

Saving the Ford plant's history

A conversation with Brian McMahon, St. Paul historian and author.

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Local historian Brian McMahon has released an e-book about the Ford assembly plant in St. Paul. The plant is now being demolished.

The demolition of St. Paul's Ford assembly plant has officially begun. Shuttered in 2011, the 88-year-old manufacturing facility produced Model T's and A's, Galaxie LTDs and Ranger trucks, not to mention armored cars, trucks and tractors during World War II.

For the past 20 years, the history of Ford in Minnesota has been assiduously chronicled by local historian Brian McMahon, who is writing a book for the University of Minnesota Press, expected to be released next year. In the

interim, the Minnesota Historical Society has released a 20-page e-book by McMahon that nicely crystallizes the plant's extraordinary story.

Q: How did you get interested in the Ford plant?

A: I'm a trained architectural historian, and I've long been interested in [Ford plant architect] Albert Kahn's work. So when I came to the Twin Cities 20 years ago, I arranged a tour of the production process, and was mesmerized.

Q: So a book seems a natural extension of your interest.

A: Yes — I have so much incredible material, it really should be put in the public realm. When I started, there was no serious speculation that the plant would shut down, so it wasn't motivated as a memorial to the plant. I did an oral history in the late 1990s of retired autoworkers, both union and management folks who had long, long histories with the plant, including some dating back to 1929. I have over 1,000 pages transcribed; I guess I wanted to share it, plus ephemera and objects, and over 1,000 photos.

Q: Why was the site along the bluffs of the Mississippi River so attractive to Henry Ford back in the early 20th century?

A: Ford needed a large site that could accommodate a single-story building. This was the lesson he learned when he pioneered the assembly line that changed the way cars were made. The Minneapolis plant [at 5th Street near what is now Target Field] was 10 stories and was functionally obsolete even before it was finished. Beyond that, he felt he needed a place for workers to park their cars — he was talking about hiring 18,000 workers at the time — which never came to be. Then, one of the key reasons [St. Paul won out] was the access to hydropower from the hydroelectric power plant on the Mississippi River. Ford was very focused on being energy-independent and not at the beck and call of the utility and coal companies and the railroads. It was paramount.

Q: What has the plant meant to St. Paul's economy?

A: It was a huge, monumental step in St. Paul staking its claim as a manufacturing city. Up until that point, Minneapolis was the manufacturing center of the region. It was a tremendous economic shot in the arm, introduced in what was then an undeveloped part of town. [In the late 1970s] about 1,800 people worked there on average.

Q: What lessons can be learned from the Ford plant's history in St. Paul?

A: Ford received the permit for the hydro dam [along the Mississippi] at a time when corporate welfare was fairly unusual. The dam was built at public expense ... and it was basically turned over to a private company. That was a very important precedent. Over the last 50 years, there has been intense competition around the country for these large plum plants, with governments offering incentives.

The training center [opened at the plant in 1999] was also a genuine collaboration between the state, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, the United Auto Workers and Ford. It was based on a shared interest in keeping the plant in St. Paul when rumors abounded that its days were numbered. A genuine partnership of the highest sort.

Q: What was the downfall of the plant?

A: We got the plant because, at the time, Ford wanted production near his customers, and we were a huge market for automobiles, plus there was the proximity of the railroad to ship cars. Once trucking became more prevalent and the nation's freeway system developed, that became more important determinants of where plants would go. [Auto] plants and their suppliers moved toward the middle of the country, generally lower Michigan to Alabama. It created a cluster effect. That was really the end of it.

Q: What do you think is the best use for the site?

A: I think it's very important to remember the activities that took place on the site. We need to try to create a meaningful legacy project to educate and inspire people about the plant. My preference would be to save part of the building, the training center and original building.

The site was first zoned residential because it was such an attractive and beautiful site, and clearly it still is. So it could be residential, maybe a mix of uses. One of the biggest lessons here is how the industrial sector in our economy has been dismantled. I'd like to see industrial there, but it would be very hard to do.