

Company Towns: Commemorating the American Auto Industry in Southeast Michigan

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The history of the state of Michigan, especially in regards to the twentieth century, is indelibly linked to the rise of industrial capitalism and automobile manufacturing. While the success of the auto industry has ebbed and flowed, the resulting “car culture” of the area – the intimate engagement between people and automobiles as a distinctive way of life - is an inescapable trope. This culture permeates the present and future and informs certain constructions of the past that people use to understand themselves and the current social, political and physical landscape of the state. Most history museums and sites in the industrial cities of southeast Michigan, at least in some capacity, strive to provide an accessible treatment of local themes and cultural norms. The arc of industrial boom and bust is still ongoing, but local historic sites that use the rise of automotive manufacturing to tell the hegemonic narrative of America’s industrial might writ large must be especially careful to represent local history in ways that line up with people’s perceptions and sensitivities of contemporary realities.

A sustained economic downturn within the automotive industry has inspired a number of reactions to presentations of the residual effects of auto firms’ former prominence, whether ambivalence, concern, nostalgia, or even outright resentment. In the face of the transition to a primarily service based economy, civic leaders in industrial cities are scrambling to find new ways to keep their manufacturing areas productive, but in ways that effectively adapt their outmoded original purposes for the modern day. This natural response to economic decline has brought a troubling contradiction to light: capitalizing on Michigan’s automotive legacy has often meant distilling it into an object of curiosity. That is, responses to deindustrialization have

sought to preserve former relevance by having to acknowledge elements of their chief industry's fight against obsolescence, especially vis-à-vis commemorative efforts and a sort of "museumization" of automotive production and lifestyles. This tactic has come to be a common starting point in many former industrial areas, where cultural institutions have come to represent the centerpieces of attraction, reinvention and diversification of the local economy. The physical evidence of auto production still remains in the erstwhile center of industrialized America; there is little dispute that Michigan's industrial heyday has come and gone, but efforts to promote, maintain, and profit from the memory of this glorious past are an ongoing concern to public historians and city boosters alike.

While the area has a rich history of industry, labor and prosperity, it has become all too apparent to all observers that the halcyon days of Big Three dominance in this country are over. But the ways in which that the past is used as a backdrop for understanding how we have arrived at the unsettling economic realities facing the industry and state today reveal that commemorating the glorious past of the American automobile is contentious business. Based on her work in Lowell, Massachusetts, a city that has effectively dealt with the loss of its manufacturing base, Cathy Stanton speaks of the rise of "heritage" sites in the realm of public history as complex responses to certain conceptions of the past co-opted for a number of reasons, not the least of which being economic concerns via tourism or a means of generating local pride. While making use of purported facts that idealize the past, critics often declare that "heritage is not the same as history. It is processed through mythology, ideology, nationalism...into a commodity."¹ This tension between history and heritage undergirds the ways that history is used today; that onetime realities of automotive production and the curiosity of people to experience a bygone time and place have been distilled into a commodity as tangible as the cars themselves

speaks to just how different the economic and social structures of today are than they were only a few generations ago. As manufacturing jobs continue to leave the state by the thousands each year, local leaders naturally look for ways to fill the void left by departing revenue and population. These efforts have often sought to utilize existing infrastructure and proud ideals about a city's past, tailoring its cultural institutions to competition for a greater share of lucrative tourist dollars. Putting forth a certain retelling of events relating to the often controversial history of auto production in the state of Michigan is just that, one of many possibly conflicting accounts of success, failure, strife or consensus.

The push for greater acclaim, legitimacy and appeal of historic attractions by academics, business leaders and the general public has catalyzed existing institutions to be more responsive to the changing academic and cultural mores, seeking a more holistic and sophisticated approach to the time-worn celebratory telling of American history. Eschewing the traditional story of the most profitable era of automotive might and its profound effects on surrounding communities, the "new social history" seeks to implement a more dynamic and innovative approach by implementing a bottom-up grassroots depiction of historical circumstances. Heroic stories of auto pioneers have been pared down and interpretations are much more sensitive to conditions of class, race, immigrant status, organized labor, and the like. Despite the ostensibly leftist sensibilities of the movement, even unabashedly reactionary patriotic institutions such as Colonial Williamsburg (CW), long trumpeting its incredible attention to detail to tourist audiences craving realism and accuracy, have been forced to incorporate the less savory elements of their time period, such as slavery, misogyny or poor personal hygiene. The chance to make larger social points about race relations or socioeconomic disparities had been largely ignored over the years in favor of a narrative that neither challenges visitors' beliefs nor dispelled any

myths about a romanticized, simplistic past. But in spite of years of resistance, even the ultimate historical theme park has come to embrace its most glaring flaws, acknowledging that its aim of complete visitor immersion in the past could only be “partial at best.” By pointing out anachronistic buildings and where signs of modern Williamsburg were being cleverly hidden by plants, barrels and period architecture, CW has attempted to accommodate the new history in an old museum.²

Comparable treatments of automotive history have faced similar interpretative dilemmas, often airbrushing controversial labor issues and the economic fallout of capital flight.³ But as Handler and Gable explore in great detail, the constant conflict between the business side of public history and its academic grounding creates competing prerogatives. On one hand, profitable historic sites seek to present an accurate portrayal of historical realities, but only to the extent possible within the framework of a sustainable business model that by necessity often must capitulate to entertainment, lodging and hospitality interests. How history itself gets changed in the process into a salable and appreciable product is the crux of public history, or more succinctly, made accessible. Whose history is being put on display, and who are the targeted demographics for that history? The past has become serious business, both figuratively and literally.

While the city of Flint will be my primary microcosm of study on the efficacy of public history efforts in southeastern Michigan, other sites in metro Detroit will be considered for the sake of buttressing larger arguments and themes prevalent in similarly downtrodden industrialized communities across the country. Museums as traditional sites of historical retelling take an increasingly critical role in conveying the most salient messages of automotive history in the nascent cultural economies of this and are therefore a large part of my analysis. The Henry

Ford in Dearborn, the Alfred P. Sloan Museum in Flint and the Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Center all serve as regional hubs for automotive history in the state, the most noteworthy sites dedicated to exploring local ties to the burgeoning industrialization of America and Michigan in particular. I will also review a number of other sources that critically evaluate Rust Belt attempts at revitalization and the growing postindustrial sense of history as an item of consumption and leisure. Given the unique historical moment of the bankruptcy of most of the U.S. auto industry, treatments of its history can evoke very strong feelings of nostalgia or bitterness in accordance to viewers' own experiences with the industry and how its realities are confronted by these museums, especially with respect to a historic arc that has not yet reached its terminus. The ultimate challenge of adapting Michigan's entrenched industrial ethos into one capable of future economic survival hinges on being sensitive to the past but using it as a constructive means towards an equally prosperous future, whether via "culture-led urban regeneration"⁴ or some other means.

I. Boom and Bust

In order to appreciate how locals have responded to industrial decline, we must examine the state's industrial beginnings. A number of social and economic developments during the twentieth century have shifted patterns of immigration, work and leisure that have come to redefine the state and its most famous identity as the home of the "Big Three" automakers of General Motors, Ford and Chrysler. If we begin with a standard stages-of-development theory of modernism, Michigan's climb to prosperity began with the shift from an agrarian to industrialized manufacturing economy, bringing people away from largely population-diffuse areas toward cities and their modern, mechanized factories. To this end, the extent to which the automotive boom contributed to the augmentation of America's physical landscape and its

citizens' consumerist habits has often been understated. Ronald Edsforth takes this view, positing that the rise of the automobile was not simply an inevitable stage of industrial development, but instead represents the greatest single catalyst in the development of modern consumer capitalism, personal transportation and leisure.⁵ The exact reasons why people were so overwhelmingly eager to take to the roads remain to be seen, but the benefits of ownership soon became obvious. The convenience of personal transport unconstrained by tracks like trolleys or trains made cars popular items to own in the early decades of the twentieth century, prompting many to violate the prevalent Victorian ideals of asceticism and frugality to incur the debt necessary to own one. While the first models produced by Ford and the various marques of GM (Buick, Oldsmobile, Cadillac, et al.) were aimed toward the wealthy, once production methods were simplified and perfected, prices dropped and cheaper models emerged that put them into the hands of blue and white-collar working Americans.⁶ With automobiles facilitating the emergence of modern patterns of leisure and consumption across every social class, all such groups have a stake in automotive history as it has, in some way, impacted the lives of nearly every American, to the point that one's car is as big a status symbol today as their home or occupation. In a sense, the car is the quintessence of the American experience – while it is unique to each person who owns one, the freedom and convenience afforded by personal transportation is as important in our daily lives as any other civic freedom to which we are collectively entitled.

Fatefully, several of America's pioneering automotive magnates happened to hail from the area, such as Dearborn native Henry Ford and GM founder Billy Durant who emigrated from Boston to Flint as a young man. Seeing the potential in automobiles, they combined new manufacturing techniques and savvy business acumen to bring some of the earliest 'horseless carriages' to life, combining the new technology of the internal combustion engine with the

existing infrastructure of buggy manufacture. What was commonly seen around the turn of the twentieth century as a passing fad would grow to spark a transportation revolution that would give rise to some of the largest and most powerful industrial firms the world has seen. While the fledging automotive industry grew by leaps and bounds in the first two decades of the twentieth century, it became apparent that huge labor pools would be necessary to keep up with the demand for the newfangled cars. Detroit and Flint, Michigan serve as prime examples of cities that owe a great deal of their growth to the influx of persons needed to staff these bustling factories all hours of the day.

The growth of Flint closely parallels the growth and success of GM, serving as the hometown to the expanding corporate monolith while evolving into nothing short of a de facto company town. Flint in the earliest days of General Motors “was to the nation’s leading automobile producer what Pittsburgh was to steel”⁷, but its roots as a vehicle producer long preceded its affiliation with production of automobiles. In fact, the boom and bust cycle of the auto industry was not unparalleled in Flint’s history. Blessed with huge white pine forests surrounding its namesake river, the city was the state center for lumber production from the 1850s, providing millions of board feet for woodworking endeavors across Michigan, but the timber supply would be virtually exhausted by 1880. Fortunately, the leading businessmen of this industry – H.H. Crapo, J.B. Atwood and Co., Begole, Fox and Co. - decided to keep their capital and profits in Flint, supporting the rising carriage industry and its derivative, the automobile.⁸ By the time William Crapo Durant filed the incorporation papers for the General Motors Company on September 16, 1908, and forever after, Flint’s fortunes were to be tied, for better or for worse, with the auto industry. Several wildly successful early roadsters were produced in the city around the turn of the century, the most famous of which would be the

Buick, “the rock on which GM was founded” according to Durant and the source of Flint’s continuing status as “Buicktown, USA.”⁹

The city went from a small but thriving town of approximately fourteen thousand residents before Buick’s move to Flint in 1903 to a midsized metropolis of more than 156,000 in 1930. So rapid was Flint’s growth that existing housing stock and city services could not keep up with the demand. So pressed for suitable living spaces was the city that GM felt compelled to provide housing itself, contracting the building of entire neighborhoods of small, identical homes surrounding its sprawling Buick, Chevrolet and Fisher Body factories and selling them at cost to its workers. Flint’s population would expand exponentially in its years of peak employment and production, commonly held to be the era before 1970. Factory building and line production could not keep up with demand for new automobiles, so GM agents scoured the land to recruit new labor. Almost any able bodied man who applied was immediately put to work, and when word spread around the country that assembly line jobs were so plentiful in Michigan, especially in the cities of Flint, Lansing and Detroit, families flocked by the thousands from the Midwest and South to fill these newly created industrial positions.

The prospect of high wages and home ownership proved very attractive to many emigrants, especially those from rural backgrounds whose livelihoods were limited by poor economic conditions. Even during the years of the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to Northern factory towns in the early 20th century, the black population of Flint was relatively low, constituting less than 4 percent of the city. Their employment at GM was even less prominent, serving in only the most menial of capacities in these early decades. On one hand, the highly variable nature of Flint’s working population and the influx of migrants and foreign immigrants formed barriers to true working-class solidarity in these early years.¹⁰ Thus,

the promise of upward mobility via gainful employment was still very much tied to one's ethnicity, but as long as most people in town had jobs, homes and prosperity, race relations remained relatively peaceful.¹¹

There are many examples of extremely close association between GM and Flint in these years, to the point where the line between corporation and government was often blurred. GM's status as the town's largest employer, and its residual effects of civic growth was not lost on the city's elected leaders and prominent institutions, which at times functioned as organs of corporate interests even before such alliances became prominent political strategies. One could hardly argue with the results in the early to mid twentieth century; while the city was not explicitly owned by GM in the manner of other single-industry towns like Lowell, Massachusetts to textiles, Homestead, Pennsylvania to steel or Pullman, Illinois to railroad cars, most of Flint's infrastructure and new investment came either directly or indirectly as a result of the massive GM payroll. Indeed, Flint might even be cited as the preeminent symbol of mid-century liberal consensus, a shining example of the American Dream promised by a flourishing free market and sanguine idealism of the 1950s. So powerful was GM's position as the leader of American industry that Chairman Harlow Curtice, a longtime Flint resident, was named *Time Magazine's* Man of the Year for 1955. Not only was Curtice painted as a shrewd, forceful personality amongst Flint's elite, but the accompanying story gave a glowing account of his city's lifestyle and the material wealth being accumulated by his Flint-based workforce:

How far is Flint from London, Paris, Madrid, Rome, or Mexico City? Not far, in the sense that a prosperous, strong U.S. economic system is clearly the basis for the record-breaking prosperity of the whole free world...Flint is the world's most General Motorized city, and it says more

about the state of the nation today than volumes of statistics. Bright new Buicks and Chevrolets line Flint's main streets. There is a job in the Flint area for virtually anyone who wants one. Of a work force of 135,400, some 86,700 are employed by G.M. The 83,000 hourly employees draw wages averaging \$100 a week—with some skilled old timers at the forge plants earning \$10,000 a year [nearly \$80,000 in 2009 dollars], Flint has an automobile for every 2.8, persons, v. a nationwide average of one for every 3.7. Nearly 80% of the residents own their own homes, and 80% of the homes have television.¹²

The idea that Flint's climate of postwar opulence is tied to purchasing power and consumer goods speaks to the sort of metrics that Americans often use to judge the prestige and success of a place. But such hyperbole declaring Flint akin to the sprawling metropolises of the world make the consequences of deindustrialization in the city that much more striking. Flint has, like many cities, suffered serious setbacks to its economy and civic infrastructure as a result of not only GM's deindustrializing prerogatives since the 1970s but also larger trends of urban decay that has seen city centers lose their place as the core of a metropolitan area. The continuing suburbanization of America may also be to blame for the decay of the likes of Flint and its larger neighbor, Detroit; a pattern emerging over the past half-century, especially with the rise of the middle class, has shown gradual movement from neighborhoods within the city limits to its outlying rural-urban fringe, resulting in "urban sprawl" marked by a lower population density and less centralized residential and business districts.¹³ Thus, many residents of metropolitan areas no longer live and work within the central urban area, instead choosing to live in satellite communities, suburbs, and commute to work – which may have even relocated to the suburbs with its employees!

These developments have characterized Flint, as well as many other Midwestern Rust Belt cities; after living and working within the city for some years, those residents that could afford to frequently moved to nearby bedroom communities while maintaining their employment at GM. Thus, the population of Flint forms a bell curve during the 20th century, as the rise of manufacturing led numbers to swell to nearly 197,000 at its peak in 1960, but have dipped nearly 40 percent by the present day. With such losses of population within the city came the erosion of its tax base, and the gradual socialization of suburban living as a marker of middle-class identity. At a loss for tax income, cities like Flint are forced to cut critical services like police, fire, and garbage collection and accumulate huge amounts of debt, and their general populations are increasingly poor and non-white. The deficits had become such a problem in Flint in recent years that the state of Michigan felt compelled to stage an emergency takeover of the city's finances in 2002, with receivership effectively stripping Flint citizens and government of the right to economically govern themselves.

Sociologists and historians believe that race has also played a role in expediting the pace of suburbanization in America's cities. The migration of southern African-Americans in the early 20th century looking to capitalize on the jobs available in the up-and-coming industries of places like Flint has been cited as a catalyst for the pace of suburbanization and the sort of de facto racial segregation that occurs in predominantly racial-minority inner cities today. Whether accurate or not, the cities have come to be increasingly perceived as dangerous, crime-infested areas, while suburbs are usually viewed as safe places to live and raise a family. These associations have contributed to a demographic trend known as "white flight"¹⁴. Flint's population reflects this trend, as the racial makeup of the city as of the 2000 census was 54 percent African-American, 3 percent Hispanic and just 41 percent white.¹⁵ The close relationship

between the decline of industry and the decline of cities, when taken with the adverse social side effects, reveals an often painful history that is often downplayed or revised in the hopes of attracting new development or profiting from the memory of happier times.

II. Critical Theory: Responses to Deindustrialization

The ebb and flow of the industrial/manufacturing economy within just a single century has inspired much scholarly analysis of the social effects on industrialized areas that came with such marked success and decline. But the company towns of Michigan would not have grown the way that they did without a rock-solid belief in industrial capitalism as the key to the “American Dream” of opportunity and sustained prosperity. But the protracted downturn of the automotive industry since the 1970s has left it vulnerable to criticism by those deeply affected by its business decisions and the seemingly unsympathetic nature of the capitalist system. The same companies that provided such comforts for its workers for generations suddenly found themselves having to answer to them for almost completely severing ties with community bases that had grown accustomed to corporate largesse.

For most of the past century, the twin phenomena of mass consumption and mass production were the cornerstones of sustained economic growth, efficiently manufacturing not only high quality, standardized goods but simultaneously providing enough residual benefits to workers that they could in turn afford the products they were making. If the concurrent rise of a pleasure-driven consumer culture in the 1920s is any indication of the new priorities of American workers, then the ability to genuinely participate in this exciting culture and its creature comforts in exchange for their production of its goods proved to be an enticing tradeoff.¹⁶ Indeed, belief in the primacy of conspicuous consumption as a means of self-actualization would undergird the

wild success of manufacturing through the early and mid-century. Whenever discussing industrial production and the enormous ranks of laborers needed to fuel such endeavors, Marxist criticism inevitably must be confronted. These critics might argue that the circumstances of industrial workers at Ford and GM plants during years of peak growth would constitute alienated labor, resulting in a “false consciousness” that obscured the exploitation of the working class for the disproportionate benefit of rapidly expanding capitalist giants.

But if we were to leave it at that, such a straightforward Marxist critique would certainly underestimate the role of industrialization, and particularly the unforeseen prosperity of automotive manufacturing, in the huge material gains made by members of the working class. With ample pay, these workers could now afford more comfortable lifestyles than previously possible on a working wage. The exchange of alienated labor for wages and involvement in the consumer economy in this case was not so much coercion as it was an attraction for work in the manufacturing sector.¹⁷ To be sure, automobile factories could be loud, dirty, dangerous, monotonous places, but fair pay for fair work would come to be a hallmark of the industry and a rallying cry for later unionization movements. The introduction of the “Five Dollar Day” in January 1914 by the “Flivver King”¹⁸ himself, Henry Ford, certainly undercuts the notion of disaffected labor; the resulting speedup of production of inexpensive Model Ts after the introduction of the moving assembly line in Ford’s Highland Park factory around the same time, plus the workforce stabilizing effects of higher wages, saw profits rise and prices of Model Ts fall. By 1924, even unskilled laborers in Ford’s plants could afford a new Model T for less than three months salary.¹⁹

Although industrialized workplaces were accused of separating the man from his culture, modernization has instead begun to recognize work as a cultural attraction in and of itself. While

the Marxist hypothesis predicted a clean division of workers and owners, culminating in a proletarian revolution and classless society, this situation has not necessarily come to pass. The class struggle has instead manifested itself in the form of the tension between work and culture.²⁰ As a result, production is no longer the singular goal of industry; rather, the production process has also evolved into an object of curiosity to be put on display and gawked at, similar to the ways we might view ancient ruins or artifacts. This shift towards the “museumization” of work is, according to Dean MacCannell, the hallmark of the death of industrial society and the rise of modernity, i.e. the postindustrial information economy. “Under such conditions, modernity is transforming labor into cultural productions attended by tourists and sightseers who are moved by the universality of work relations - not as this is manifested through their own work (from which they are alienated) but as it is revealed to them at their leisure through the displayed work of others.” Indeed, this *work display* appears to be a uniquely modern phenomenon, wherein workers are compelled to use the vacations and leisure time afforded by their jobs to pay to view the work of others where they can, for a limited time, compare their own experiences to and even take part in the regimens of other workers.²¹

In this odd form of “escapist tourism,” people are drawn to attractions that they identify with and find inherently interesting, but not too familiar. In the same way that people do not want to interact too closely with smelly farm animals and unkempt townspeople at a “living” site like Colonial Williamsburg, many people who visit sites of automotive history do not want to be confronted by the realities of work that are often all too tangible or challenging to their beliefs about capitalism: labor-management strife, layoffs, dangerous workplaces, squalid social conditions, or other negative elements of the shop floor.²² Instead, local sites can and often do look to capture visitors’ fascination with the automobile by evoking the warm, nostalgic feelings

they may have for their first car and the freedom and memories that it brought, or the “drive-in culture” that came with industrial prosperity – driven (no pun intended) by the rise of the automobile as the centerpiece of American life. But where to draw the line between celebration and reality becomes especially controversial when a critical component of the story of the industry, its downfall (and potential rebirth), has not yet concluded.

Perhaps the most salient example of this phenomenon with regards to the auto industry is Ford Motor Company’s River Rouge factory tour, one of the firm’s seminal facilities located near its corporate headquarters in Dearborn. These daily tours through the facility transform the factory into part serious workplace and part sideshow; despite the risk of trivializing the work on display, one imagines that such excursions are offered because of the ancillary benefits. While nominally informative as to the minutiae of automotive manufacturing, summarizing the entire assembly line process into a short period allows for the tour to come across as an extended commercial for Ford vehicles – an easy form of positive publicity for the company that people actually pay to experience! Of course, other opportunities for shameless self-promotion do not go unused; futuristic concept cars and a pricey gift shop greet visitors at the end of the tour, as well as a return trip to the Henry Ford campus, where their tour tickets were presumably bought to complement the triumphant history on display at Industrial Museum and Greenfield Village. This comes as no surprise; the Henry Ford and River Rouge tour make use of work display elements from the past (in the museum) and present (the tour) to bring the story of Michigan auto production into the future. [As for the permanent automotive display at the Henry Ford, it will be discussed in the next section.]

In contrast to the pleasant portrayals of life on the assembly line, popular culture has certainly produced some less than reverential portraits of the machinations of the automotive

industry. Perhaps the most infamous and well known piece on the topic that questioned GM's capitalist decision-making is Flint native Michael Moore's documentary *Roger and Me*, which upon its 1989 release sought to expose all of America to the grim realities of industrial downsizing and portray the auspices of multinational corporations like General Motors as unfeeling, greedy and relentlessly profit driven.²³ The film serves as a retrospective of many of the circumstances of Flint's decline in the 1980s. Because of all of GM's plant closings, the city had been receiving attention from many national media outlets, including ABC's *Nightline* and the *CBS Evening News*. These segments are interspliced with Moore's own footage and interviews with local workers and mid-level corporate representatives that at times make themselves and the company line seem foolish and unconcerned with the fate of the city. It all comes together to form a scathing, often populist critique of contemporary industrial policy in the "everyman", outraged perspective of its creator that, sadly, also exposes citizens' inability to provide sustainable solutions to their own plight. In a sardonic and sometimes bitterly ironic way, the film uses humor to portray the company as a cold, heartless industrial giant that cared little about the horrible conditions facing the residents of its hometown, a onetime boomtown due to its status as one of the largest corporations in the world. More striking than just the industrial history on display in the film is the social fallout that resulted from GM skipping town, representing the historic period that present commemorative efforts must broach in a very sensitive manner.

The particular blend of circumstances that frame our sense of place is explored through a simple but stark comparison between two very different urban climates. Early in the film, images of gritty, blue collar Flint is directly contrasted with the more leisurely culture of the upwardly mobile young professionals that populated coffee houses and dessert shops in San Francisco,

where Moore had been working as a muckraking journalist. The obviously left-leaning Moore's subsequent depiction of Flint's breakdown is not only meant to show the tangible results of deindustrialization but also dispel the unabashedly optimistic and majestic portrayals of American prosperity heralded by conservatives that tend to focus only on thriving areas and selective class experiences. It evokes the somewhat paradoxical effects of the free market, which has been both the cause and destruction of happiness for those who are so tightly enmeshed with its products. As the dominance of the manufacturing sector continues to erode, the necessity of unskilled labor has seemingly given way to the technical know-how essential to staying competitive in today's dynamic information based economy. Flint's identity as a city that went from a nearly singular reliance on the mass production of automobiles, has led not to postindustrial "Yuppiedom" of San Francisco but to being a used up shell of its former self.²⁴ Marx and Engels might have viewed this outcome as their theory coming to fruition: class conflict and capitalism's failure to provide for people was in fact creating major problems in Flint and elsewhere, with prolonged economic marginalization of the city in place of the rise of socialism and communism.

Several particularly galling segments of the film depict the hardships of individuals affected by GM's downturn. In the infamous "Pets or Meat" scene one woman, whose husband lost his job on the assembly line, was living solely off social security payments and had turned to skinning rabbits to make extra cash – a process graphically depicted on screen by the eager entrepreneur. Ben Hamper, a close friend of Moore's who had worked the night shift at GM's Truck and Bus plant for the last ten years and had written a column for Moore's *Flint Voice* newspaper, recounts the day he suffered an anxiety attack at work, overwhelmed by the constant, tedious grind of his welding job and the numerous layoffs and rehires he had endured. Hamper would later go on to

recount his role in the film in his autobiography, *Rivthead*, giving more background on these events and spinning irreverent anecdotes of life on the assembly line: plots to kill time by “doubling up” so a line mate could leave work early; battles with obstinate management types, and most troubling of all, the fight to keep oneself sane with the repetition of a single, easy task for hours a day, years on end. He describes the dehumanizing, unsavory conditions inside a factory that he had learned from his father upon a tour of old Fisher Body in Flint when he was just seven years old:

If nothing else, this annual peepshow lent a whole world of credence to our father’s daily grumble. The assembly line did indeed stink. The noise was close to intolerable. The heat was one complete bastard... We stood there for forty minutes or so, a miniature lifetime, and the pattern never changed. Car, windshield. Car, windshield. Drudgery piled atop drudgery. Decades rolling through the rafters, bones turning to dust, stubborn clocks gagging down flesh... squirming against nothing, nothing, nothingness. I wanted to shout at my father, “Do something else!”²⁵

Being involved in just one tiny portion of the assembly line process, as Hamper would later discover, fostered a disconnection not only with the finished product he was helping to create but also with his role at GM as a whole, lending some credence to the Marxist conception of alienated labor. The company seemed so huge that, to many of the author’s linemates, they held such insignificant positions that it was very hard to take pride in their work and near impossible to effect any larger organizational change. But such was the fate “that went along with being just another cog in a mammoth flywheel.”²⁶

A significant portion of *Roger and Me* also focuses on the city's efforts to repair its image and reinvent itself as a cultural center, depicted most preposterously as the "tourist Mecca of the Middle West." Hundreds of millions of dollars of capital were invested in building a luxury Hyatt Regency hotel downtown, the Water Street Pavilion festival marketplace, shopping center Windmill Place, the Great Lakes Technology Centre commercial space, and the crowning jewel - an indoor Six Flags amusement park, AutoWorld.

Opened on Independence Day 1984, then-Governor James J. Blanchard predicted AutoWorld would trigger "the rebirth of the great city of Flint." At the time, city leaders were so desperate for new investment and revenue opportunities that they were willing to throw their support behind a project that seemed doomed before it even opened. Many observers at the time wondered how long the indoor theme park could possibly survive with its peculiar mix of low-intensity rides and a heavy dose of Flint history. Sure enough, six months later a Maryland investment firm abruptly withdrew its backing of AutoWorld, shutting it down because of poor attendance. The park would go down as a colossal economic development and entertainment bust, an embarrassing symbol that has dogged Flint since. Said one opening day visitor, "The rides and things they had were all low-key. You could tell it was just something that wasn't going to make it. They needed more thrill."²⁷

AutoWorld was plagued by an identity crisis of sorts. It did not clearly purport to be a museum or a theme park, leading to misguided expectations from a public that expected one thing and ended up with something very different. Patrons were baffled by the lack of roller-coaster thrills from a Six Flags venture, and upon viewing its interesting, but not especially gripping attractions like a three-story V-6 engine, the test-track simulation of a custom-made IMAX film or the undeniably cheesy singing puppets of the "Humorous History of

Automation,”²⁸ many did not feel the need to visit the park a second time, put off by the cutesy “Mickey Mouse” history²⁹ and museum-like qualities of the otherwise impressive geodesic dome. In retrospect, it was simply not a sustainable idea; AutoWorld was not Cedar Point, a popular amusement park amongst thrill-seekers, nor was it a museum like Greenfield Village. Both have highly successful business models based on a very straightforward manner of presenting their respective experience. But in Flint, the park would be beset with operating problems and static attractions, the \$80-million theme park closed its doors in January 1985, later reopening for holidays and other special occasions before finally being demolished in 1997 to make way for something more useful to the city’s future – a parking lot for the University of Michigan-Flint.

Moore seemingly leads viewers to believe that the people of Flint are hopelessly optimistic but willing to try anything, even something as far-fetched as tourism, to revive itself, stimulating change that is difficult and long overdue. Suffering from an acute form of dependent deindustrialization,³⁰ Flint has lived by the auto industry for so many years that once it left no amount of planning could bring back its glory days. This seems to be the part that is so difficult to come to terms with for some in Flint. Despite the decades-long discouragement, the active search for a successor to the automobile goes on, even as the effects of auto production are still being felt in the community.

III. Museums, Sites and Auto Shows: The Postindustrial Economy

While the car culture of Michigan manifests itself in numerous ways, this analysis is largely predicated on the study of museum treatments of automotive history as a means of guiding public discussions about the past and future of the state. Three standout museums in

Flint, Dearborn and Ypsilanti, respectively, are distinct in size, scope and resources and thus provide a solid cross-section of the attempts being made to make sense of this automotive legacy. While other sites and organizations may rest formally or informally on ties to the industry, the serious academic nature of museums uniquely positions them as the standard-bearers for what we ought to know about our collective automotive past. After all, museums are traditional repositories of history and memory, and even as they attempt to broaden their appeal to attract more visitors, their assumed authority and integrity of educational purpose bear much of the burden of how people both inside and outside of the car culture come to remember its formative developments.

The permanent exhibit at the **Alfred P. Sloan Museum** in Flint, titled “Flint and the American Dream,” chronicles the growth of the city and GM seemingly side-by-side as a kind of mutually beneficial partnership, suggesting, as was the common saying in its peak years, “what’s good for General Motors is good for Flint.” With some reflection from the viewer, the exhibit seems to go on to expose the shortsightedness of such thinking, but the display provides little doubt that the company was the chief catalyst for improving and maintaining a high quality of life for its workers. By extension, we find that GM money bankrolled most of Flint’s current infrastructure, but the exhibit downplays the city’s struggles to shed its postindustrial problems - even if those problems may have come as a direct result of GM’s reduced presence in the area.

Upon entering the gallery, the visitor is greeted by an introductory video clip of assembly lines, happy emigrants and civic celebrations of newfound prosperity, outlining four interpretive themes for the exhibit: Flint as a “blue collar town” that saw its workers’ lives driven by new methods of factory production that altered patterns of works, leisure and family; a “company town” that arose out of a transportation revolution, creating thousands of jobs based on a

burgeoning consumer-oriented society; a “boom town” that saw the city’s physical landscape augmented by the new centrality of the automobile in American life; and finally as a “newcomers’ town” that saw an explosion of black and European immigrant populations in search of gainful employment outside of the bitterly stratified surroundings of the Old South and the Old World, respectively. The combination of these four ideas in the resulting exhibit comes across as buoyantly optimistic in its portrayals of Flint in its heyday, giving the impression to those not old enough to remember the city before white flight and urban renewal that it was at one time a very vibrant, pleasant place to live and work. Antique machinery, a simulated assembly line, and a number of classic Chevrolets and Buicks line the galleries, and when joined with the wistful civic memorabilia of baseball games, company picnics and department store shopping, the juxtaposition of GM’s growing market share with the pleasantries of middle-class living implies a subtle approval of company beneficence. In much the same way that veterans remember the battles of World War II vividly, former auto workers in Flint remember the days when “Generous Motors” was king and seemingly everyone was employed and able to achieve in some modest fashion the trappings of middle-class life on working-class wages, a common embodiment of the mythical American Dream in the postwar decades.

The new social history seems to have permeated the storyline to a certain degree; while the titans of industry like Ford, Rockefeller and Carnegie do merit a lot of attention in the story of the rise of America’s industrial might, there is an appreciable focus on the experience of workers themselves and the pride that came with their jobs despite the sometimes tedious, repetitive and even dangerous conditions of life on the assembly line. In recent years, a large portion of the exhibit has been converted into an interactive space focusing on the famous Sit Down Strike of 1936-37 that culminated in the recognition of the United Auto Workers union, a

mammoth achievement at a time when management dominated the workplace and dictated labor conditions without workers having the ability to barter on their own behalf. High-tech touch screens dominate the gallery, allowing patrons to access newsreel footage of the bitter month long strike, which saw the deployment of National Guard troops and several court injunctions. Visitors also have the opportunity to play mediator in deciding how the stalemate should have been settled based on historical statements. Wax figures with accompanying audio clips, coupled with archival photographs and objects help bring the time to life, and the entire presentation is surprisingly sophisticated for a regional history museum of its relatively modest size. More importantly though, the museum's willingness to show just how cruel and violent management-labor relations could be in the golden age of industrial production, a time so often wistfully portrayed as one of happiness and prosperity for all, is a major departure from popular memory, which tend to highlight the positive elements of economic expansion. Perhaps these nods to labor troubles are only derived from the city's ties to the strike, but the increased presence of labor history in the hegemonic narrative denotes a striking inclusion of the common man mentality into a museum field traditionally dominated by top-down depictions of elite-driven history.

The chronological arrangement of the museum shows a progression in the style of automobiles and changes in modes of production, but it remains conspicuously short on exploration of the reasons for GM's gradual departure from the city. It is inferred that production in Flint greatly declined in the years after 1970, but the reasons are touched on only tangentially at best. There are brief mentions of the introduction of robotics, foreign competition and environmental concerns for the changes in Flint's operations, but the main focus is instead on the various fruitless attempts by the city to attract new development, such as the aforementioned AutoWorld theme park and Water Street Pavilion entertainment complex. Flint and cities like it

that have had to deal with deindustrialization have gained a reputation in recent decades as abandoned, dangerous cities. This label has been hard to shake, but that the museum was at least willing to put a positive spin on revival efforts in Flint was encouraging. The reasons for the city's downfall, on the other hand, are extremely convoluted and debatable; are museums, which strive for objectivity, really the proper place to discuss politics and the nuanced, volatile nature of industrial capitalism? These institutions will swear that their presentations are meant to inform, not to advocate any particular viewpoint, leaving people to infer their own conclusions. However, the degree to which new conclusions are drawn is probably based on one's preexisting personal biases. The presentation at Sloan Museum may hold some sway amongst the uninitiated, but locals with automotive ties will probably not be too moved one way or the other.

Most people that view the Sloan's exhibit would undoubtedly come in with their own preconceived about deindustrialization, so a balanced approach, if bland and somewhat uninspiring, seems to be the best way to maintain the museological status quo. That is, while it is not particularly controversial to present a folksy, populist conception of what was fundamentally a radical labor event because of the heroic elements of UAW success, the failure of the same industry to sustain its dominance is much less clear cut and highly contentious. The Sloan appears to be treading middle ground, admirably serving its blue collar community by not only saluting the founders of GM (the museum is named after one of the company's pioneering executives, after all) but by also celebrating the workers that its corporate dominance was predicated on, the people today seemingly left behind by the company. Thus, the message is there, but it does not necessarily challenge the viewer to reconsider their existing views because, in reality, there is no one way to analyze Flint's troubles. Then again, therein lays one of the major roles of museums in society: arbiters of debate, which in the Sloan's case might elicit

reactions of pride, anger or ambivalence over Flint's status as a GM and labor stronghold. While one person's conception of Flint history may seem fundamentally correct, another person may disagree or even be personally offended by their interpretation of the past.

The Henry Ford, and specifically the Industrial Museum component, is one of the largest and most famous museums in the United States, benefitting from a large endowment courtesy of Ford Motor Company. While operating under the patronage of a nonprofit organization, the explicit connection between the museum and its monolithic corporate benefactor is likely not lost on those who tour it. Because the institution advertises itself as "America's greatest history *attraction*" (emphasis added) and "the one place you must visit in your lifetime," it is hard to imagine its interpretative prerogatives as purely educational. But as an organization of such massive size and scale, one can envision that the profit motive necessary to sustain such a large enterprise is no small consideration.

Despite the rich history and vast institutional resources of the Henry Ford and Greenfield Village, it is odd that more research has not been conducted into its operations and sprawling infrastructure. The Henry Ford might be compared to Colonial Williamsburg in the way that, noted by Handler and Gable, the interplay between the business and historic sides of their respective operations provide the main tension behind what the institution presents itself to be. A perceptive critic may question whether the inclusion of an IMAX theater, multiple eateries and LEGO playground merely enhance the guest experience, or obscure the educational mission of the Henry Ford. Such is the nature of modern museums, especially those large enough to position themselves as entertainment destinations akin to theme parks or shopping malls. Technology and innovation have changed the way people interact with museum displays, moving away from the object fetishism and artifact-driven veneration of traditional exhibits in favor of those that allow

further engagement with the larger themes on display, but I would ask how museums like the Henry Ford, ostensibly run as non-profit entities, ought to balance the noble aim of serious scholarly analysis of the past and being a money making venture catering to tourists. The two goals need not be mutually exclusive, but capitulation to marketing pressures has proven to be a necessary evil in order to validate the academic side of museum work that simply would not exist without paying customers. Indeed, having an institution of such size appears to be something of a double-edged sword. On one hand, the Industrial Museum has what every museum wishes it had: an enormous campus, acres of display space, and a comparatively large collections and acquisitions budget. But on the other, such trappings seemingly carry a responsibility to be more audacious in its curatorial decisions, which could be much more critically grounded. Unlike the Sloan, which displays a relatively succinct storyline because of its limited institutional resources, the Henry Ford, while impressive in terms of sheer scope and number of unique artifacts, does a somewhat disappointing job of articulating a cogent account of automotive history, especially given its creator's monumental role in that history's development.

While the Industrial Museum covers a vast array of technologies, my primary concern is its sprawling automotive gallery, "The Automobile in American Life." It is set up as a maze of sorts, with visitors travelling down a simulated "road" viewing an eclectic array of vehicles categorized by age, body type, purpose or brand. Interspersed with the cars themselves were a number of small display cases tracing a rudimentary evolution of the industry, from Henry Ford's original 1896 Quadricycle through the space-age concept prototypes presumed of the near future. The impressive range of vehicles certainly ranks high on spectacle, but similar to the criticisms leveled against the museum's displays covering other categories of artifacts such as furniture or farm implements, their presentation of seemingly hundreds of cars presents a sensory

overload. Instead of focusing on each car's individual symbolism of the greater trends of the industry, each vehicle commonly had only a small plaque showing only its most superficial details like year, make, model and horsepower. There was a strong chronology to the arrangement of the cars, and periodic supplemental information on the industry's growth highlights the decline of independent companies leading to the consolidation of the Big Three; however, the palpable focus was on breadth rather than depth in telling the automotive story. Put another way, the Henry Ford displayed so many cars that they seemingly used ten where one would do. In order to digest the entirety of the exhibit one must essentially ignore a large number of the cars on display, and after seeing so many cars of similar style the artifacts tend to become forgettable, even tedious, obscuring the engagement with their innate historical qualities that the museum intends to foster.

The lack of a real back story behind the exhibit was the most troubling element. The cars lack any sort of thematic cohesion, giving the look and feel of an eccentric "cabinet of curiosity" of a wealthy collector (which in fact it is, like many of the exhibits in the Industrial Museum).³¹ Many of the cars just seemed to be on display for their own sake, their innately historic/antique designs being their only really remarkable qualities. Some were of course manufactured by Ford Motor Company, but the others that were made by its American competitors were undoubtedly chosen to balance the presentation away from an obvious bias. However, any meaningful references to the processes or people that built the cars were conspicuously absent. Given that Ford is credited with implementing the modern assembly line and for pioneering a high manufacturing wage via "five-dollar day", it is interesting that these facts either lay buried in fine print in the exhibit that I could not find or are simply glossed over. The concept of new history from the bottom-up might posit that Ford's fortune was made on the backs of many thousands of

workers, and well paid as they may have been in those days, it also bears mentioning that Ford's beneficent wage was tied to his wishes to stifle the unionization of his factories. To ignore the relationship between products and people makes the exhibit feel superficial at best. It only asks the visitor to passively take in the novelty of these now-obsolete models without considering the countless factors that went into making such vehicles or to truly fathom just how pervasive the automobile has come to be in daily life, ironic given the exhibit's title and especially given the that so many of the people in the greater Dearborn/Detroit area have some past connection to its production.

The last and smallest venue of the three, the **Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Center** was unique amongst the museums I visited as the space itself was seemingly part of the historical fabric of its displays. It hails itself as the "World's Last Hudson Dealership," referring to the Hudson marque automobile that was last produced in 1957, and maintains much of its classic look and feel. Its cars were simply parked in rows throughout the building, and if not for memorabilia on the walls, it would appear to be a 1950s car showroom (which in fact it once was). The center's curator and owner Jack Miller began his career at the building in the 1940s when it was his father's dealership. He has maintained a collection of Hudson cars ever since, as well as a wide variety of memorabilia and other models that had ties to Ypsilanti, many having been built at the famed Willow Run Assembly plant. There were requisite Ford and GM products on display, but the primary focus was on the independent and long extinct companies of the early to mid 20th century, like Tucker, Hudson and Nash. The qualities of the Center place it in the realm of museums in a very loose sense; some of its displays were only vaguely tied to any central theme, such as one case containing antique auto parts, keychains and buttons with only a sparse accompanying label that unhelpfully denoted "various automotive items." There was no

chronological narrative or pervasive theme present other than implied ties to manufacture in Ypsilanti, thus for this narrative to have any meaning a visitor must have some background familiarity with the town and its relations with the auto industry in the past.

In these regards, I felt as though the designation of itself as an “Automotive Heritage Center” co-opted the pretensions of a museum while maintaining some of the eccentricity and lack of cohesion found in early “cabinets of curiosity.” Given its position as a local, independent organ of automotive history grounded in more than half a century of personal experience and reflection, it effectively demonstrates the blurring of boundaries between the academic expertise assumed of museums and the rise of popular knowledge that fills the void in lieu of professional assistance. Many smaller institutions operate on an almost exclusively volunteer basis and as a passion of those involved, and Miller’s shop/museum in Ypsilanti seems to fit this trend. They are not necessarily grounded in the scholarly research of large museums, but do present their own displays in a similarly authoritative manner. It raises several basic but difficult questions: who really “owns” history, and who is able to authoritatively interpret it? From personal experience, museums large and small, with varying resources available to them, interpret common themes in equally variable ways. Broadly speaking, I believe the primary goal of a museum is to educate, and by association entertain, inspire or inform. If what museums want visitors to know matches up with what they ultimately get out of their presentations, regardless of size, these differences in presentation are not important so long as the educational mission is faithfully imparted and visitors leave with a renewed sense of perspective.

Rather than call it a museum in the traditional sense, Ypsilanti seemed to be more an extension of the aforementioned “car culture” way of life so prevalent in Michigan outside of a singular institution but made manifest in a permanent facility. Nearly every museum relies on

external sources for artifacts and information to support their exhibits; an important feature of all three museums I visited is that a large percentage of cars on display were at first or are still collectors' pieces, purchased or on loan from automotive enthusiasts throughout the country. Dedicated collectors of antique automobiles can be found nearly everywhere, often exhibiting their cars at local and regional car shows and participating in clubs dedicated to their particular car. The Buick Club of America chapter based in Flint, for example, styles itself as every bit an authority of historic detail and specifications of classic Buicks as any museum, and in fact serves as a source of information on which museums base their own collections. That an amateur organization like this can assist and inform professional institutions of historical scholarship certainly shows that museums hardly exist in a vacuum, and are in fact dynamically involved with other groups sharing a common focus. These networks and shows create a matrix of historical research, display and enthusiasm that rivals that of academics and museum professionals; many museums, as small as Ypsilanti and as large as the Henry Ford, often rely on owners' background knowledge of their vehicles and borrow them for their own exhibits.

Not coincidentally, each of my three subjects also serves as de facto host of a technically independent but undeniably connected auto show on or near their campuses in the summer months, an interesting intersection between professional and amateur historians of classic automobiles that further underscores the seemingly omnipresent connections of Michigan to an automotive past. The "sense of history" that connects historians and citizens to a place and its unique circumstances is certainly alive and well in southeast Michigan, with the museums, shows, and clubs devoted to automotive culture all a direct result of the intimate engagement of people with a fascinating and bittersweet history of the cars and how they have symbolically augmented so many personal narratives.³² The ways which people connect themselves with this

common automotive past arise from this sense of place, an attachment to particularities of Michigan and its lifeblood industry that are justificatory, celebratory and self-preserving of a proud legacy, speak to the reasons why history or heritage continue to matter. That is to say, car buffs of this state and region make the place and its history matter because it is personally meaningful and often a formative part of their individual identities.

While each museum I visited had its own interpretive themes and style of presentation, as a general frame of reference, each of them seemed to follow a basic “arc of progress” in their treatment of the auto industry: small, agrarian towns grow exponentially due to industrialization; prosperity peaks; deindustrialization saps the cities’ former economic and social vitality with a painful shift to a service-based economy. Michael Wallace takes issue with such progressions as implied by the terms ‘industrialization’ and ‘deindustrialization’ for connoting of a kind of stages-of-development model that oversimplifies or completely ignores many complex factors. A selective interpretation of the things that have led to Michigan’s current status as the heart of the Rust Belt can portray deindustrialization as an unavoidable, inherent consequence of the massive industrial buildup of the early 20th century without regard for human agency or the external factors of accelerating globalization.³³ Whether or not such labels are explicitly used within the museums I visited, the chief aim of their displays seemed benign enough: to show evolution over time and how the industry, its products and its practices have changed life for the people who worked for them and those who bought their cars. Each puts its own level of emphasis on such themes, but by virtue of even showing locally made antique cars in southeast Michigan the downfall of the auto industry becomes an inescapable subject. Because they mainly speak to a local constituency that has been disaffected by the loss of its manufacturing base, their presentations of what are often contentious memories of the loss of factories and jobs must

straddle the line between clinging too much to a “good old days” mentality of bygone growth, prosperity and innovation and confronting the realities of deindustrialization that are all too real to many of their patrons.

The three institutions also shared another common thread despite their varying sizes and resources; each proclaimed itself as a hub in the MotorCities National Heritage Area, a designation uniquely bestowed upon southeast Michigan by Congress in 1998 in recognition of its historic and pervasive ties to automotive manufacturing. In a sense, the MotorCities initiative, administered by the National Park Service, serves primarily as a legitimizing agent for auto history, with its mission “focused on raising awareness and understanding about the impact of the automobile on this region with emphasis on increasing tourism, expanding education and encouraging revitalization.”³⁴ The Heritage Area’s official website provides a number of historically salient points that justifies its existence by tying automotive production to larger social themes. Amongst other things, Michigan is credited with inventing many of the developments discussed throughout this paper: the assembly line, mass production and vertically integrated vehicle manufacturing; the middle class, the modern labor movement, and numerous wage, benefit and workplace safety advancements, influenced the Civil Rights movements, inspired artists and designers, and many more. The laundry list of grand accomplishments helps the initiative to justify its own existence and importance. It is telling, however, when Michigan is described as the “Silicon Valley of the early 20th century,” as the direct comparison between the two seems highly symbolic of the two greatest examples of economic progression: the change from a manufacturing to knowledge based service economy. In some respects, the implications of such a statement presents Michigan’s automotive history as just that, history, with high-tech firms filling the role of the automobile as the catalyst for innovation in the modern economic

system. The fact that this “heritage” has been supplanted and lacks a true successor in Michigan presents a problem to MotorCities despite its noble intentions of commemoration and tribute.

The explicit relationship between history and tourism makes museum treatments of the overarching “MotorCities story” that much more important, especially if it is to style itself as a means of reversing Michigan’s economic fortunes. The aforementioned museums represent the core of the educational initiatives associated with this Heritage Area, and in being associated with it each did present an addendum to its own exhibits about the auto industry of Michigan as a whole, outside of its particular community. The car factories of this state are widely known to have been converted to wartime production of weaponry and military vehicles during World War II, a brazenly patriotic and celebratory element of the industry’s contributions termed in the Heritage Area literature as the ‘Arsenal of Democracy.’ This is just one example of the explicit association often made between America’s international dominance and prosperity and the automotive industry. Perhaps more than any other purchase a person can make in this country, buying an American automobile imbues a strong sense of pride and patriotism for many people as a selling point just as much as for their quality, especially in the face of GM’s decline and as Japanese carmakers like Toyota and Honda have steadily increased their share of the American market in recent decades. As such, the saga of the auto industry in America and especially in Michigan, its long-established epicenter, is still ongoing and museums will have to continue to adapt their interpretations of a sometimes proud, sometimes tragic but always important industry that has shaped life in this state as we know it today, for better or for worse.

History museums, as publicly accessible organs for disseminating the history of given places or subjects, must be especially sensitive to providing a realistic and engaging portrait of the past that does more than just promote passive acquiescence to a set of authoritatively

presented facts. While the word *history* by itself connotes a static, unchanging past that has come and gone, history is only dead if it is presented as such and its dynamic causal relationship to the present is ignored. Because it is easy to get caught up in the nostalgia of boomtown prominence, new approaches to old events have a responsibility to at least present the more contemporary problems that have emerged from them, not just as isolated happenings. The museums and sites explored here have to some extent attempted to bridge this gap, and as a result have the task to not only present accurate representations of history but to present them as a tool engagement with and interpretation of today's world. ◇

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