

Motor City: The Story of Detroit

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Dearborn, Michigan. Workers in a Ford plant bending metal strips to form window frames for automobiles in 1941. Photo from Library of Congress.

"You can see here ... the whole structure of an industrial society," wrote essayist Edmund Wilson, reporting on a visit to Detroit, Michigan in the 1930s. As the capital of America's most important industry — automobile manufacturing — Detroit became the Motor City and a global symbol of the power of American capitalism.

A second-tier industrial city at the end of the 1800s, Detroit was home to machine and stove manufacturing, cigar making, drug and food production. But the city had natural advantages that suited it for automobile production. Located in the heart of the Great Lakes region, Detroit had all of the ingredients for industrial growth: it was close to the nation's major centers of coal, iron and copper mining; it was easily reached by water and by land; and it was near the nation's leading, well-established production centers. Still, it was not a great metropolis. When Henry Ford founded the Ford Motor Company in 1903, Detroit was only the nation's 13th largest city.

Of the 125 auto companies that sprang up in Detroit in the early 1900s, Ford quickly rose to the top. A restless innovator, Ford invented the modern assembly line. In the past, workers would do multiple tasks building a car. This assembly-line system would have a

worker focus on completing one task alone in creating the car. Then, the work would be continued by another worker. This system greatly increased how quickly cars could be made.

Ford draws many people to Detroit

In 1908, the young company introduced the Model T, a car whose standardized production would revolutionize the industry. Six years later, Ford announced the five-dollar workday. This led to a dramatic increase in the pay for industrial workers. Word of Ford's high wages brought people from all over to the Motor City. The auto businessman recruited craftsmen from Scotland and England, along with blue-collar workers from the rural Midwest. Ford also hired many African-Americans from the city's rapidly growing population of southern migrants. By 1940, Ford was one of the largest private employers of African-Americans in the United States.

By the mid-1900s, 1 in every 6 working Americans was employed directly or indirectly by the automobile industry. The “Big Three” auto firms — General Motors, Ford and Chrysler — were all based in Detroit. The auto industry consumed huge amounts of steel, glass, copper and plastic. As a result, a variety of auto-related industries sprang up around the city. Detroit was, in the words of one historian, a “total industrial landscape.” It was a place where hundreds of thousands of workers found work on the assembly lines and in the many small factories that made all sorts of car parts.

Bloody battles over unionization

The auto industry employed vast numbers of working Detroiters. Not surprisingly, it became a major target for the industrial union movement. Unions are like clubs that are formed by groups of workers who work together to fight for improvements they want. During the Great Depression, organizers from the United Automobile Workers (UAW) engaged in lengthy, often brutal struggles to win better pay and treatment for workers. Ford was the site of some of the bloodiest battles over unionization. The auto giant hired its own private guards to stop labor organizers, leading to the “Battle of the Overpass” at the massive Ford River Rouge plant, where union supporters were violently beaten. Still, the UAW succeeded. By 1941, the union had negotiated contracts with every major auto firm. By the end of the 1940s, the Big Three offered generous wages and extensive benefits that made auto workers among the best paid in the country. By the mid-1900s, a majority of Detroit residents were homeowners. Many autoworkers were able to save enough money to send their children to college.

By 1950, Detroit had become the fifth-largest city in the United States, home to nearly 2 million people. But during that time of prosperity, the auto industry started to change the way it was run. Between 1948 and 1967, Detroit lost more than 130,000 manufacturing jobs. The auto industry began to move its plants to the suburbs and to the small towns of the upper Midwest. At the same time, the industry also experimented with new technology

that replaced many assembly-line jobs with machines. The results were devastating. Many of the large, early 20th-century factory buildings in the city emptied out. The massive Dodge Main plant, which employed more than 30,000 workers at its peak, shrank its workforce to a few thousand before closing in 1980.

Detroit is devastated as auto companies shut down

By the 1970s, Detroit's image had been completely transformed. The city was no longer a symbol of the mighty engine of American business. The rise of international competition, especially from Japan and Germany, further weakened Detroit's auto industry. Chrysler, the smallest of the Big Three, filed for bankruptcy in 1979, while Ford and General Motors faced serious losses.

Although the fortunes of the auto industry eventually rose again, the Big Three would continue to struggle in an increasingly competitive economy. Detroit suffered a great deal. The city is still home to the Big Three headquarters, but the city's population has dropped to 886,000, and its job base continues to shrink. Boomtown Detroit is now a distant memory, visible only in the old factory buildings that were once magnets of opportunity. A fitting symbol of Detroit's lost industrial might is Ford's Highland Park plant. Once home to the first assembly line, the plant is now empty and deserted.

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