

## Delphi Body Works

Founded: 1848

Location: Franklin and Wilson Streets (1848), Delphi; Main Street, hardware and repair store (1850s– ); 313 South Washington Street (ca. 1870s– )

James W. Kilgore arrived in Delphi in November 1846. Kilgore had learned the skills of a millwright, molder, and machinist in his native Pennsylvania. Shortly after arriving in Delphi, the young mechanic went to work for Dunkle & Witherow, makers of wagons. William Dunkle, also from Pennsylvania, had come to Delphi in 1837. In 1848 the two men became business partners and, as Dunkle & Kilgore, pioneered the manufacture of plows and wagons in Carroll County. They established a two-story factory at the corner of Franklin and Wilson Streets. Prosperous from the outset, Dunkle & Kilgore opened an agricultural implement store and repair shop on Main Street in the late 1850s. During the Civil War the two men introduced labor-saving machinery into their Franklin Street works. In 1872 they built a new factory and began to manufacture engines and boilers.

Dunkle & Kilgore was known for its lightweight but powerful steam engine, which featured a valve construction designed by Kilgore. The portable Dunkle & Kilgore steam engine powered threshing machinery drawn by horses. The eight-horsepower model weighed three thousand pounds; the twelve-horsepower version weighed only five hundred pounds more. The engine sold well, and Dunkle & Kilgore maintained a six- to ten-man labor force to produce it. The firm also marketed the “Little Corporal,” an upright engine that occupied less than two square feet of floor space and

was ideally suited to the needs of printing houses and other light-manufacturing establishments.

In 1879 two Dunkle & Kilgore employees, Jacob Fisher and Lambert Hare, purchased the wagon and plow side of the business. Dunkle & Kilgore dissolved their partnership in January 1882 and divided the remaining assets. In 1888 William Bradshaw, a worker at Fisher & Hare, purchased Hare's interest in the business; four years later he purchased the remaining interest from Fisher. At some point the firm was renamed Delphi Wagon Works. The company flourished after its separation from Dunkle & Kilgore. Jacob Fisher made many improvements in agricultural machinery, for which, his obituary claimed, he refused to seek patents because his only object was to help others. With the advent of rural mail delivery, Fisher designed a mail wagon that served as a model for the entire nation. The company also produced a horse-drawn, closed-body school hack in 1899, which Delphi Body Works claims was the first school bus produced in the United States. The wagon body was later replaced by a truck chassis, and school bus bodies remained one of the company's major products through the 1930s.

William Bradshaw's two oldest sons, Robert and Howard, became partners in the firm in 1895. A third and much younger son, Charles, joined the company in 1934. Beginning on the shop floor, Charles worked his way up through the company, which in 1929 became the Delphi Body Works. Howard left the partnership in 1936, selling his interest to Robert and Charles, and five years later Charles gained complete ownership of the company by purchasing the shares of Robert and father William. During World War II Delphi Body Works produced aircraft parts in its machine shop and mobile X-ray units

in its main plant. The company was incorporated in 1945. Delphi Body Works expanded its product line over the years to include utility truck bodies; trailers; hydraulic equipment, including bucket trucks for electrical workers; and the Challenger vertical tower, a mobile unit developed by Olmstead Utilities, which Delphi Body Works hoped to export. Ownership passed from Charles Bradshaw to his children, with his eldest son, Richard, maintaining a controlling interest in the company and serving as president. Richard had been an economics and history teacher in Chicago before he took over his family's firm in 1980.

In May 1991 the Delphi company purchased the renamed Olmstead Utility Equipment Company of Olmstead Falls, Ohio. It was only one of two firms that produced an insulated work platform, known as a utility tower, used primarily by utility companies, railroads, and highway crews. Delphi prides itself on its long tradition of delivering the product personally and remaining on site to train the customer's employees on its use. Delphi Body Works threw itself a party on its sesquicentennial, including a buffet-style lunch and a display of old and new equipment. In 1999 Richard C. Bradshaw presided over Delphi, and Walter Hoagland was the plant manager. Annual sales were expected to reach over \$1 million within the year, and the firm employed twenty-seven workers.