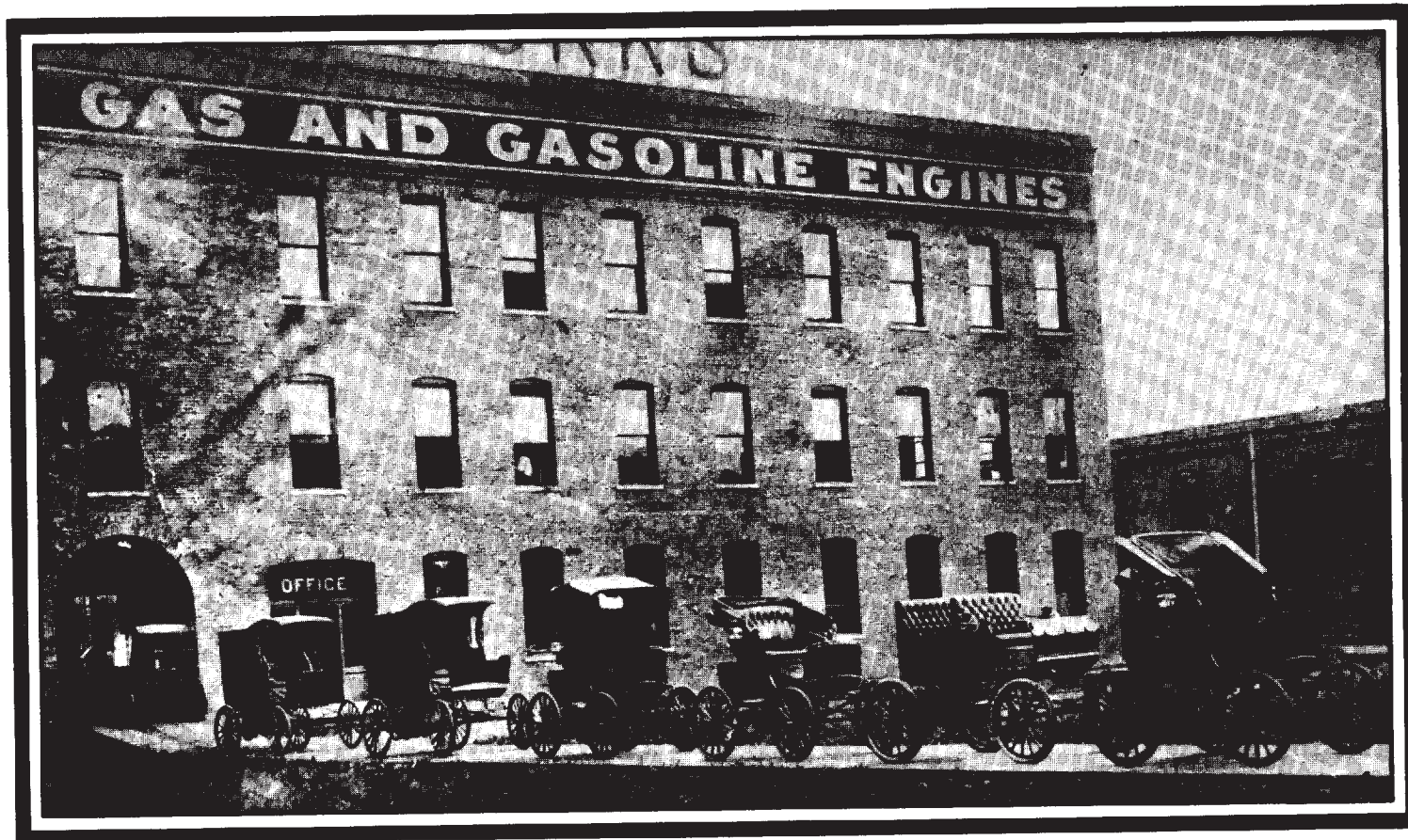


DETROIT ON WHEELS



In 1899, just three years after an experimental "horseless carriage" sputtered and chugged its way down Detroit's streets, Ransom Olds opened the city's first automobile factory on East Jefferson Avenue, next to the Belle Isle Bridge. Producing one, sometimes even two cars a day, the new "Oldsmobile" plant launched Detroit into the Automotive Age.

For the hundreds of car builders who followed Olds, Detroit was an ideal place to manufacture automobiles. The city's strategic location on the Great Lakes provided easy access to iron ore from the Upper Peninsula and coal from Ohio, and Detroit's dominance in building marine engines gave it a head start in the production of internal combustion engines. Its numerous metal-working industries also provided a bountiful supply of skilled workers and engineers. Detroit's stove companies, brass and copper mills, shipyards, and railroad equipment manufacturers all employed thousands of molders, metal finishers, mechanics, and other tradesmen whose skills were easily transferable to the tooling and building of auto-

mobiles.

Equally important, Detroit's elite had the capital to bankroll the early auto companies. Fortunes made in Michigan timber and copper helped finance Olds, Buick, and Cadillac in their early years. Michigan railroad money bankrolled Packard, while the founders of Detroit Edison stood behind the first car-building venture of Henry Ford, the farmer/mechanic turned engineer.

These pioneer auto manufacturers soon established Detroit and the nearby cities of Pontiac, Flint, and Lansing as the leading centers of the new industry. By 1904, the fast-growing Oldsmobile Company produced 5,000 of the 22,000 cars built in the United States, and dozens of auto companies springing up in Detroit already employed 2,000 of the city's 60,000 factory workers.

These early auto workers were skilled mechanics, not assembly-line factory hands. Even the most rudimentary car they produced—complete with wooden carriage bodies and wire bicycle wheels—was regarded by contemporaries as a complex and exotic piece of machinery. Each car was built slowly

and with a minimum of standardization. "In our first assembling," Henry Ford later remembered, "we simply started to put a car together at a spot on the floor and workmen brought to it parts as they were needed, in exactly the same way that one builds a house."

Skilled woodworkers and metal finishers constructed the bodies; skilled upholsterers stitched the leather seat covers; and skilled mechanics built the engines, machined the parts, and assembled the finished car. Unskilled shop hands fetched parts or did heavy work in the foundries where engine blocks and other components were cast. But even in the foundry many of the workers were skilled men who made the molds and poured the molten metal.

Skilled metal workers were the key to the auto industry's initial growth in Detroit. They were also the key to a sudden resurgence after 1901 in Detroit's labor movement—a resurgence that saw the number of union members in the city nearly double over the next three years. While Detroit was establishing itself as

the nation's Motor City, it was also becoming, many employers feared, a Union Town.

Company managers bitterly resented this union upsurge, for the metal workers who led Detroit's labor movement fully believed that they, not the owners, knew best how to organize production in a socially progressive manner. In many cases, their unions did not try to bargain with employers (who were not inclined to negotiate in any case). Rather, union workers simply published a "price list" for certain tasks, insisted on specific rules for performing the jobs, and set maximum limits on how much work time and production they would perform each "stint," or day. If an employer did not abide by these rules, union tradesmen walked out of the plant and set up picket lines.

Where they could enforce their terms on employers, unions also insisted on a "Closed Shop"—a shop that hired only union members with full apprenticeship training in all facets of the trade. To union members, this arrangement seemed fair and sensible, since employers would otherwise hire half-trained "rate-busters" to speed up work and undermine both product quality and the craftsman's skill. The inevitable result of such "hoggish" speed up, argued union craftsmen, was falling wages, irregular employment, and a "debauched" workforce.

Skilled tradesmen could not always enforce their work rules, price lists, and Closed-Shop provisions on employers. But as the city's economy boomed after 1900, and as metal workers found their skills in growing demand, their unions took the initiative. In 1901, the Machinists Union struck for shorter hours, eventually forcing 28 metal-working shops to reduce the mandatory work day from ten hours to nine. That same year, the Amalgamated Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers Union forced two of the city's major employers, Detroit Spring and Steel and American Car and Foundry, to honor the union wage scale and grant 5 percent pay increases. The Iron Molders, after a six-month strike ending in June, 1902, forced the Buhl Malleable Iron works to grant authority to the union's Shop Committee to set wages on new work. Rejuvenated by these victories, Detroit's unions grew from a city-wide membership of 8,000 in 1901 to 14,000 in 1904.

Faced with these union gains, management spokesman John Whirl complained that employers "had no more real control than if they were in no way connected with the shop." Indeed,



Above: *Detroit Saturday Night*, the weekly newspaper of the Chamber of Commerce, made no reference to company spies in its idealized portrait of the Motor City. For daily newspapers like the *Evening News*, however, the seamy side of the Open-Shop campaign was headline news.

Opposite page: the 1899 Olds plant.

in some plants, they had great difficulty just introducing new machinery. In iron and brass foundries—where workers cast molten metal into parts for machinery, stoves, and automobiles—many employers were eager to install new semi-automatic molding machines,

enabling them to turn out larger batches of standardized metal parts with less reliance on skilled labor. But in a Closed

Early Car Making

There were four basic production steps in building an automobile: 1) foundry work, 2) machining, 3) body work, and 4) assembly.

1) *The Cadillac foundry, 1906.*

To cast molten metal into automobile parts, a patternmaker first made a wooden model of the part. The skilled coremaker and molder then made a mold, packed it with sand (initially by hand, later by machine), and poured in the molten metal. In the past, their indispensable skills enabled these craftsmen to win union work rules in some foundries. After the Employers' Association launched its Open-Shop campaign, however, the foundry industry became predominantly non-union—"debauched" as some molders saw it, but "disciplined and reliable" in the words of the *Michigan Manufacturing and Financial Record*. Molders who could not accept the employers' discipline were replaced, the *Record* observed in 1910, as "their foreign helpers learned the trade and a considerable influx of iron molders of foreign birth came in."



1



2



3



4

2) *The machine shop of the C.H. Blomstrom Company, maker of the "Queen" automobile, Detroit, 1905.*

The machinists pictured here produced finished engine blocks and other parts by grinding, drilling, and buffing the rough castings from the foundry. Belts attached to revolving overhead shafts powered the lathes, drill presses, and other machines crowded into the room. Each of these machinists could

operate and repair most of the machines in the shop.

3) *Fisher Body, date unknown.*

Metal finishers used files, hammers, and other hand tools to smooth the seams in early car bodies.

4) *C.H. Blomstrom's chassis assembly department, 1905.*

Mechanics assembled the engine, transmission, and finished car at stationary work stations. Since many parts were cast and machined by dozens of outside contractors, the mechanic had to re-file and grind the ill-fitting components to produce a working machine. In assembly, therefore, only "the highest class of mechanics must be employed," *Machinery* magazine wrote in 1909.

Shop, union-enforced work rules regulated the introduction of such machinery, frustrating management's drive for more streamlined and profitable operations. In a Closed Shop, concluded Whirl, "the proprietors were merely the financial agents" for a production process controlled by union tradesmen. "It was for them [managers] to find out the cost of production as arranged by organized labor, and then make the selling price sufficient to leave them a profit."

To employers, such union "interference" was a burdensome restriction on their property rights and a significant barrier to growth. Entrepreneurs and managers saw themselves as the champions of economic rationality, and they did not want to concede or even share control over shopfloor operations with the blue-collar members of Detroit's craft unions. To counter union strength,

the city's industrialists therefore formed the Employers' Association of Detroit (EAD) in December, 1902, and began a long-term campaign to cripple the city's labor movement.

Between 1903 and 1907, companies repeatedly fired union employees and refused to renew Closed Shop agreements, provoking dozens of major strikes. An economic slump, beginning in 1904, gave the EAD a decided advantage. "The plan would be," according to Chester Culver, the EAD's Chief Counsel, "to declare an 'Open Shop' and replace the [union] crew with other workers from the unemployed people here in the city." Rather than allow unions to concentrate their efforts on individual employers, forcing each to accept a separate agreement, EAD member companies had organization spokesmen present a unified position to both the press and the labor movement.

The EAD strategy was very simple. It supplied a firm with strikebreakers and sought a court injunction against the union. This was a particularly easy matter in Michigan, where an 1898 court ruling defined most picketing as an illegal disruption of the peace. Under the inevitable court order, the police would break up picket lines and arrest union leaders.

To insure that unions, once driven from the workplace, would not stage a comeback, the EAD also established a city-wide Labor Bureau to recruit strikebreakers and screen out "troublemakers" from the workforce. After 1903, Detroit's employers frequently turned to this centralized employment agency for detailed records on each job applicant hired and each worker laid off by member companies. By 1906, the Labor Bureau had files on 40,000 people—nearly half of Detroit's workforce—

and EAD spies planted in factories and unions made sure no "quarrelsome" or "insubordinate" workers slipped through the Labor Bureau's net.

Employers argued that screening was a necessary and morally justified defense against union "discrimination." For according to the EAD, the Closed Shop not only was bad for business, it was also "an injustice to those [workers] who have an ability to rise." The maverick "ratebuster" condemned by unions was, to the EAD, "the speedy and perfect workman" who "may be able to do twice the work in a given time that his benchmate can." Under the "false standard of equality" established by union work rules, "the good man," as the EAD termed him, "is kept down and the poor man kept up."

Fortified with this crusading spirit, Detroit's employers steadily wore down their union opponents. In 1907, the

city's metal workers fought a series of bitter and violent strikes in a last-ditch effort to stem the anti-union tide. Their demonstrations failed to turn back Hungarian and other foreign-born strikebreakers the police escorted into the plants, and their picket lines were finally broken by court injunctions banning all "loitering" or "union patrolling" in the vicinity of the factories.

Less than 9 percent of Detroit's rapidly expanding workforce was unionized (15,000 out of 175,000) by 1911. Open-Shop employers were free to raise production quotas, lengthen the work day, and introduce new machinery without consulting union Shop Committees. Production speeds and output rose dramatically, but wages either crept up slowly or actually fell in Open-Shop plants. Union-supported apprenticeship programs collapsed in every industry but the building trades, replaced after 1913

by EAD's own management-controlled trade school.

The business climate was balmy indeed for Detroit's auto companies: a vast new market was opening up, capital was abundant, skilled and unskilled labor was available in ample supply, and the trade-union movement was demoralized and weakened. In this fertile soil, the city's economy grew rapidly, nurturing dozens of car and truck manufacturers. In 1910, 38 separate companies produced such forgotten models as the Faulkner-Blanchard "Gunboat Six," the "Hupmobile," and the Grabowsky "Power Wagon." In 1917, Detroit's car companies turned out one million automobiles and employed nearly 140,000 workers. By then, the city was attracting workers from all over North America — and beyond.