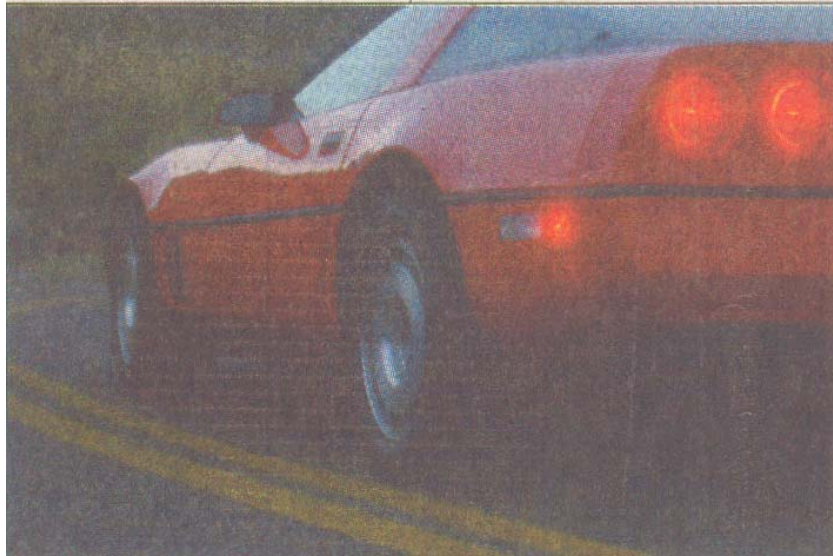


Auto Techs: Not what they used to be

BY LORI PRUITT
Special assignments writer



Today's cars are so complex that it takes a highly trained technician to repair them.

Gone are the days of the oil-covered auto mechanic. Today's auto technicians not only are much less likely to get dirty, but they must also have the skills to work on high-tech vehicles.

In fact, it's a wide-open field, offering an excellent living for those willing to work hard and get the appropriate training. Nationwide, there's a shortage of 60,000 trained technicians, and there will be a need for an additional 35,000 per year for the next 10 years.

In Alabama, automotive service technician is listed among the state's high-demand occupations by the Alabama Department of Industrial Relations.

Technicians mainly work in dealerships, independent shops and vehicle fleets.

"It's a professional field, and it's moving away from the stereotype of the mechanic with dirty fingernails," said Paul Lee, manager of the Automotive Youth Educational Systems (AYES) program, which works with area dealerships to help recruit high school students to start their technician careers early. "In fact, many do their work wearing surgical gloves."

"You don't have to worry about job security, either," he continued. "The best of the best in the Birmingham area are making over \$100,000 a year. The average trained, experienced technician can make about \$50,000 a year."

The main reason for the shortage is that automobiles are much more sophisticated these days. In 1980, auto manufacturers developed the onboard diagnostic system, which uses computers to diagnose problems, said Tom Berryman, a Ford ASSET (Automotive Student Service Education Training) instructor at Bessemer State Technical College.

"That move signaled the end of the good old boy working on his car under the shade tree," Berryman said. "Over the next three or four years after 1980, we lost 50 percent of our work force because they didn't have the skills and weren't willing or able to get the training. We're trying to catch up."

In 1996, a newer onboard diagnostic system raised the bar again, Berryman said. Manufacturers realized that there was a crisis in finding enough trained technicians, so they banded together to offer programs at the high school and college levels to educate students, counselors and parents about auto technician careers.

And it's an uphill battle to convince people, especially parents, that their children can make a good living working on vehicles. "People still remember that the troublemakers, or the kids who couldn't cut it in school, were sent to the auto shop," Berryman said. "It's hard to change the mindset of the general population, and we are slowly turning the tide, but the truth is that this field has become exceedingly complex. I need the best of the best."

At the high school level, the AYES program gives students a background in electronics, computers, math, communications and other skills. Students also get on-the-job training at participating dealerships. The program prepares students to graduate and go to work, or enter a degree program.

Six high schools statewide offer the AYES program, said Lee, who also works for the Birmingham Automobile Dealers Association, an active participant in the program. Six more schools have applied for the program. The Birmingham area schools are Shades Valley and Minor High.

At the college level, Bessemer State offers three associate degree programs sponsored by automobile manufacturers Ford, GM and Toyota. These programs include all the tools, vehicles and equipment a student needs to train as a senior master technician. Students accepted into these programs must be sponsored by a dealership.

Salaries for most graduates start at about \$40,000 a year, and for those who continue to work hard and keep their skills up to date, the opportunities are even greater. A technician also can move to other jobs within the dealership or company. "The degree opens up a lot of doors," Berryman said.

Lee agreed. "It used to be that you had to be good with your hands to be an auto technician, but now you have to be good with your head and your hands," he said. "It can really pay off."