

Thoughts About the People Who “Built the Car”

By Charlene Snow

Growing up in Southwest Detroit in the 50s and 60s was like living in a small town with one industry. But the scale was dramatically different than that of any small town. Major auto manufacturers and suppliers were everywhere. The smokestacks towering above the Ford Rouge Complex were always in the background. They were there at picnics & fireworks in Patton Park. The smokestacks were in clear view when I visited gravesites of family members. Little did I know then that the 1932 Ford Hunger Marcher graves, that in those days lacked headstones, were only a short distance from those of my family.

The fathers of many of my friends worked in one of the plants around the Southwest neighborhood or in a job connected to the auto industry. I say the fathers as almost no women with school aged children worked outside of the home in those years.

My paternal grandfather, who immigrated from Hungary, brought the family to Detroit from Elyria, Ohio when Henry Ford offered \$5 per day in wages. Both my paternal grandmother and grandfather moved to Ohio from a small village in Eastern Hungary around 1912 or 1913.

My father worked at the Ford Rouge in the glass plant. He was a machine repairman and therefore part of the skilled trades in the plant. He took the Baker bus (which followed the same route of the Baker St Trolley discussed elsewhere in the Guide) along Vernor Hwy. to work; sometimes he rode to work with a neighbor. Two of my mother’s three brothers worked in the auto plants. The husband of my father’s sister worked at Ford Rouge, which was simply referred to as “The Rouge” or “Fords”. Most of the men on my block were factory workers. People drove the cars made by the company for whom they worked. Those working at Ford drove Fords, those at GM drove GM products and those working at Chrysler drove Chryslers. That held true with the exception of Cadillacs. Very few people in my neighborhood drove Cadillacs.



The Show family car as seen from their front window

One of my uncles worked at Cadillac on Michigan Ave., and I recall an anecdote regarding him. One of the relatives from the Lansing area who bought Cadillacs would share an order number of the car he purchased and give that information to my uncle. My uncle then watched for that particular car to

come onto the production line. He provided cigarettes and small gifts to the people building the relative's car to ensure special care was given in the production of that car.

My sister-in-law's mother, who was divorced, worked at Fleetwood on Fort St. She was one of the few women I knew who worked in a factory. Then later, after the children were grown, my sister-in-law worked at the Ford factory in Milan, MI.

My two brothers worked at Ford and also worked for the UAW. Four of my 5 nephews presently



Charlene & her family

work in Ford plants. My late husband was an attorney for the UAW. The auto industry in Southwest Detroit has been part of my family for 4 generations.

My best friend's grandfather was involved in the early union organizing days at Ford. Everyone referred to him as Grandpa Angus. When my friend and I walked over to visit with him, he told us stories of his organizing work with the union and the battles that happened on Miller Rd. in Dearborn as the Dearborn police watched and did not intervene. He came to Detroit from Nova Scotia and was a staunch Democrat. Through him we were introduced to volunteer work for the local Democratic district organization as well as joining him and other family members at Scottish bagpipe concerts in Windsor. I wish we had tape recorded his comments and stories.

My schoolmates in our corner of the neighborhood came from a variety of backgrounds including Maltese, Irish, Scottish, German, Polish, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Italian, and Mexican. There may have been had some Chaldean families, but few Muslims had settled in the neighborhood by that time. In the era of segregated Detroit, most African Americans lived in Southwest Detroit neighborhoods further downriver or those that bordered the "Old Westside" near Tireman . Other people of color resided in East Dearborn. Most of the men worked in factories, but I also had friends whose fathers were doctors, dentists, photographers, regional salespersons, and businesspeople.

When we drove down Miller Rd. to visit relatives or to go shopping, my father would point out the various buildings that were part of the Ford Rouge complex and explain what part of the car was made in each building. I heard about the Battle of the Overpass when I was young; it was part of the history of the area. My father also explained that before the war, the company had people follow workers to the bathroom area and check how long it took them to use the facilities.

With age, I came to understand how those factory jobs molded our lives and were a part of us. The industry offered many families in Southwest Detroit the opportunity to have stable housing, buy cars, take vacations “up north” and educate their children in parochial schools and in colleges. However, not everyone benefitted from these opportunities. Nonetheless, coming of age in that neighborhood gave me a solid foundation and shaped my view of the world.

It’s my hope that individuals, businesses, college students and civic organizations will aid this effort to chronicle the rich tapestry of the communities that powered Southwest Detroit plants in its auto heyday, while enhancing our understanding of the neighborhood’s current residents.