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'Mr. Heavy Duty' Builds Ferrara Into A Powerhouse

BY ED BALLAM

While revolving doors in the top management offices of some apparatus manufacturers are one sign of the industry's fierce competition, Chris Ferrara's steady-as-she-goes philosophy is helping to propel the company that bears his name to the front of the pack.

Through thoughtful management and a dedication to top-quality products, Ferrara Fire Apparatus has carved out a spot as one of the top fire truck builders in the nation.

At age 49, Chris Ferrara is a self-made man and the pride he has in his business is evident in the 300,000-square-foot manufacturing plant and in each of the rigs that roll out of his Holden, La., facility about 50 miles outside of New Orleans.

Personal Inspections

"I am very particular when it comes to apparatus," said Ferrara. "I personally check each one before it leaves because they've got my name on them."

These days, checking each apparatus has become a frequent chore as the company is on track to exceed its 350-unit goal for 2007, grossing more than \$120 million. Ferrara Fire Apparatus is competing with more than 60 other manufacturers in a domestic market where annual sales total about 5,600 trucks valued at close to \$2 billion. Only a half-dozen companies make more than 300 apparatus a year.

The name Ferrara is associated with very heavy-duty apparatus built by craftsman, many from the ground up. Even Ferrara's staff calls him "Mr. Heavy-Duty."

That quality is carried through each line of apparatus, from huge aerial platforms to Class A pumpers to rescues, tankers and brush trucks. Ferrara Fire Apparatus has become a full-line builder doing business internationally as well as domestically.

"I never thought it would get this big, never," said Ferrara leading a tour through his modern manufacturing facility abuzz with people cutting, bending and welding metal, wiring bodies and



A 2005 Ferrara custom pumper is one of 10 engines and three ladders battling a fire that destroyed the landmark Granzella's Restaurant in Williams, Calif., on Oct. 11. Williams Fire Chief Jeff Gilbert, center, says he is sold on Ferrara Fire Apparatus and has a 77-foot Ferrara aerial scheduled for delivery in February. The Granzella fire solidified the decision to purchase the aerial, a first for the town about 60 miles north of Sacramento. *(Fire Apparatus Photo by Don Burnett)*

plumbing fire pumps. Overall, he has nearly 500 employees.

Ferrara grew up in rural Louisiana, graduating in 1976 from Redemptorist High School in Baton Rouge and the Local Union 198 Plumbers and Pipefitters Apprentice School. Following in his father's footsteps, he joined the union and got a job with Exxon Chemical as a pipefitter and fabricator.

As he got settled in his profession, Ferrara married his wife, Angela, and moved to Central, a small town north of Baton Rouge where he became a firefighter.

From The Trunk Of His Car

"I really got active with Central Volunteer Fire Department," he said. "That was all funded with chicken dinners and door-to-door donations without any real budget. We didn't have a lot of money, and we really needed a new fire truck."

Using his pipefitting and fabricating experience, Ferrara and fellow firefighters set out to build a tanker/pumper from scratch using a GMC cab and chassis.

"We built the body, installed the pump,

did the plumbing, the whole nine yards," he recalled. That truck was in service for nearly two decades before an unfortunate crash put it out of service.

While building his first truck, Ferrara learned that there weren't any businesses that sold fire equipment in his region. And that was all the inspiration he needed.

"I did some research and really wanted to go into business for myself," he said.

He was in his early 20s and ready to make his mark. "It seemed like I worked all my life during high school and I didn't play a lot of sports," he said. "Instead I worked at the corner store, worked at the baseball park, worked in a lot of different areas and gained some expertise in running a business and learned how to deal with customers."

Ferrara started a business selling fire equipment – rescue and hand tools – literally out of the trunk of his car.

"This whole thing was started on \$1,800," he said, "that and a lot of begging for credit from companies so I could have equipment to show and sell."

The business soon moved to an office in his home, then to a barn he built in the back of his house and then to a building in Baton Rouge.

"We were selling different fire equipment and then we started selling fire trucks," he said. Initially he sold trucks made by a Wisconsin-based company called 3D, which was later bought by American LaFrance. "I learned a lot selling other people's fire trucks," he recalled, "and I said, 'Shoot, I can do anything those guys can do and better.'"

The Move To Holden

The business started blossoming. In 1988 Ferrara Fire Apparatus was incorporated, and he got a Small Business Administration loan to buy machinery and have working capital. An expansion doubled the size of the facility, and Ferrara became a full-scale manufacturer. In those seminal years, the company was making less than 25 trucks annually and was considered a regional builder.

By 1993 the expanded Baton Rouge facility became too small, and Ferrara searched for a new site. He wanted access to good workers for continued growth, a highway for transportation of materials and products, land for expansion and proximity to major airports to compete beyond the local region.

He found what he needed and bought 60 acres in Holden, a rural area where the land was priced at \$900 an acre. The company is still there today, just off Interstate 12 half way between New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

Building a strong workforce, a solid reputation for high-quality apparatus, and a dedicated dealer network, Ferrara catapulted to the top tier in apparatus makers nationwide with overseas sales as well.

Impressed With Everything

"A lot of people take us for granted," he said. "They think we're a smaller regional builder and we're not. We are an international builder with international sales."

Jeff Gilbert, chief of the Williams (Calif.) Fire Protection Authority, bought three apparatus from the company in the past three years and is negotiating to buy a 77-foot quint on an Inferno cab and chassis.

"I looked at Ferrara when I was with another department," said Gilbert. "I've been impressed with everything I

have heard and seen about Chris and his business."

He said his department spent more than a year developing specifications for its first Ferrara truck. "My board said get what you want, but make sure it will last," he recalled. "That's why we decided on a Ferrara."

Gilbert, who was visiting the Holden factory with Mark Azevedo, a member of the Williams City Council, said his experiences with Ferrara have been outstanding, as have the trucks delivered to his community in Colusa County, about 60 miles north of Sacramento.

"It's nice to know that when you sit down and start discussing about what you need and what you think you ought to have, you're not going to get taken advantage of," he said. "I know that I can go all the way up to Chris himself if I need to have something taken care of."

Hands-On Owner

Mitch Willoughby, Ferrara's vice president of dealer sales, said his boss makes a point to personally meet and greet customers when they arrive at the factory.

"If he's here, he'll go out of his way to meet with them," he said, "and it's rare that he's not here."

Willoughby, who has worked 12 years with the company and 26 years in the industry, said Chris Ferrara is a hands-on owner, involved in everything from research and development of new products to final inspection before delivery.

"He's very particular when it comes to detailing," he said.

While Ferrara may be omnipresent in the factory and business, Willoughby describes his demeanor to the rest of the world as quiet and unassuming, which is the company's style.

85-foot Mid-Mount

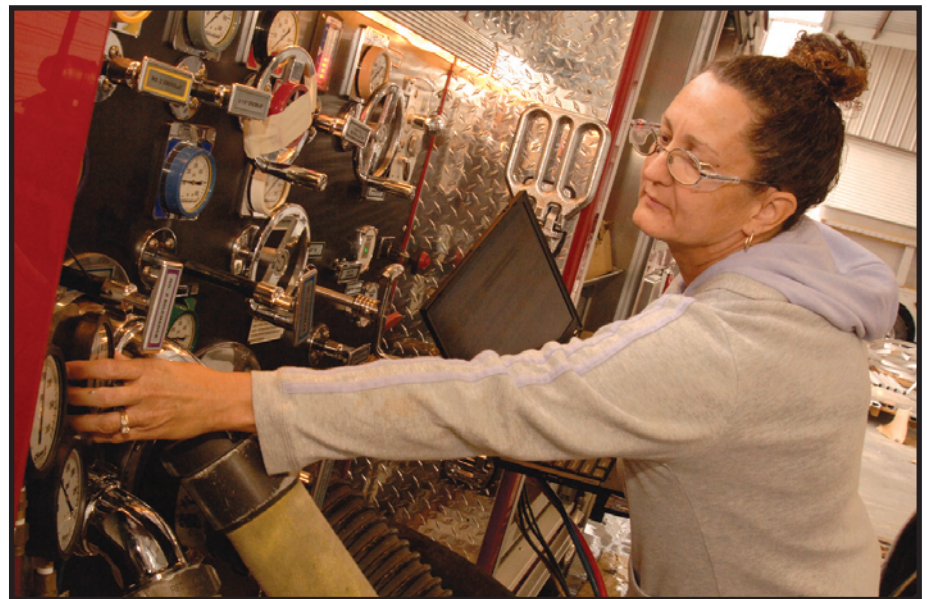
For example, Ferrara Fire Apparatus introduced a first-of-its-kind five-section, 85-foot mid-mount aerial at the Fire Rescue International show in Atlanta in August. There were no pyrotechnics, no lights, no balloons. Nothing. The truck was parked unassumingly on the show floor among the other Ferrara apparatus.

"We designed that 85-footer to meet a customer's needs," Willoughby said. "We'll sell a lot of them, but our goal is to meet our customers' needs."

Some 15 years ago, Ferrara came up with a through-the-tank ladder storage system to help a customer who needed to find a new place for ladders and to make them more accessible. His company was the first to develop and introduce that system, which is now an industry standard.

"Even with that concept, we still do it better than everybody else," Ferrara says. "We fabricate an aluminum structure that slides through the tank and makes it completely enclosed."

Some of the company's less obvious innovations involve the way its bodies



Felicia Sovinee, an Underwriters' Laboratories field inspector, tests a newly completed pumper for the Harvey (La.) Volunteer Fire Company. A UL field inspector is permanently assigned to the company, on site every day, putting apparatus through its paces. The company is on track to surpass 350 units completed in 2007. *(Fire Apparatus Photo by Jon Gilbert Fox)*

are built. There are more gussets and more platerwork built into the sub-frame of its body than any other in the industry, Ferrara said.

Picking up a small section of aluminum double I-beam in the body fabrication area, Ferrara points out the thickness of the material 7/16 of an inch. That piece is used for the rear support and at full length, a weight lifter would find it challenging to heft.

"We truly build the heaviest product out there, hands down," said Ferrara. "Our bodies and body construction use more platerwork, more heavy-duty construction than anyone out there. We've seen a trend in bodybuilding to find cheaper ways to build, using less thickness and less materials. We refuse to do that."

Custom Cab And Chassis

Glyn Harding is vice president of engineering and has been with Ferrara for 20 years. To keep the high quality affordable, part of Harding's job is to find ways to save money in engineering and on the production floor with labor savings. He has a team of 16 engineers to help him with that task and to work with fire departments to build the apparatus they need.

Harding said Ferrara Fire Apparatus bodies are made of 3/16-inch aluminum while some of the company's competitors use 1/8-inch aluminum.

"The only place we use 1/8-inch aluminum is on trim pieces, decorative items that have no effect on the strength of the body," Harding said. "If we cheapened the product, we'd lose market share, and we don't want that."

Ferrara, according to Harding, is one of the few custom manufacturers that builds apparatus using Galvneal steel, stainless steel, formed aluminum and extruded aluminum. About four years ago, Ferrara introduced a stainless steel unitized body, making it the fifth body style in the company's line up.

Custom Cabs And Chassis

Ferrara Fire Apparatus is also one of a handful of apparatus builders that actually build their own custom cabs and chassis from the ground up. Among the others are Pierce, E-One, American LaFrance, KME, Sutphen, Seagrave, Spartan/Crimson and HME/Ahrens Fox.

Ferrara uses the same over-built techniques in its cabs as its bodies,



Chris Ferrara, 49, of Ferrara Fire Apparatus, is surrounded by framed photos of apparatus his company has delivered in a conference room at the company's factory. (Fire Apparatus Photo by Jon Gilbert Fox)

using 3/16-inch marine grade aluminum and massive structural extrusions in the subframe, outboard uprights, crossbeams and roof perimeters. The cabs and chassis have a roll-cage design for occupant protection.

Harding said the company not only passed, but exceeded the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Structural Standards (R29), the European crash test and safety standards.

High Standards

The standards call for the roof to be able to withstand a force of 22,000 pounds. To prove that Ferrara Fire Apparatus has one of the strongest custom cabs in the industry, Harding said the company exceeded that requirement by three times over, placing a total of 66,000 pounds on the roof with no damage to the crew area.

The cab was also subjected to a simulated impact of a head-on collision in 2003. Some, 3,700 pounds were swung on a pendulum into the front of the cab to simulate an impact velocity of 18.2 mph, he said, and all the doors remained closed and intact and none of the structural parts of the cab failed.

The testing equipment and the test cab are part of the factory tour and one of the first places Chris Ferrara takes visitors.

To prove that his bodies are the strongest, he had the 66,000 pounds

placed on the fire body with no resulting structural deformity.

"Look at this," he said as he opened and closed the doors on the cab as well as the body. "As far as we know, no one has even tried to test their bodies."

John Wallace, director of Ferrara's chassis division, said the company decided to start building its own cabs and chassis about nine years ago in order to be taken seriously.

"Without our own cab and chassis, we were not a real contender," Wallace said. "We started out at ground zero and built from the ground up."

The designs are based on what the company's customers liked and didn't like about the products that were already on the market and led to the creation of the top-of-the-line Inferno cab and chassis and its trimmed down sister, the Igniter.

"The main thing people wanted was more visibility," Wallace said. "Our chassis has the best visibility in the industry."

Ferrara cabs have a 4,100-square-inch windshield and a 43-degree view, and they come in a variety of configurations, from a two-door rescue cab to an 80-inch command center.

Beefier Chassis

"Custom cabs and chassis are beefier than commercial cabs and chassis and that's just the way it is," Wallace said.

On some models, especially heavy-duty all-wheel drive units, the company builds chassis with double frame rails for added strength.

Ferrara recently had 10 such heavy-duty apparatus pass through its shop, all bound for Istanbul, Turkey. They were all-wheel drive units outfitted with Ferrara's unique StrongArm device, a boom aerial with a 1,500-gpm piercing nozzle.

The Strong Arm

The Strong Arm product has caught on in the international market, but has not taken off in the domestic market, according to Chris Ferrara.

"We have some leads domestically and we're working real hard on closing those deals," he said, noting that there will be 20 Strong Arms in service overseas by the beginning of the year.

The Strong Arm was introduced at the Fire Department Instructors' Conference (FDIC) three years ago. Ferrara said the product was born out of a tragic fire in Texas where firefighters were killed trying to save a McDonald's restaurant.

A firefighter came up with the idea of a huge piercing nozzle that could penetrate a building and extinguish fires without putting firefighters at risk. Ferrara said the inventor of the nozzle came to him looking for help, and he thought of mounting it on a 50-foot heavy boom made by Gradeall.

Flexibility To Take Risks

Because he is sole proprietor, Ferrara said he has the flexibility to react quickly to new ideas and to take calculated risks with research and development.

"They are truly amazing firefighting machines," Ferrara said of his StrongArms. "They really put out a tremendous amount of water... They're perfect for strip malls, warehouses and furniture stores. You can poke a couple of vent holes and put water in a third hole. When safety is such a focus, this gets firefighters out of harms way."

Willoughby attributes much of the company's growth to the owner. "Chris is probably the strongest visionary I've ever known," he said. "If he's got a goal, I'll be damned if something stops him from achieving that goal."

Willoughby said Ferrara Fire Apparatus has attracted the attention of others in the industry because it has become a serious competitor in a limited mar-



Patricia Roe, an electrician with Ferrara, drills holes to install a warning lamp on the bumper of an apparatus under construction. Ferrara builds units on a wide variety of cabs and chassis, including its own line.

ket. "We've reached a pinnacle where the major players are taking notice," he said. "I'm getting calls from major dealers, sometimes two or three each week."

The dealers, he said, are interested in joining the Ferrara team.

Willoughby said Ferrara's uncompromising commitment to quality has made the company a leader, as well as a strong 32-dealer, coast-to-coast network.

Chris Ferrara ticks off a list of major departments in the United States and around the world who do business with his company, including the Fire

Department of New York, Indianapolis, Houston, Knoxville, Tenn., Columbus, Ohio, Orange County, Fla., Mexico City and Dalian, China.

"What sets us apart is, I feel, we are still a true custom builder," Ferrara said. "We build what the customer wants and we have done really well. Not to brag, but when you do the research we've probably been the fastest growing fire truck manufacturer in the history of fire truck building."

For information call 800-443-9006 or go to www.ferrarafire.com.



A Ferrara Strong Arm sits on a lift awaiting completion. Behind it are two additional units, part of an order of 10 for Istanbul, Turkey, ready to move down the line. The apparatus are built on Ferrara-built heavy-duty all-wheel drive cabs and chassis. By the beginning of the new year, the company expects to have 20 of the unique vehicles in service worldwide. (Fire Apparatus Photo by Jon Gilbert Fox)