

Author recounts glory days of Ford Motor in Minnesota

NEAL ST. ANTHONY



BRIAN MCMAHON Photos from the 1960s of the former Midway Ford complex on University Avenue in St. Paul.



Brian McMahon, author of “The Ford Century in Minnesota.”

Brian McMahon, an architect and commercial developer from Brooklyn, N.Y., moved his family to the Twin Cities more than 30 years ago amid a real estate recession and for a change of scenery.

McMahon, 71, the retired executive director of St. Paul economic-development organization University UNITED, got involved with a lot of urban-renewal projects along one of St. Paul’s

main commercial arteries. Also a writer and historian, he also developed an interest in the Ford Motor Co.'s Minnesota roots.

It grew from a tour of the since-shuttered Ford plant in St. Paul's Highland Park neighborhood in 1998.

"It was led by Al McGregor, a retired Ford worker who volunteered to show people what he and the other workers did for 30 years or more," McMahon said. "And they were proud of their contribution."

McMahon has written "The Ford Century in Minnesota," published by University of Minnesota Press. It's a comprehensive, interesting chronicle of Ford's history in Minnesota, particularly in St. Paul.

McMahon, through the memories of 40-plus retirees, details the working experiences of Ford workers, first at the 1913-vintage Minneapolis plant; today the renovated "Ford Center" near Target Field.

The Twin Cities Assembly Plant in St. Paul opened in 1926 with the Model T, made for another 19 years. It closed in 2011, after years of threats, labor unrest and shrinkage, when Dallas Theis, a 53-year plant employee, drove the last of the Ford Ranger small trucks out the door.

Manufacturing was preceded in Minnesota by retail.

In 1903, Stephen Ten Voorde signed a contract to sell "Fordmobiles" at his bicycle shop in St. Cloud. Four generations later, the Ten Voorde family still operates what is now the oldest Ford dealership in the world.

However, St. Paul's University Avenue, which also once housed an early Ford manufacturing plant, was also Ford's "Mainstreet" sales hub for years. By the mid-1920s, there were three Ford dealerships on University.

Henry Ford was a production genius who also paid manufacturing workers enough to buy a car, part of his growth plan. But he could be rough and mercurial in dealing with suppliers, dealers and workers. Many dealers did not survive his "audacious schemes," including dumping all his inventory and parts on strapped dealers in the 1920s to help Ford buy out equity partners in Detroit.

In researching the original University Avenue dealers, McMahon found that one, M.J. Osborn, a dealer at 117 University, a building that still stands, got out of the business rather than put up with Ford's machinations. Osborn invested in another fledgling business that became St. Paul's globe-spanning Ecolab.

"Henry Ford was extremely harsh with dealers," McMahon said last week. "He wanted a dealership on every corner so they would be cutthroat ... and help keep prices down. He begrudged the dealers."

Several Ford dealerships on University prospered through the 1970s, but eventually folded or moved to the suburbs, including Midway and Saxon.

Henry Ford got tough with workers after the Great Depression.

“He opposed labor unions and it was a brutal work environment,” McMahon said. “He was the last of the Big Three automakers to sign with the United Auto Workers. He wouldn’t have done it without an ultimatum from President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, by 1941. FDR threatened to [nationalize Ford]. Ford was needed to produce [trucks and tanks] for World War II. GM and Chrysler were already unionized.”

At the beginning of the Ford Century, it was rugged individualist Henry Ford.

By the end, it was a proud but declining workforce that was credited with making a quality product, the Ranger, that fell victim to globalization, the taste for bigger trucks, and being too far north of Ford’s consolidating supply chain.

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