Divco merged to become Divco-Twin Corporation. Two investment firms held most of the stock, but Twin Coach owned 17 percent. While Twin Coach concentrated on producing more buses, Divco handled the delivery truck manufacturing and service parts responsibilities.

World War II changed everything. Heavy industry focused on the war effort, and production of anything nonessential

ceased. Helms needed to keep their existing fleet running. In addition to routine maintenance, their staff of mechanics began to rebuild or replace engines. Before the war, Divco-Twin had produced both the flat front Twin Coach style and the Divco style with a “nose.” After the flat front version was discontinued, Helms purchased chassis and built their own trucks until 1948. According to Sandy, in 1967 General Motors offered the bakery a deal on new trucks with the stipulation that they retire the old fleet. Within two years of signing, the bakery closed, thanks in part to supermarkets and changing lifestyles. The fate of the old trucks ranged from conversion to destruction.

Restoration

When Sandy found one lucky enough to survive, he lacked the funds to buy it. Then his business, Olson’s Gaskets, which sells NOS and reproduction automotive gaskets for antique and obsolete vehicles worldwide, generated extra profits in the exact amount needed. The business purchased the truck in 2000, and a month later Sandy shipped it to Robinson Restoration in Limerick, Pennsylvania, where it stayed for six years.

“They took it right down to every nut and bolt, took it all apart, cleaned, painted, and repaired everything,” Sandy said. “It was in a restoration shop that was probably doing three or four cars at a time, so they

Like many delivery trucks of that period, the Helms was a stand-and-drive configuration denoting that the seat could be folded forward and out of the way.



Customers were encouraged to board the truck to personally select their pastries from the drawers.



A view of the simple instrument panel



The original 4-cylinder Hercules OOB engine was rebuilt with parts from the OOC engine version, which was commonly used in Cletrac crawlers.

to Helms than to any other customer.

would go until I ran out of money and then push it aside and work on somebody else's car. It kind of went in spurts."

After going into service in late 1931, or possibly early 1932, this truck stayed on the job until 1967, as evidenced by the license plates. Sandy recalled, "When they took the transmission apart, the gears were so sharp that the guy said you could shave with them."

The OOC version of the Hercules motor, which differed from the OOB only in bore size, was common in Cletrac crawlers such as those used by the military—so parts existed.

"We were able to find the bearings and timing gears and all of that," Sandy said.

"A fellow in Pennsylvania named Landis Zimmerman, who supplies most of the Cletrac crawler parts to restorers, had a lot of the mechanical stuff on the shelf." The rest came from Jerry Biro in Ohio, a dealer specializing in vintage Hercules parts. Some still bore military wrappers.

Factory headlights consisted of a flat lens with a bulb underneath. After sealed beam headlights came out in 1940, Helms converted their trucks. For the original type, Sandy turned to Don Axelrod, who owns Headlight Headquarters in Massachusetts and buys up old headlights from others in the hobby. Don had not only one pair but four. Sandy bought them all and traded a pair for a whistle that was

used as a pattern to duplicate several more whistles. The whistle looked like two pie tins with a rubber diaphragm between.

Sandy hired a woman named Karen Bundy as a consultant on paint colors and decals. She had restored a Helms delivery truck and collected Helms memorabilia. Karen sold him a precious set of original decals because she knew he would do a proper restoration. Unfortunately, she did not live to see it finished. It now displays both original decals and reproductions. The "Olympic Bread" decal refers to the bakery's corporate sponsorship of the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles.

Rare and beautifully finished, the wall of original drawers and hardware makes



This back hatch functioned as a versatile storage area with many uses.



This rear view reveals that the truck's suspension down to the U-bolts is painted blue, and the floors are real pieces of wood.



Sandy found a company that produces amazingly accurate 1/24-scale models of the Helms trucks. If interested in owning one, email Sandy at olsonsgaskets@gmail.com.

This decal serves to remind that Helms was a corporate sponsor of the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles.



The components were designed and built to run forever.

an impression and are the highlight of the interior. "Like everything else, it's over restored," Sandy said. "It probably never looked that nice on the day it was brand new because it was meant for work."

The Twin Coach catalog offered custom designed cabinetry installed at the factory. John Fageol said, "It is my understanding that the Helms trucks all went out with the drawers. Helms probably sent them a drawing and said "This is what we want."

Drivers stacked crates of bread loaves up front and used the drawers mostly for pastries. "Helms wanted people to get in the truck, yank out the drawers and look at the stuff, and say 'Here's what I want,'"

John added. "It was not just delivery. It was a selling tool for Helms."

Patience rewarded

Sandy showed his unfinished Twin Coach Delivery at the ATHS National Convention and Antique Truck Show in Baltimore, Maryland, in May of 2006. It lacked glass, decals, and more. The shop completed the restoration just in time for the Antique Automobile Club of America's Eastern Regional Show in Hershey, Pennsylvania, that same year. Sandy drove it along its first ten miles in the Multi-Stop Parade to the show field. From then on, his Twin Coach has continued to collect awards and fans everywhere it goes.

"We get so much pleasure out of showing it," Sandy said, "and I let the kids in it. When we're at a show, I carry a special stool so they can get up in it and toot the whistle."

Then there are those who remember the Helms trucks from childhood. "One year we were at the Port Orchard cruise-in," he recalled with a smile, "and twice I had older ladies standing next to my truck crying. How do I deal with that?" 🚚

Learn more about Olson's Gaskets at www.olsonsgaskets.com and read about the Fageol family and their amazing inventions at www.fageol.com, which is loaded with information.