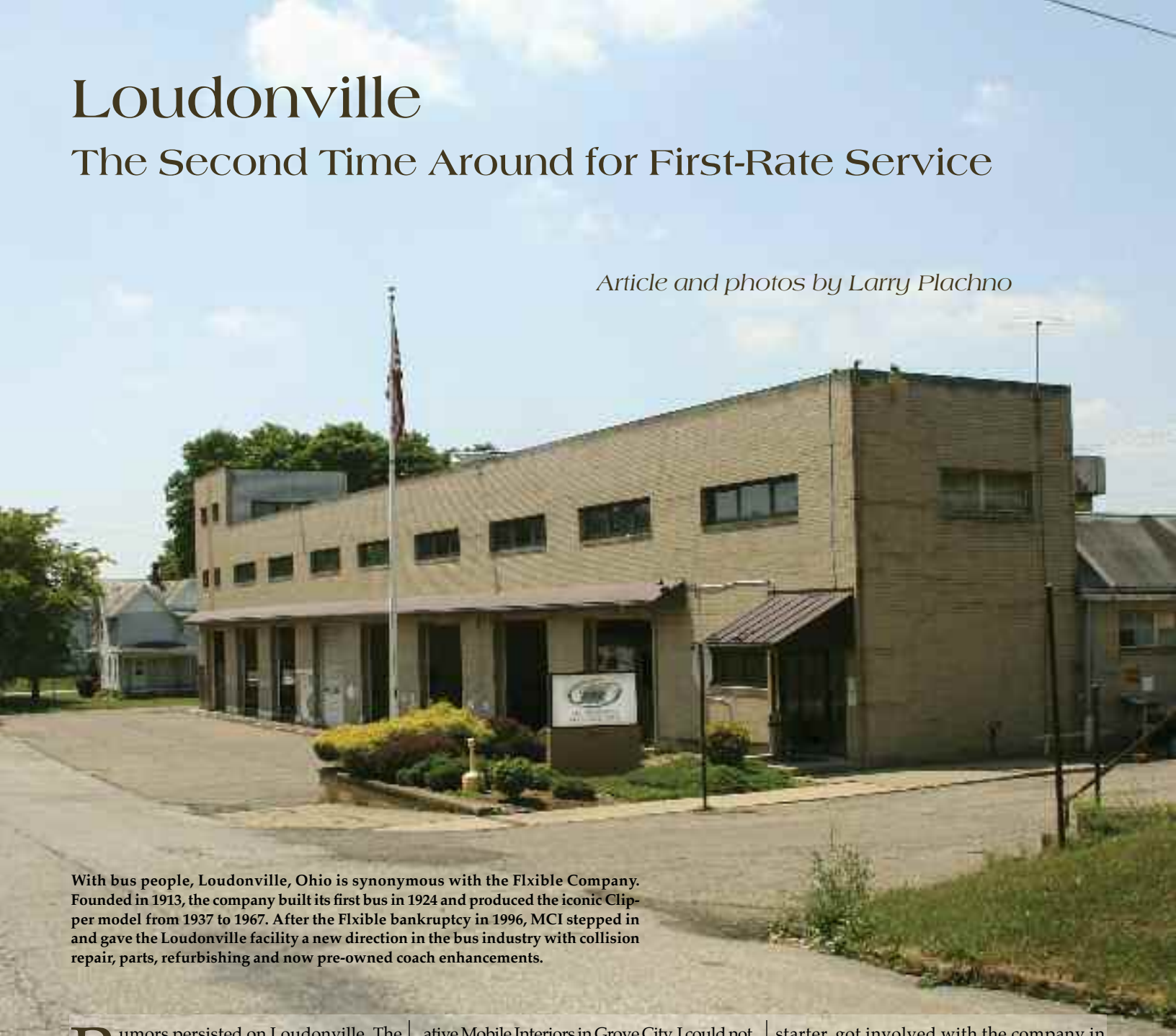
Loudonville

The Second Time Around for First-Rate Service

Article and photos by Larry Plachno



With bus people, Loudonville, Ohio is synonymous with the Flxible Company. Founded in 1913, the company built its first bus in 1924 and produced the iconic Clipper model from 1937 to 1967. After the Flxible bankruptcy in 1996, MCI stepped in and gave the Loudonville facility a new direction in the bus industry with collision repair, parts, refurbishing and now pre-owned coach enhancements.

Rumors persisted on Loudonville. The name came up repeatedly in conversations and printed material. Could Loudonville continue to be a major bus center even after the demise of Flxible? All of us who have been in the bus industry for any time know about Pontiac, Michigan; Brownsville, Texas; and Lamar, Colorado – the traditional homes of General Motors, Eagle and Neoplan USA. Although well remembered, they have passed into the halls of bus history and are no longer active in the industry.

This is not so with Loudonville. After the demise of Flxible, MCI stepped in and took over the former Flxible facility in Loudonville. It now has a second life as part of the bus industry. June found my family in Ohio with our coach for a family reunion at an amusement park in Sandusky and work on conversion items at Creative Mobile Interiors in Grove City. I could not resist making a stop in Loudonville to see what is going on. The story behind what Loudonville was and now is makes an interesting part of the bus industry.

Originally founded in 1913 by Loudonville native Hugo Young and his partner, Carl F. Dudte, the Flxible Sidecar Company developed and built a flexible connection between a motorcycle and sidecar that allowed the sidecar to remain on the ground when the motorcycle leaned into a curve. In the era prior to paved roads and production automobiles, this was a popular innovation. At this time Loudonville had a population of less than 2,000.

Another Loudonville native, Charles F. Kettering, the inventor of the automobile self-starter, got involved with the company in 1915, and by 1919 the company name was shortened to The Flxible Company. The introduction of paved roads and the inexpensive production Ford Model T automobiles severely reduced motorcycle sales so the company expanded into building buses and eventually funeral cars and ambulances.

A second plant opened in Millersburg, Ohio, several miles east of Loudonville. It built trailers during World War II and later became the Special Products Division and was responsible for Guardian lockers for railroad and bus stations. In 1949, the new Land Cruiser Division was established at Millersburg to built custom interiors in Flxible bus shells. After building a motor home interior in a Flxible Clipper for Miles M. Elmers, a traveling salesman, Miles and his

Loudonville supplies parts to the main assembly line at Winnipeg as well as MCI's main parts facility in Louisville. Many parts and kits are in stock at Loudonville for immediate shipment.

Loudonville has its own professional paint booth with the equipment to bake on the new paint. Painting is important in collision repair, refurbishing and pre-owned coach work.

son Kirwan purchased this division from Flxible, moved it to Columbus, Ohio and renamed it Custom Coach Corporation. This effectively started the converted coach industry.

Over the years the original Loudonville plant was expanded several times, eventually extending west over what should have been the next street. The first bus was built in 1924 and special projects included buses for Goodyear's airship operations. Flxible's iconic Clipper coach design emerged in 1937 and remained in production under various names until 1967. While Flxible bus production figures were small when compared with General Motors, the company did enjoy a strong following among operators who needed smaller coaches.

The introduction of the General Motors revolutionary PD4104 coach in 1953 prompted Flxible to look at diversifying into the transit bus business. Fageol Twin Coach in Kent, Ohio became available and was acquired by Flxible with production moved to Loudonville and Millersburg. While Flxible gave up building intercity coaches in 1970, their transit line proved reasonably successful. That same year saw transit bus production moved to Delaware, Ohio, just north of Columbus. At that point the Loudonville facility was relegated to parts production.

Flxible was acquired by Grumman in 1978 and ownership passed to General Automotive Corporation in 1983. Declining transit bus sales forced the company into bankruptcy in 1996. Later that year, MCI acquired the Loudonville facility and equipment.

When MCI came to Loudonville in late 1996, their initial interest was in using the facility to produce parts for the large number of Flxible transit buses then in operation. This was soon expanded to include parts for RTS transit buses. It did not take long for MCI to figure out that while Loudonville is located in rolling Ohio hills and farm country, it is also very centrally located to much of the bus industry. Chicago is only 350 miles west, Nashville is 460 miles south and 480 miles east is Newark and New York City. This puts Loudonville within a day's drive of the huge number of buses located in the Northeast and Midwest.

As time went on, MCI began expanding operations at Loudonville. Local staff were available who were not only talented and dedicated but also had previous bus experience. By 2001, Loudonville was already involved with coach repair work and soon developed expertise with collision repair. Parts manufacturing expanded to include items for buses no longer in production. This was followed by parts manufacturing for coaches currently in production at MCI's facility in Winnipeg.

From here, Loudonville became a center for refurbishing and all types of retrofits, eventually developing some experience and expertise with retrofitting wheelchair lifts. In more recent years, Loudonville got involved with enhancements on pre-owned coaches and then power train replacement modernization. In addition to all of this, Loudonville is also an MCI Service Center

Collision repair has become the major activity at Loudonville. This particular coach suffered a head-on collision and is being rebuilt from the front back two passenger windows.

The biggest problem with collision repair is hidden damage. This "bogie" frame at the front wheels was replaced rather than pushed back into shape because of extensive damage.

and does some business in parts, particularly for buses now out of production.

Collision repair is the single biggest activity at Loudonville. The location of Loudonville makes it easy for buses to be driven or trucked in. There are three reasons why the Loudonville facility has developed an enviable reputation for collision repair. One is that the facility has the proper equipment to deal with this type of work. A second is a dedicated staff with substantial bus experience. Perhaps the most important is that as the original builder of MCI buses, Loudonville has access to all of the original blueprints, parts and company expertise to put the coach back together like the day it left the factory. If and when a question or problem comes up, they have access to the documents or experienced staff who can provide a solution.

One of the biggest problems with collision repair is hidden damage. A typical collision problem for a coach involves a front end accident. While the visible damage may be obvious, the hidden damage may not. Depending on the severity of the accident, hidden damage may go back behind the front wheels in the frame structure and sometimes even up into the web frame construction at the passenger level.

Other collision repair facilities that simply pull or push the frame structure back into alignment do not solve this problem. The bus may appear to be in alignment but it is cosmetic at best because the underfloor structure still has damage. Not only can this damage come back to haunt you in the years ahead but it could be a disaster in the event of another major accident. MCI solves this problem by replacing the damaged structures and bringing the bus back to original specifications and its original strength.

This pre-owned coach was sent to Loudonville for an engine repower. Complying with EPA 2007 regulations, it was repowered with a new Cummins ISM engine. This procedure has been so well regarded that customers are purchasing the coaches sight unseen even before Loudonville completes them.

Over the years, Loudonville has become recognized for expertise in refurbishing, retrofits and particularly wheelchair retrofits. Back in 2005, Loudonville embarked on a major refurbishing program for Greyhound involving 220 102DL3 coaches. More recently, Loudonville did a mid-life retrofit for a substantial number of New York MTA MCI commuter coaches. When you look at the price of new coaches and their expected longevity of two or three million miles, refurbishing makes a great deal of economic sense.

Today, it is not unusual to see coaches from different operators at Loudonville for refurbishing. Some may be in for cosmetic work where appearance is more of a concern than mechanical work. Other jobs get more involved and include upgrading or replacement of major components or systems. It is noteworthy that Loudonville has a professional paint booth with the equipment to bake on the new paint. Hence, the completed coach can look like new again when it leaves Loudonville.

Increasingly popular are various types of retrofits. These may be done individually or in connection with either a minor or major refurbishing program. Some of the most popular retrofit programs include 110-volt electrical outlets, onboard Wi-Fi, and three-point seat belts. However, they also include some of the new safety systems and even frameless windows. Also popular with D model owners is a "facelift" with a new front end that includes the "cats-eye" headlights.

Recently, with the new ADA laws taking full effect on October 1, 2012, Loudonville has been particularly busy with wheelchair lift retrofits. Their popularity in this area stems from the fact that Loudonville does a true OEM retrofit and not a patched-up "backyard" job. Bear in mind that installing a wheelchair lift properly involves changes to the bus structure, HVAC system and electrical system. It also should include modifications to make sure that the electrical system on the bus can support the additional electrical draw for the lift.

Tour-Mex brought several coaches to Loudonville for wheelchair lift retrofits. When they saw what Loudonville could do in refurbishing coaches, they used their coach as a pilot in anticipation of sending more coaches through Loudonville for this procedure.

This group of new Cummins ISM engines is in stock at Loudonville and being used for engine repowers that need to comply with EPA 2007 regulations.

For repowers that must comply with EPA 2003 regulations, MCI uses rebuilt Detroit Diesel series 60 engines. This one already has an Allison transmission.

What makes MCI stand out in this area is that they approach the wheelchair lift installation from the standpoint of OEM specifications. Beyond the actual installation of the lift and the various system modifications, MCI has all of the additional fittings and parts used for OEM lift installations. As a result, when the bus leaves Loudonville, it looks like the wheelchair lift was installed when the bus was new. It does not look like some patched-together retrofit that could easily detract from your customer image.

One of the newest and more interesting procedures at Loudonville are the pre-owned coach enhancements. This easily qualifies as "a sign of the times." With new coaches having price tags of a half-million dollars but durability to roll two or three million miles, it is obvious that a refurbished coach might not only be suitable in many applications but could also represent substantial savings to a coach owner. More than one person has observed that this kind of savings is essentially putting money in the bank.

This concept was not lost on Mitch Guralnick at MCI who began checking and re-energizing preowned coaches prior to sale. This resulted in three levels of preowned coaches based on quality: Deal, Select+ and Certified++ with a warranty on the two higher levels. Loudonville was selected for much of the heavier work in this area because of its equipment, staff and expertise.

What happens is that as preowned coaches arrive at MCI, they are evaluated and a determination is made based on their condition, mileage and other factors whether to offer them for sale at the Deal, Select+ or Certified++ levels of quality. Several of these coaches are then sent to Loudonville to bring them up to the appropriate quality level.

Actual work involved can vary from coach to coach. Some degree of reconditioning is expected but additional enhancements can include systems, retrofits of seat belts, 110-volt outlets and Wi-Fi, or even a new power train and paint. The completed coach may even look new but is economical compared with a new coach. What is interesting is that these enhanced and re-energized preowned coaches are becoming a real hit with operators. Many are being sold sight unseen even before work is completed at Loudonville.

Recently, a company brought several coaches to Loudonville for wheelchair lift retrofits. When they saw what a refurbished pre-owned coach looked like, they decided to order the re-energized procedure on one of their coaches with the idea of having all of them done.

The re-energize program, the latest development at MCI in pre-owned coach reconditioning, is power train replacement. While this procedure originated with customer requests, it has recently expanded to some of MCI's preowned coaches prior to sale. An early example was a group of buses from Princess Tours where they brought buses from Alaska to Loudonville to have MCI replace existing transmissions with the ZF AS Tronic transmission. More recently, the MCI engineers have perfected this procedure and it is offered on a regular basis.

For coaches that must comply with EPA 2004 regulations, Loudonville can replace the existing engine with a rebuilt Series 60. They can also replace the transmission at the same time. For coaches that must comply with EPA 2007 regulations, MCI recently acquired some new Cummins ISM engines

Originally acquired to make parts for Flxible transit buses, Loudonville has expanded into making MCI parts. While many of these parts are aftermarket for models no longer in production, Loudonville does make some parts for current models. Shown here are coolant tanks for current D model coaches.

that can be used to replace the existing engines. These have worked out extremely well with the first two examples receiving high customer praise. As with the wheelchair lifts, one major advantage of engine replacement at Loudonville is that things are done to OEM standards. Hence, the engine looks like it was originally installed at the factory when the coach was built.

What may not be obvious is that Loudonville is a regular MCI service center. You can bring your coach in for regular preventive maintenance service and an oil change. In addition, there is a wide range of other services available including brake and air systems, electrical troubleshooting and repair, suspension service, transmission repair as well as HVAC service. MCI offers a comfortable driver's lounge if you decide to wait for your coach.

Equipment at Loudonville includes a wide range from presses and brake presses to shears and lathes as well as other specialized equipment. MCI's original interest in moving into the facility was in producing parts for existing Flxible transit buses. While that part of the business has diminished substantially in the following 16 years, MCI has expanded other parts production at Loudonville.

Today, Loudonville manufactures a number of parts for new coach production in Winnipeg. Included are various parts for the D coach product line including the coolant tank and bumperettes. For the E and J coach product line, Loudonville makes the main evaporator assembly as well as the air tank assembly. In addition, some structural parts and value added work is also done here.

Loudonville's equipment and experienced staff do an excellent job with parts for older coaches that are no longer in production. As time goes on, Loudonville has been taking on increasing responsibility in the area of MCI aftermarket parts. This includes parts for MCI models no longer on the assembly line, parts for older models and general aftermarket parts. In addition, Loudonville has a great deal of expertise with reverse engineering older parts that are no longer in production. Again, one of the advantages Loudonville has is the original OEM blueprints and drawings. If you have problems locating parts for older coaches you might want to contact Rich Wells at Loudonville. He has become an expert in locating hard-to-find parts and is always willing to help an MCI owner.

Loudonville has become MCI's center for brake shoes. Take offs and used brake shoes are disassembled and rebuilt. Loudonville also puts together new brake shoe assemblies.

It should be mentioned that Loudonville has a full shipping and receiving department. Parts produced here are shipped to the factory in Winnipeg, to MCI's main parts facility in Louisville, or even to MCI's major parts center in New England at East Brunswick, New Jersey.

What is also interesting is that Lodonville serves as an extension of MCI's IT networks in Louisville and Winnipeg. If you place an order for parts through the main MCI parts facility in Louisville that include parts made at Loudonville, they may print out an order and ship directly from Loudonville. In this case the staff and equipment at Loudonville, that once made parts for Flxible, may have also made the parts for your older MCI.

Another interesting note regarding Loudonville is that it has become the MCI center for brake shoes. In addition to putting together new brake shoe assemblies, the staff at Loudonville is responsible for brake shoe work. Take-offs and used brake shoes are send to Loudonville where they are disassembled and rebuilt. This includes bolted, riveted and bonded shoes. Loudonville has an oven for removing bonding. Then, everything is reassembled in keeping with OEM specifications. The staff at Loudonville also does some other rebuilding and value added work including baggage compartment doors.

MCI's acquisition of the former Flxible factory has changed the work inside. Instead of Clippers and Flxible transit buses, you will now see MCI coaches. While parts manufacturing continues, the parts are different than what they were two decades ago. Today, if you are interested in refurbishing, retrofitting or drive train swaps, you can phone Ron Miller at (419) 490-2004. Questions on parts can be directed to Carl Roth (419) 490-2101.

Loudonville itself has not changed a great deal from the Flxible days. It continues to remain an agricultural community with several churches located in the rolling hills of Ohio. The Mohican Historical Society operates Loudonville's Cleo Redd Risher Museum. Its exhibits include Flxible Company memorabilia as well as Cleo's porcelain collection, locally made rifles from the 1800s and information about native son Charles Kettering. It is a great place to visit while your coach is at MCI. ❑

Loudonville does substantial work in reverse engineering where parts are needed but no longer available or in production.

Loudonville's shipping dock ships parts to MCI facilities in Winnipeg and Louisville as well as shipping some parts to customers.

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Address: 9698 W. Judson Rd, Polo Illinois 61064
Office: (815) 946-2341 • Website: www.busmag.com