Inside the Dodge Main plant: 1910 to 1981

by A.E. Schweitzer, retired Facilities Engineering Manager.
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Walter P. Chrysler Club NewsThe Dodge Main Plant was the headquarters for Dodge Brothers and the Dodge Division of Chrysler Corporation. The complex included the Winfield Foundry, which cast camshafts, and the Detroit Forge Plant, which made coil springs, crankshafts, and other items. Because they had other factories, the Hamtramck factory was called the *Main* Plant.

The facility was an excellent place to work compared with many other auto plants. Many top managers and supervisors working there in 1955 had been there for their entire careers, some going back to the Dodge Brothers Company. Because of their extreme loyalty and feelings of pride, the work attitude throughout the plant was teamwork and cooperation.

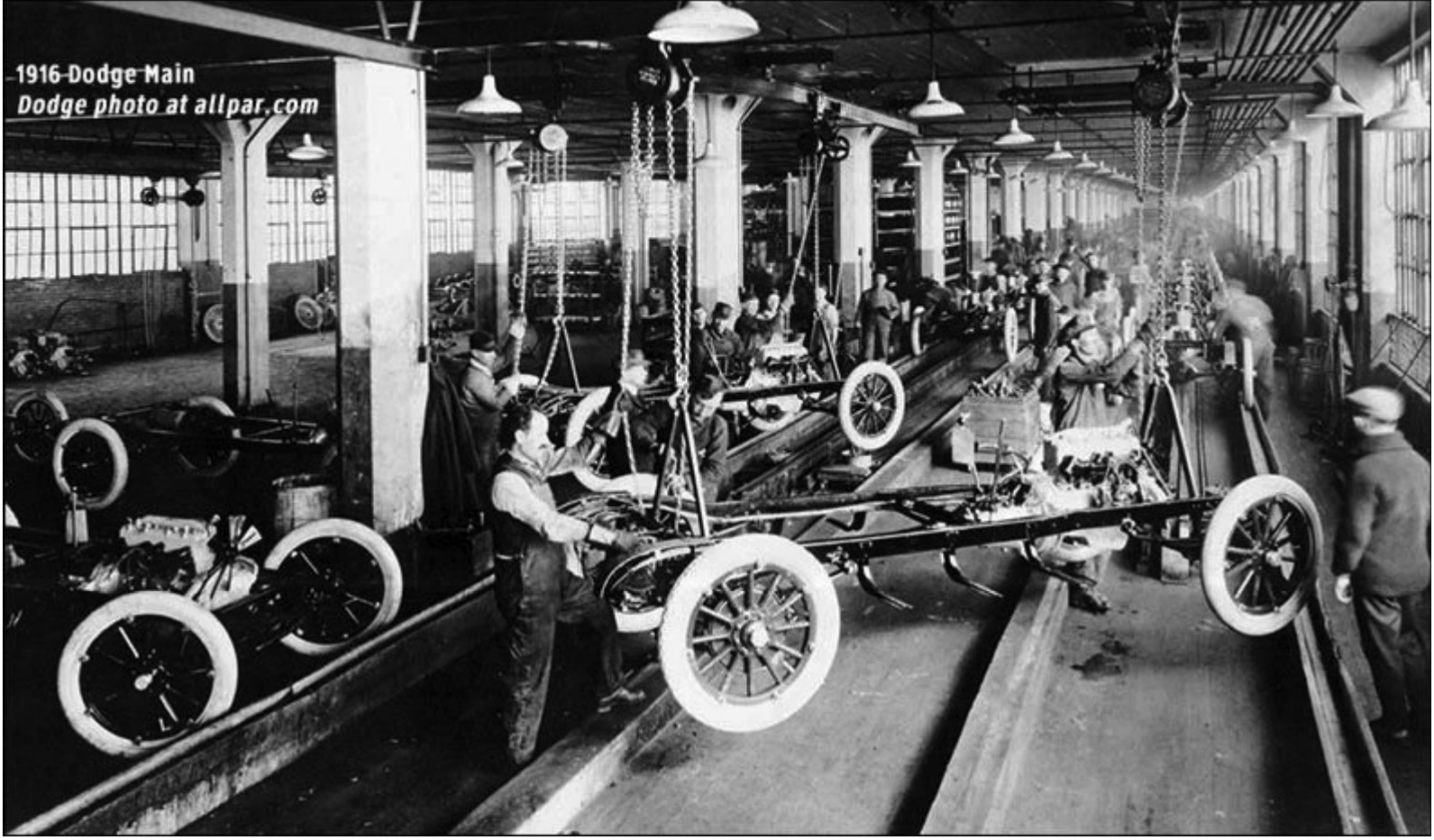
It occupied around 67 acres on the edge of the city of Hamtramck, Michigan, which is completely surrounded by the city of Detroit; a small portion was in Detroit itself. Plant 4, on Conant Avenue in Detroit, was separated only from the main plant structures by a railroad right-of-way, which was also the boundary line between the two cities.

Plant 4 and the main complex were connected by an underground tunnel running under the railroad, so trucks could enter the Conant gate and travel to the main plant's receiving dock. That dock had a large freight elevator which lifted received stamped components to the upper floors for "body-in-white" assembly.

Truck access was also on the opposite side, from Joseph Campau Avenue. Many rail sidings also led into the plant for boxcars with stampings, assemblies, tires from Goodyear, wheels from Budd, drums of paint from Ditzler, sealers, cements, glass, and even coke to feed the boilers in the gigantic powerhouse.

Joseph Campau Avenue also provided the exit for the finished cars, most of which were loaded on trucks. Some were driven to waiting freighters on the nearby Detroit River, for shipment to ports around the Great Lakes.

A customer could take delivery of his new Dodge at the plant. Many new Dodge purchasers planned their summer vacations to include a visit to the Dodge plant for a tour and then take delivery of and drive home in their new Dodge.



Many of the individual buildings in the Dodge complex were designed by the renowned Detroit architect Albert Kahn. With the ever-increasing need for a sturdy structure with high floor loading capacities to serve the rapidly growing Detroit automobile industry, Kahn developed the reinforced concrete structure. Not only was heavier floor loading possible, but the weight of the equipment that hung from the ceilings could be increased. Steel channel inserts were cast directly into the concrete ceilings, providing a secure means of hanging equipment.

The typical building had concrete columns spaced on 24-foot centers with ceiling heights of 13 feet. The columns and ceiling heights limited the routing of delivery conveyors throughout the buildings, but with innovative conveyor design, the method generally worked well.

Most of the buildings in the complex were directly related to building cars, with many smaller structures to house the supporting departments.

One was the five-story maintenance building, which provided shops for the plant carpenters, pipefitters, electricians, millwrights, and the sheet metal workers, as well as the crane and elevator maintenance department. There was even a forge shop where overhead conveyor vertical curves could be forged and fabricated. Only during a major model change over, when much work would be required in a short period of time, was it necessary to bring outside contractors into the plant.

The manufacturing buildings, which had been built at different times as the need for space grew, were connected by building extensions or bridges. It was possible to walk from the 8th floor of the Body Building on the north side of the complex to the end of the final line on the south side on the second floor, without ever leaving the plant.

Pete Hagenbuch said: “Dodge Main was where all the Dodges came from, until they moved to Lynch Road. It was fun to try to follow the line across six floors. This isn't factual, but it’s a for-instance — the line started out on floor two, it went up to four and down to one. It spent a little time on one, went up to six — it was crazy. It was like they put in different parts of the line as things came up. ... a couple of guys in the Institute went down one day and tried to spend the whole day following the line, and they got so tired, that they quit at lunchtime and they hadn’t gotten there yet.”

Most steel stampings used in the 1955 Dodges were stamped at Dodge Main in the Pressed Steel Building and on the first floor of the Body Building. Some, including roof panels and major underbody stampings, were supplied by other Chrysler facilities, or by Briggs Manufacturing or the Budd Corporation. Door assemblies were received ready to hang from Budd.

All sheet metal components from suppliers were received “in white,” unprimed or painted, protected only by the drawing compound remaining after the stamping operation.

The upper floors of the Body and Pressed Steel Buildings were devoted to body assembly, while the lower floors (with greater load capacities), especially the first floors with unlimited loading capacities, were devoted to major stamping and heavy manufacturing.

Body-in-white assembly started on the 8th floor of the Body Building, where body "bucks" on oval floor conveyors held the floor pan assemblies, cowls, side quarters with wheelhouses, door frames and roof panels all clamped together in fixtures for both spot and gas welding. Major stampings were carried to the upper floors from the press rooms and rail docks via overhead conveyors running through conveyor housings located on the outside walls of the building.

Smaller stampings were brought to various floors from the press areas or receiving, via elevators in skid boxes. Wheelhouse, floor pan and other sub-assemblies were fabricated off-line, near by. The assembled bodies were then transferred to body finish trucks which were riding on the metal finishing conveyor lines where exposed joints were solder filled and metal finishing was performed. After these operations, final body inspection and repair before painting was performed.

Upon receipt of the assembled bodies-in-white from the body shop, the first paint shop operation consisted of a thorough washing followed by "Bonderizing," a chemical process that etched the metal, preparing the surface for the paint operations that would follow. During this operation, the body was thoroughly sprayed with hot “Bonderite” solution under extreme pressure, flushed clean, and force dried in an oven.

building 1955 Dodges at the dodge main plant

After drying, the body was primed, wet sanded, and primed again prior to the hand application of final enamel. Thorough wet sanding and tacking was done after each paint operation before final enamel.

The three tone paint options in 1955 caused some inefficiency, as bodies had to be run through final enamel spray and bake operations several times, depending on whether the job was a monotone, two tone, or three tone. In the multi-color jobs, the smallest painted area was done first then masked and the second and/or third coat applied in a similar manner to minimize masking labor and materials. The finish-painted bodies, still on paint trucks, were held in a body bank on the 4th floor of the paint shop, from which they were scheduled into the trim shop, lifted by one of two electric hoists to feed the two trim lines that began on the 5th floor of Assembly Building 2.

Most of the body trim and related trim sub assembly operations were performed in Assembly Building No.2, a six story building 1,000 feet long and 100 feet wide. The sixth floor was devoted to body cloth and vinyl roll goods and leather hide storage, table and die cutting facilities, flat interior trim work manufacturing and front seat cushion and back sewing and assembly. The fifth, fourth and nearly one half of the third floors were devoted to the main body trim lines, occupied by two parallel floor type assembly conveyors running the full lengths of the building for a total length of over 2,500 feet each conveyor. Three synchronized DC powered variable-speed drives powered each line.

The bodies were carried on trim trucks made of angle iron and steel tubing. Four casters supported the truck, the two on the left side were guided by an open channel track, the other two on the right riding free on a six inch channel, flanges down. A "pusher" plate was welded to the center section of the truck which was engaged by a "pusher dog" attached to the six inch pitch floor chain, on sixteen foot centers, guided by double angles and supported by bronze replaceable rider plates. Maximum production line speed of each conveyor was 16 feet/minute, providing a maximum capacity of sixty bodies per hour for each line, or 120 bodies per hour for the two lines. The two chassis assembly and final assembly lines had the same capacities. It was rarely necessary to run either conveyor system at the maximum potential speed to meet the prevailing production schedule.

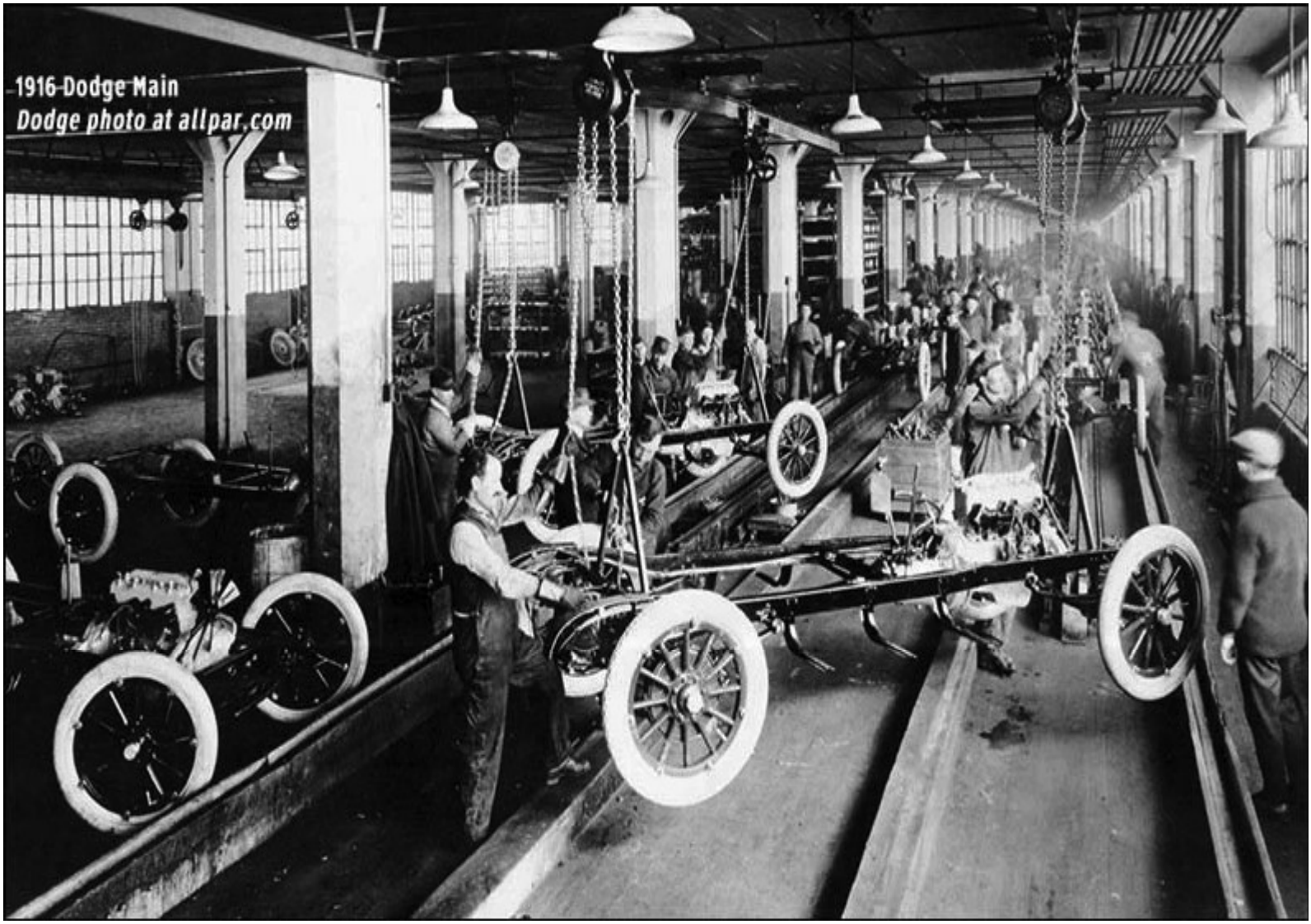
The other half of the third floor, after body trim, was a storage bank of finished bodies between trim and final, and the convertible top sewing and the top-to-body assembly area. At the west end of the floor were the instrument panel, armrest and visor assembly units, and the beginning of the final assembly line.

Fully trimmed bodies, still lacking front fenders and hoods and still on their trim trucks, were scheduled from the body bank onto the final assembly lines. Bodies on trucks were manually removed from the bank, turned 90 degrees, and pushed onto the final line, which started in a bridge connecting assembly Building Two with Assembly Building One, which had all final-related sub-assembly operations.

First, workers put a front end fixture on the front of the trim truck to locate and support the radiator yoke, stamped and painted grill components, and the inner fender panels and fenders. This was required to support the front-end sheet metal, prior to body drop.

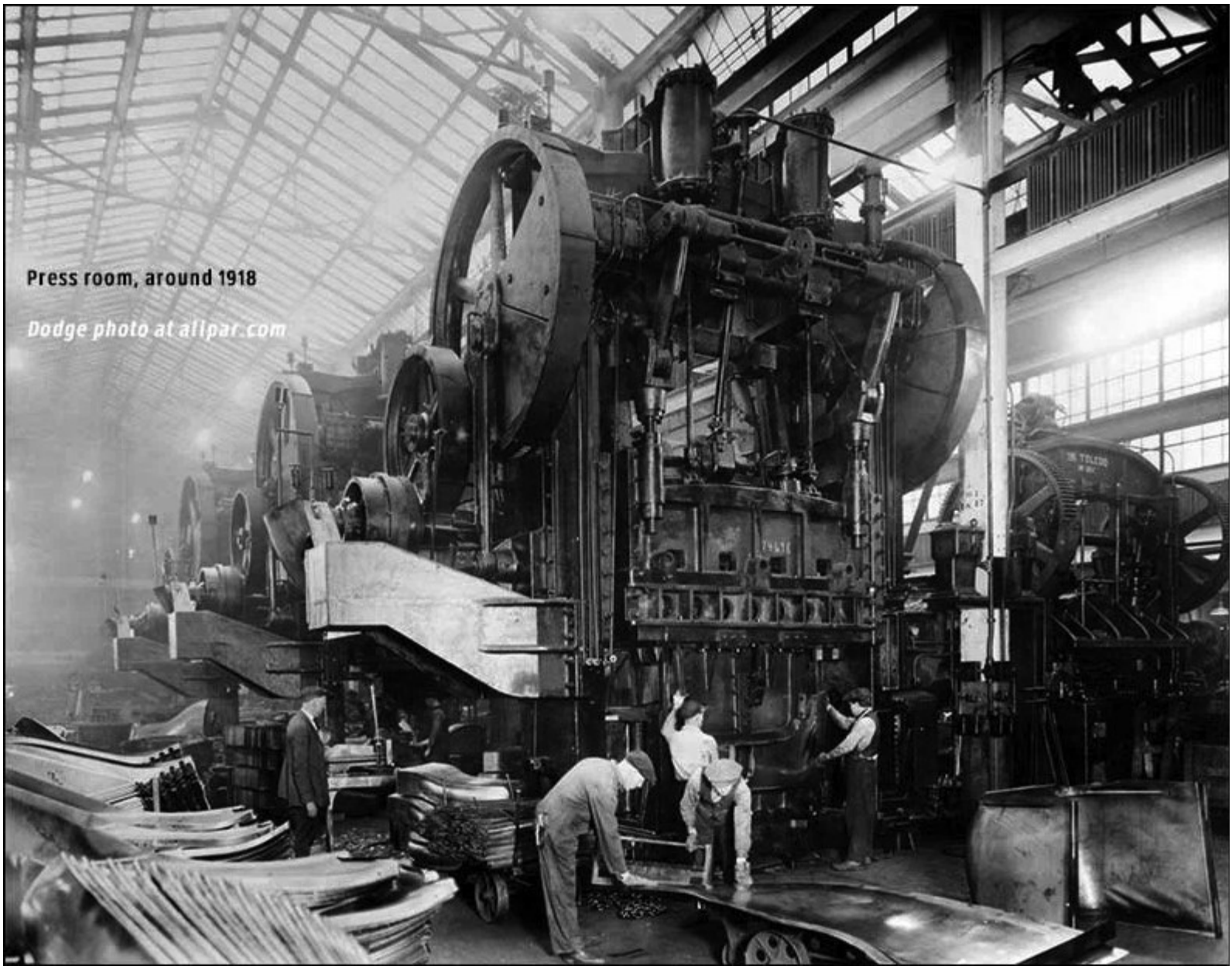
body drop at the dodge main plantWhile the body assembly operations, now with the front-end attached, were nearing an end on the third floor body final line, the chassis were being assembled on the second floor in Main Building 2, several hundred feet away. The chassis were being assembled upside down, making front and rear spring/axle sub-assemblies much easier to assemble to the frame, as well as easing the installation of brake and fuel lines and exhaust systems. The frame, already painted by the supplier, now received another coat of chassis paint to include the added components. Pre-assembled wheels and tires were added.

The assembled chassis were transferred to the last leg of the final line, via an overhead hoist/turn-over fixture that placed the completed chassis on the flat top final line. The chassis were now right side up, riding on their own wheels, to receive their engines and other items, on their journey to the “body drop.”



Now, the body was removed from the trim truck (via hoist) on the third floor and lowered to the finished chassis, moving at the same speed on the second floor directly below. After the body drop to the chassis, body bolts were installed and torqued, gas tanks connected and filled with one gallon of gas. Radiator hoses were installed, radiators filled, final under-hood wiring connected, batteries installed, the hood bolted on its hinges and the car started and driven off the line to a roll-test. This was to me the most gratifying part of the assembly; to see and hear the car start and be driven from the line, finally under its own power.

The Dodge complex had a complete, self-contained foundry that cast all engine blocks, both six cylinder and eight cylinder, clutch housings, standard transmission cases, water pump housings, manifolds, and other cast iron items. Chips and turnings from the machine shops, after gravity and centrifugal removal of cutting fluids and coolants, were conveyed back to the foundry furnace charging areas and reused as a portion of the raw materials used to charge the furnaces.

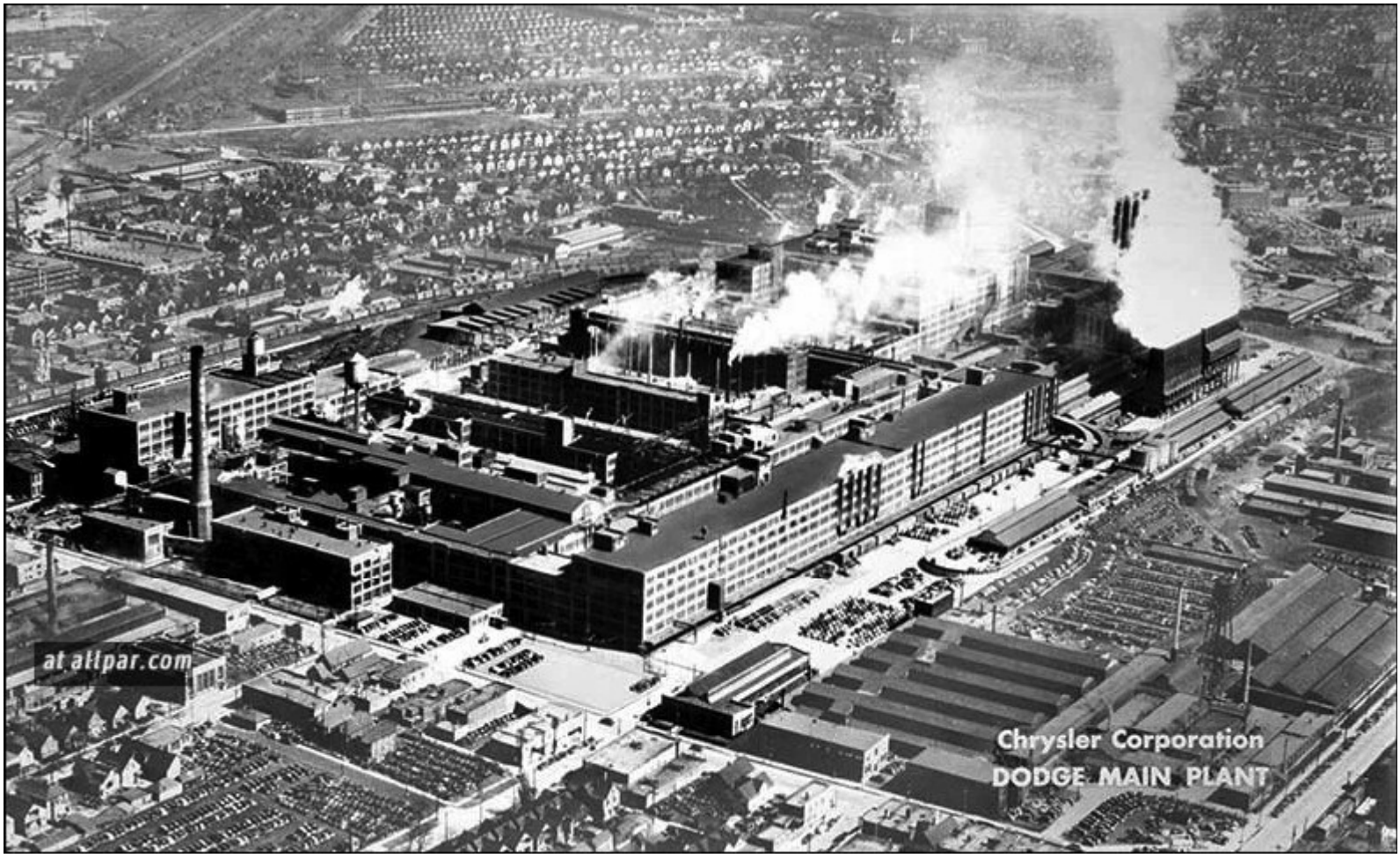


There was a sand storage and handling facility as well as mullers for blending the sand mixtures used for making the casting cores. There was heat treat department, which treated oil pump plates, standard transmission gears, rocker shafts for the V8s, and fasteners and standard transmission shafts. A plating department plated door strikers, latch items, bolts, studs, and other fasteners. State-of-the-art induction hardeners were used for V8 rocker arms and liquid nitrogen-chilled valve seat inserts installed in the V8 heads. A complete fleet of electric, propane, and gasoline fork trucks was maintained, with an exceptional fork truck battery charging and maintenance area.

assembling a 1962 Dodge Lancer

The powerhouse generated all electrical power used in the plant, as well as steam for all processing operations and heating. The system generated 110-volt single-phase power, as well as 220V and 440V three phase, using two steam turbine-driven generators needed for operating machinery and most conveyor drives. 180 "Hi-Cycle" and 360 "Super-Cycle" AC was generated for the hundreds of small hand tools. Power feed tracks hanging from the ceiling delivered power and physical support for the tools. DC was also generated for hoists, elevators, and most of the main line conveyor drives.

New engines being run-in during hot testing were used as DC generators, the power from them used in the plant. There were eight coal-fired boilers, using automatic stokers. A large shaker shook the full open hopper cars in the winter to dislodge frozen coal.



Frames were made by Midland Steel Products, about one half mile away, and shipped via flatbed trucks to an overhead conveyor beginning outside. A small bank of frames was kept on hand to offer variety and permit proper scheduling of different frames. The frames were shipped to Dodge painted black. Some of the numbers on the frames were from Midland, and not stamped on by Dodge.

Hamtramck, 1920s Dodge photo. Dodge Main in the foreground, Lynch Road property above it; plant seen at top of photo became Detroit Axle. (at allpar.com via Bill Watson)

Paints and thinners were received in 55 gallon drums, tanker trucks, or rail cars, and stored in a fire-protected environment. There were several paint mix facilities in the plant, one large facility for body paint and one smaller area for the "small parts" paint department. The small parts paint department was used primarily for front fenders and hoods, along with stone shields, front end and grill components, interior garnish moldings, rear speaker grills, instrument panels, and any other small items.

Mixed paint was pumped via a circulating system to the spray booths. Each color had its own circulating pipeline. The paint was constantly circulated to insure color uniformity and to prevent any build-up or congealing in the lines. Monitoring of color match between the two mix areas was an on-going quality control function. As one system delivered to the body paint area, the other to the front end paint area. Color match was absolutely essential.

Die cast items including stainless moldings, name badges, and such, were made by suppliers, along with seat springs, pre-painted black enamel and ready for soft trim. Carpets and seat pads were purchased precut to size.

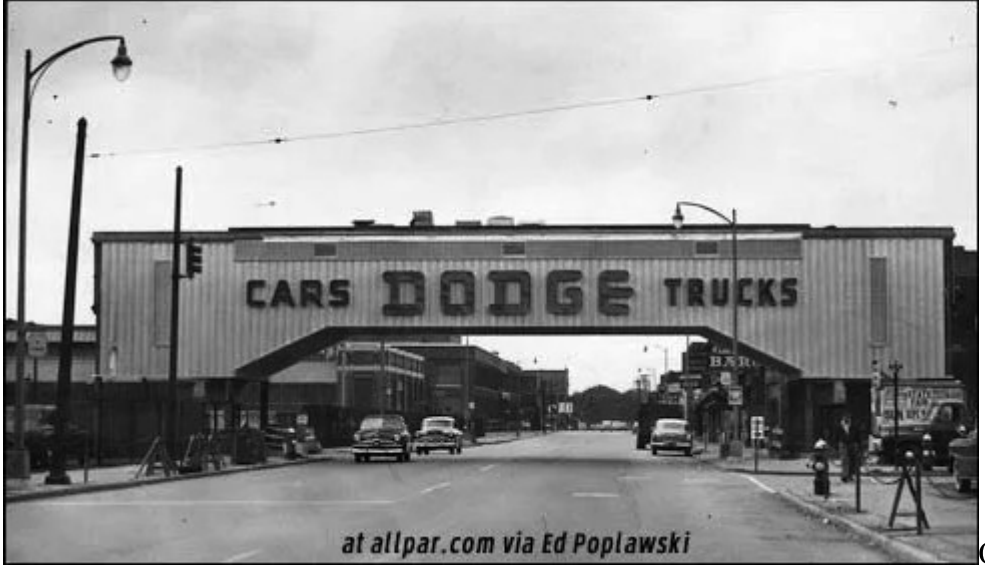
There was an executive dining room, and a cafeteria for office and plant employees that was complete with all preparation facilities; a smaller facility in Plant 4 prepared hot food for distribution to the factory areas via small train-trucks. Few vending machines were available at the time and there were only several scattered gum and candy machines around the huge facility.

The Dodge facility also had a complete, well equipped medical facility with doctors and nurses on duty at all times, an efficient plant protection/security department, and a complete fire fighting department with direct contact with the local Hamtramck Fire Department.

Greg Kowalski's talk about Dodge Main in Hamtramck

Greg Kowalski was chair of the Hamtramck Historical Commission. He spoke at Chrysler Museum in 2010:

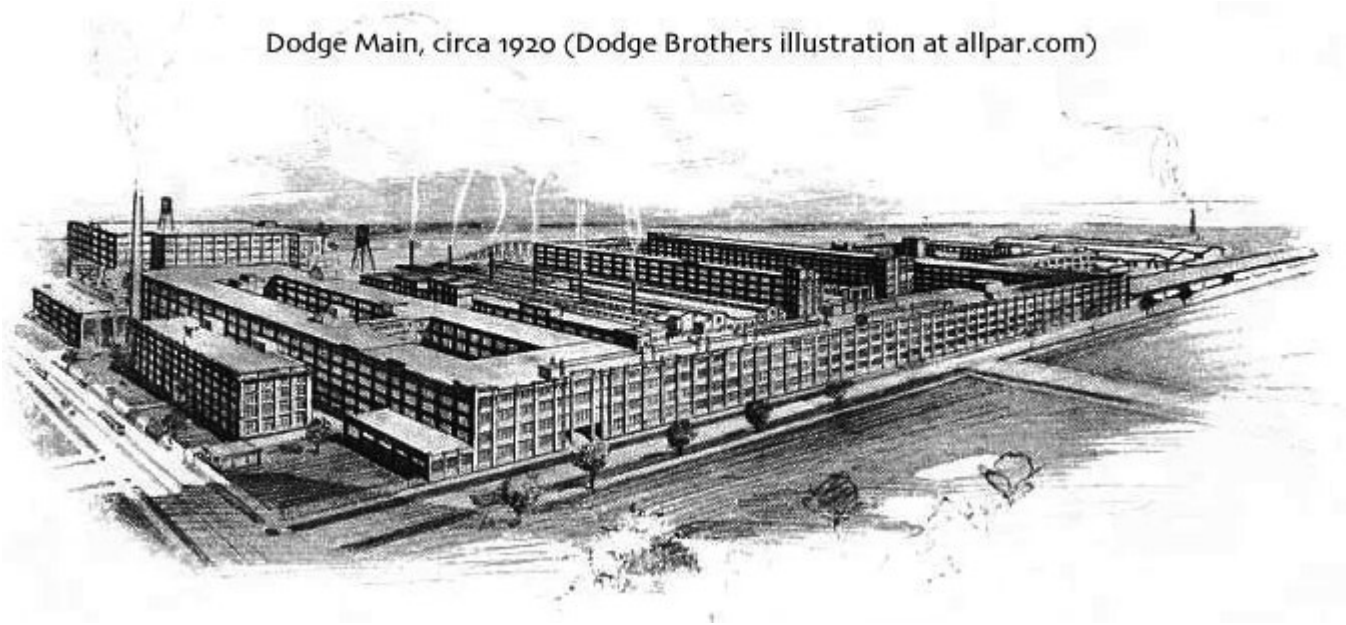
Dodge Main played an important role in the history of Hamtramck. I firmly believe that if it weren't for John and Horace Dodge there really would be no Hamtramck today, it would have been absorbed by the city of Detroit. They changed the whole destiny of the community.



Over the years the city of Detroit grew, and as it grew it annexed portions of Hamtramck bit by bit until ... the village of Hamtramck was formed in 1901. ... All of this area around here was eventually absorbed by the city of Detroit. That last portion of Hamtramck Township was up here, right over by Eight Mile Road and around Kelly, that was absorbed in about 1926. But Hamtramck is a very, very old community.

... In 1910 everything changed, that's when John and Horace Dodge came to town. They were two engineers who provided parts for Henry Ford. They did not really like working for Henry Ford, they had a rocky business relationship with him but it was a very fruitful one.

They had their own ideas about building cars. They wanted to build a factory where they could start manufacturing their cars. They came to the village of Hamtramck because it was located on the outskirts of Detroit. There were two railroads crossing the city and plenty of room to grow. One of the railroad lines went right up to Henry Ford's Highland Park plant which had just opened a year or so before. They were planning to build parts and ship them over to the Highland Park plant, which is what they originally started doing.



The ground was broken for the plant in June of 1910, we just celebrated its 100th anniversary. By November of 1910 they were actually producing parts already. That was just a shade of things to come. They started producing their own first car by 1914. Shortly thereafter they split with Henry Ford entirely.

This shows an early scene of the Dodge Main Plant, at this point it was the Dodge Brothers Plant. The Dodge brothers were fascinating characters. They were two of the most colorful people in the history of this city, they were loyal, devoted brothers. They were also brawlers and drinkers and did all kinds of wild things. They would get into fights and all kinds of trouble.

I was just talking to someone the other day about how they literally bought their way into Grosse Pointe society. One of the brothers built the Rose Terrace mansion, they had their yacht there and they tried to get into Grosse Pointe society. But

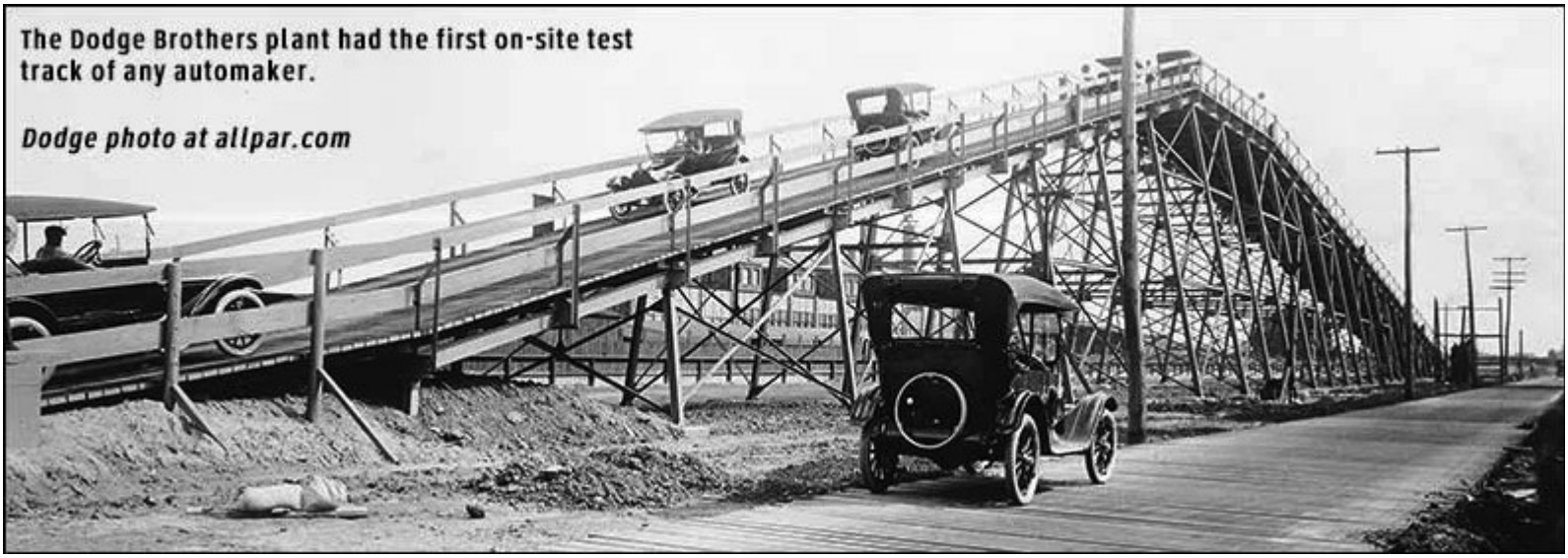
Grosse Pointe society would have nothing to do with them because of all the trouble that they had in the bars of Detroit. But by pretty much underwriting the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, they bought their way into high society in the Detroit area.

Hamtramck, 1920s Dodge photo. Dodge Main in the foreground, Lynch Road property above it; plant seen at top of photo became Detroit Axle. (at allpar.com via Bill Watson)

This picture is of the north side of the plant, this is the testing track. It's one of the first ones, its wood plank. You can see the big ramp. Of course Dodge Brothers built very good cars.

This [slide] is just a few years later, when the plant was really up and running. This is the central office building, that's the original power plant; this is the first of the two assembly line buildings. They were each about 1,000 feet long. I actually walked down them before the demolition began; it was quite an impressive sight. This eventually became one of the largest factories in the world at five million square feet of floor space and about 135 acres; as many as eight stories high.

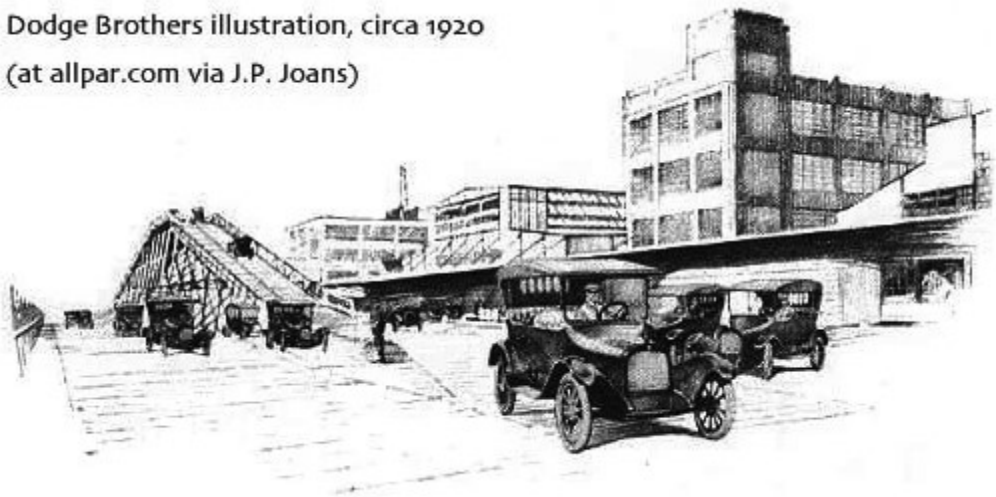
It just became a huge plant and it was a complete kind of plant where raw material would go in to one end of the plant and a finished car would come out the other end. They even had a showroom at the plant in the early years; you could buy a car right there. It was a complete plant, a very, very large operation and became important to the city of Hamtramck and the whole auto industry.



These [slide] are the front gates, this is 1915, early shot of it. Pretty impressive actually, it was an interesting dynamic there because if you look over here this is the gatehouse at the entrance of the plant, almost like an entrance to a garden, very interesting, almost rustic, and almost rural and really belied what was inside the plant.

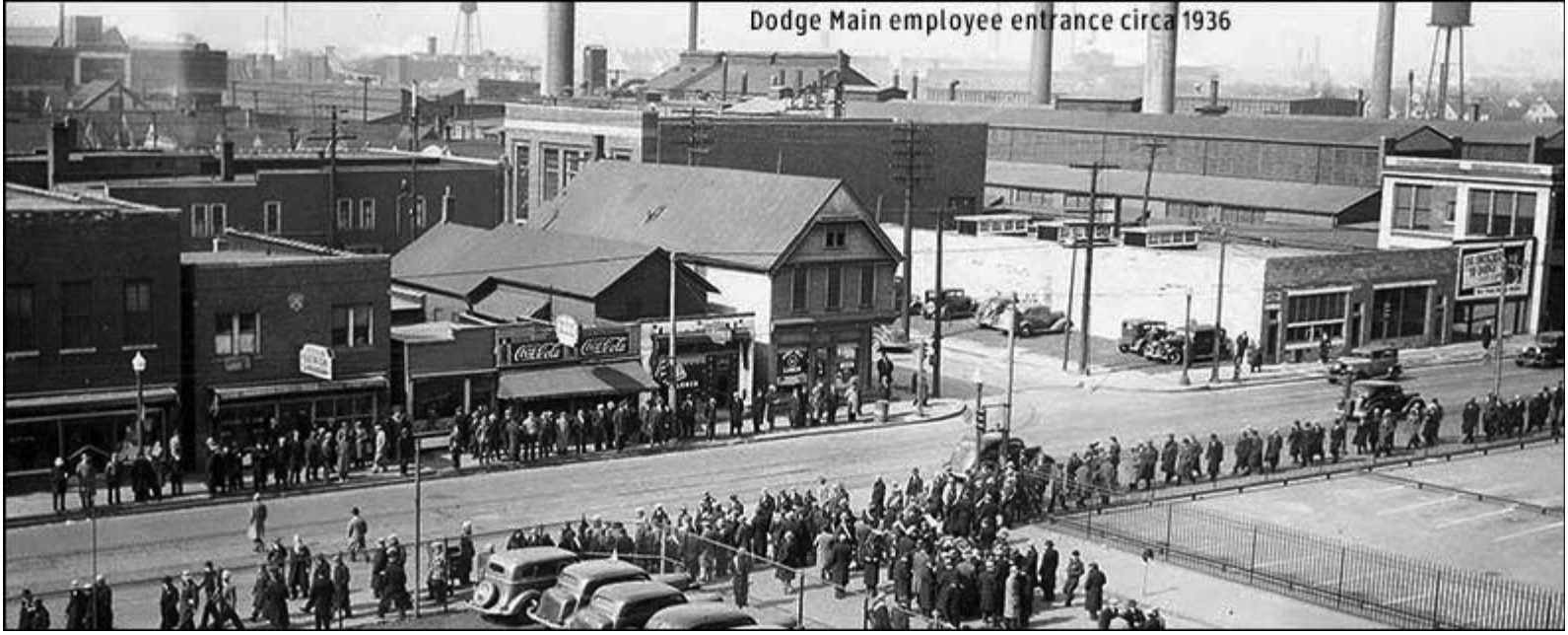
The plant started off as just a few buildings but it grew rapidly. They expanded it continuously; in fact they actually worked on the plant almost to the day it was demolished. There was work going on all through the decades. Eventually it ended up as 35 separate buildings. It would drive the city of Hamtramck officials crazy because they would do major construction on the plant and nobody outside the plant knew that they were doing that.

This [slide] is the great Dodge Brothers sign outside the factory, also from 1915.



This [slide] is more of what was inside the plant. Massive machinery and massive construction, it was gigantic. This [slide] is another scene inside the plant; this is one of the assembly line buildings. This shot [slide] shows them making upholstery and cutting leather. There was a lot of hands-on work, very dirty and dangerous work.

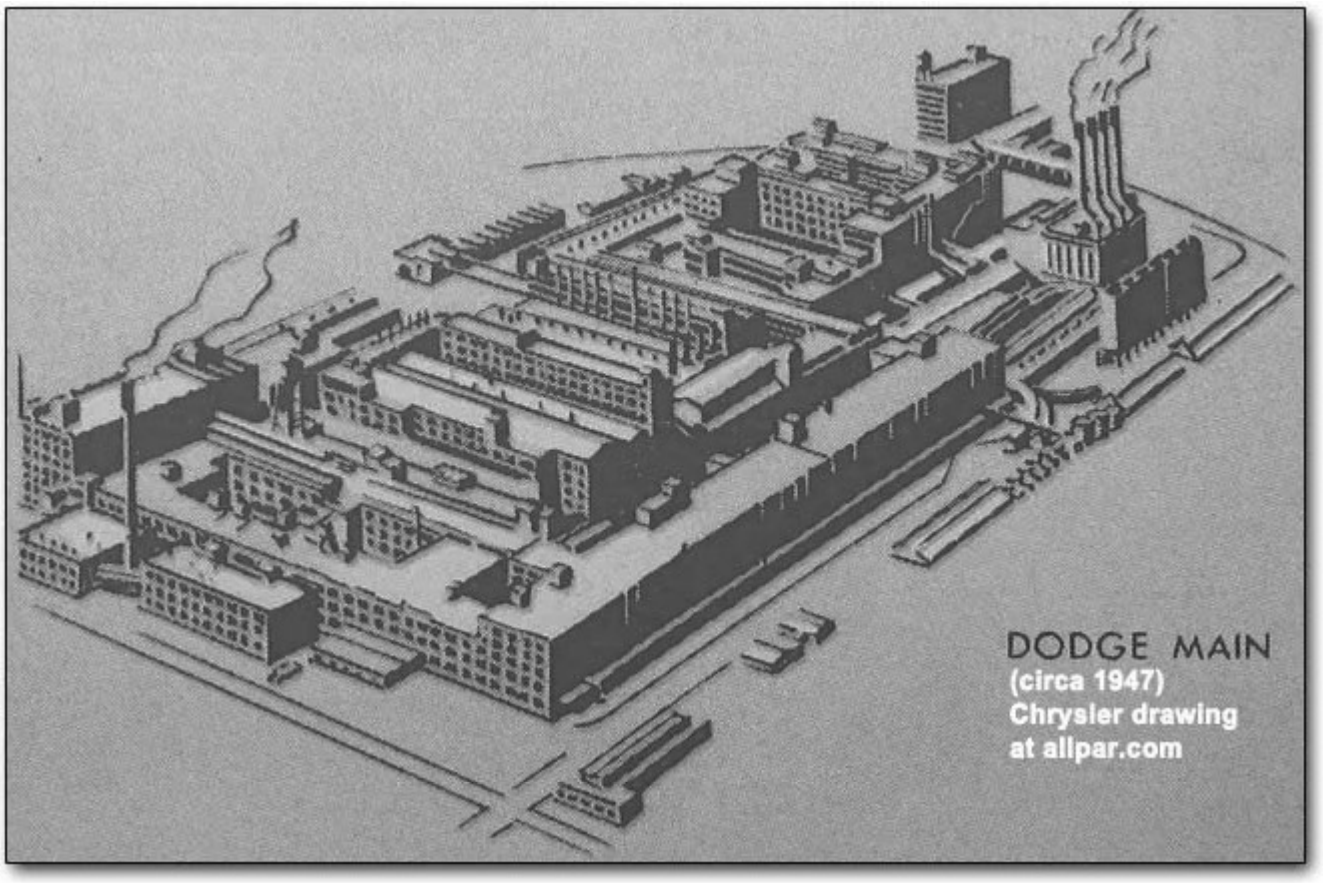
The Dodge Brothers were pretty good bosses compared to Henry Ford and the other auto manufacturers. The Dodge Brothers established a fund for widows and employees who were injured. They tried to take care of their employees to a certain degree. And of course in the hot days of summer they would bring in beer for the employees. They weren't just trying to be nice guys, because in the hot days of summer if they didn't do that they guys would go out to get the beer so this was a way of keeping them in the plant. In those days it was not unusual for trucks of people selling beer and liquor to pull into the parking lot and sell it.



At least there was an attempt to take care of their workers but it was a difficult job. It was very difficult living there. It got even worse after the Depression years after the Dodge Brothers had died.

Another construction shot [slide] inside the plant as they are working on it. Take note of these pillars and this concrete floor. More on that later.

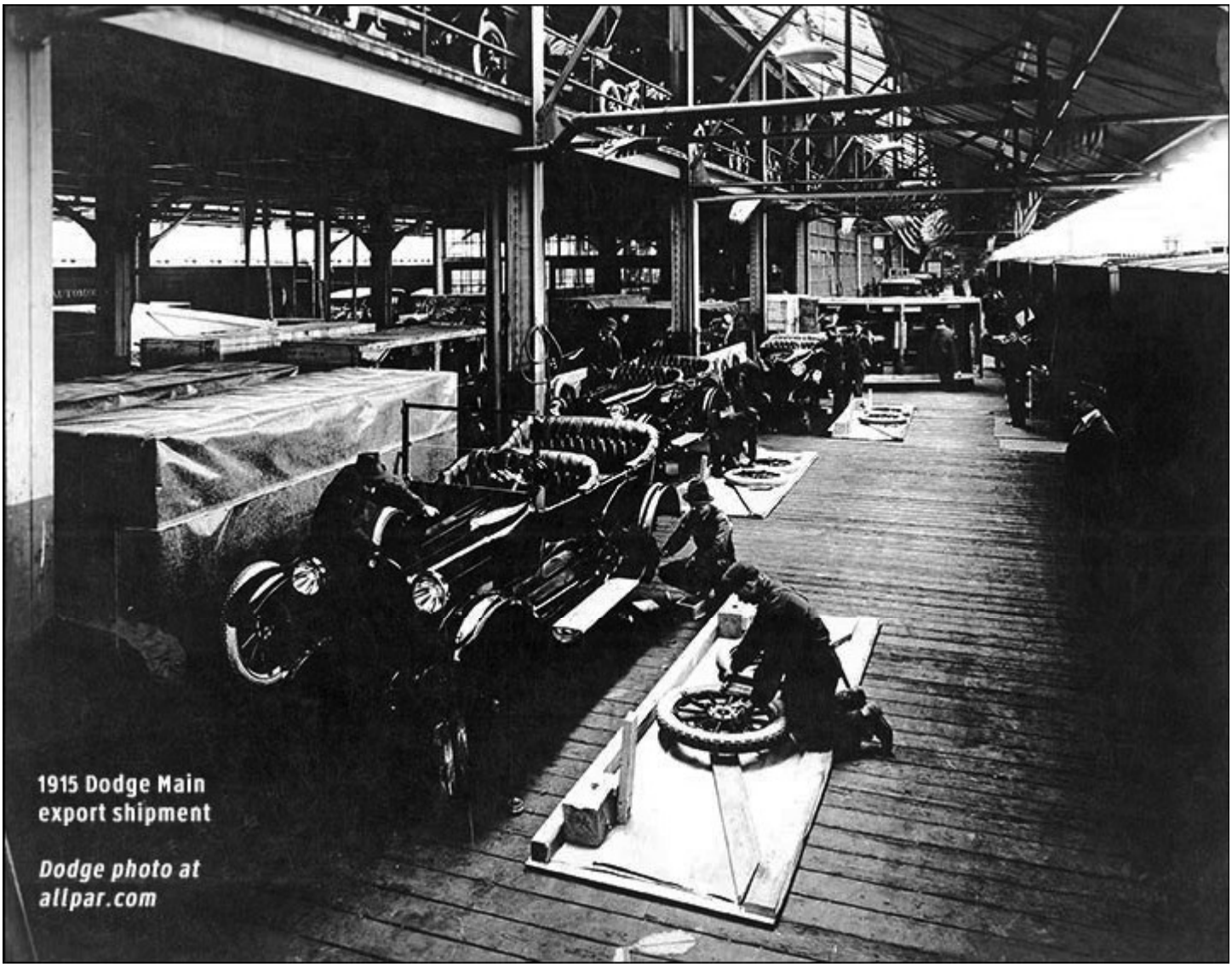
The plant was originally designed by Albert Kahn, probably the premier architect in Michigan, although he left the project fairly early on because he and the Dodge Brothers had a major disagreement. The brothers were not happy with his work and eventually went on to hire another architect. But Kahn established the idea of having these massive pillars here. This plant was vastly overbuilt and that became a major problem when they were going to tear it down, but we will get to that later on. It was an extremely well constructed building.



In 1914, the Dodge Brothers started building their first cars there. By that point they were already putting up a call for workers to come to Hamtramck to come work at the plant. They got a good response, in 1910 there were 3,500 people living

in Hamtramck. I want to stress the point that this was 2.1 square miles, that's how big the town was then and that's how big it is today. So there were 3,500 people living in this town in 1910, in 1920 there were 48,000 people living in the town, in 1930 there were 56,000. And almost all of that was due to the influx of workers who came to work at Dodge Main and the 23 other factories that sprang up in Hamtramck around the Dodge Main plant basically as a feeder operation.

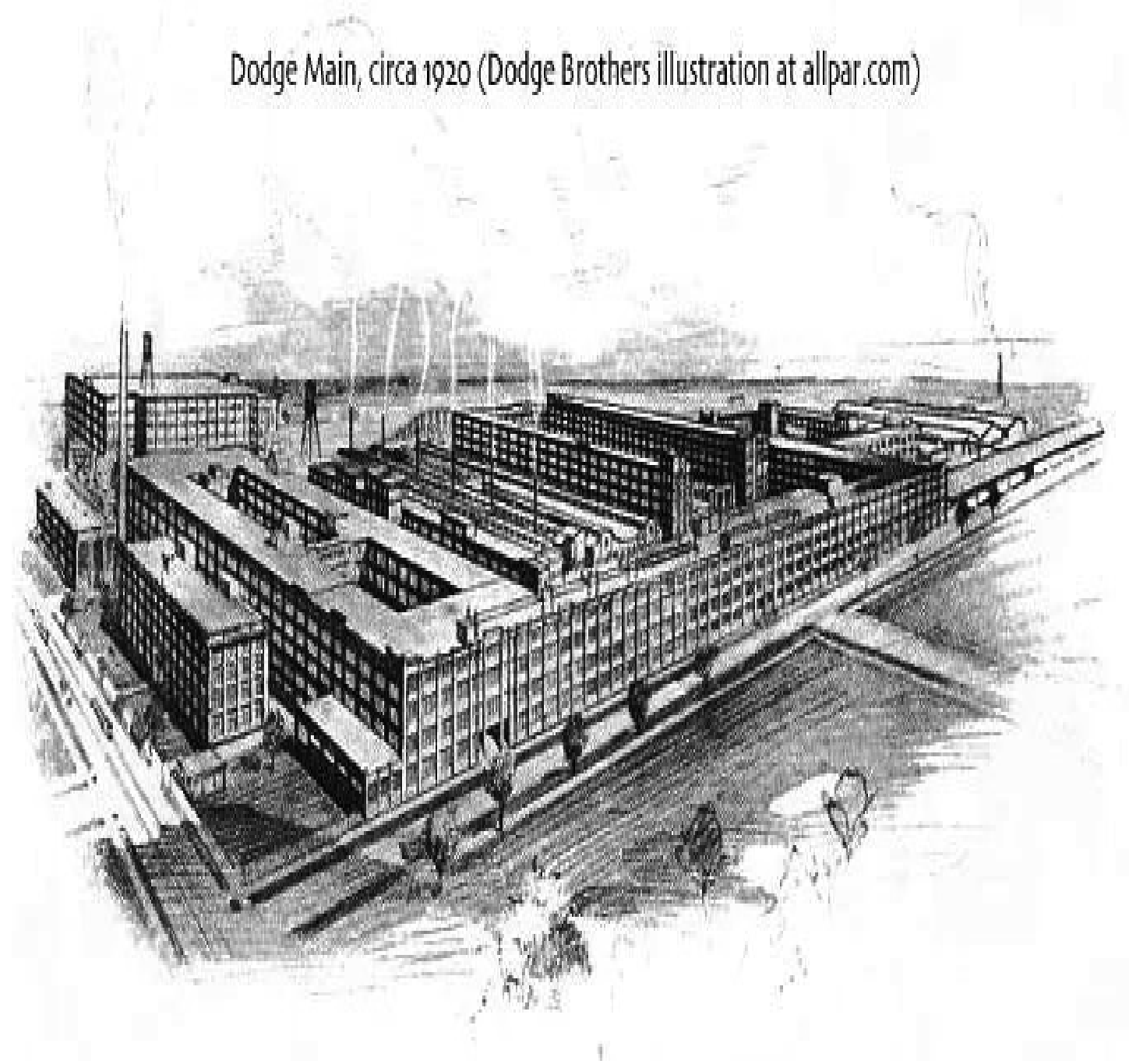
So Hamtramck went from being a dusty, rural town of fields and streams to a major industrial city in the space of ten years. We could spend all day talking about the social impact that that had on community. But that really was what made Hamtramck.



Almost all of these workers were Polish immigrants, so Hamtramck's population went from being overwhelmingly German to overwhelmingly Polish in the space of ten years. This caused enormous upheavals in town because there was a great power struggle between the people who were in charge of the town, those German saloon keepers, and these new immigrants and who came in and took power away from them. It caused an enormous social upheaval and really changed the nature of the town.

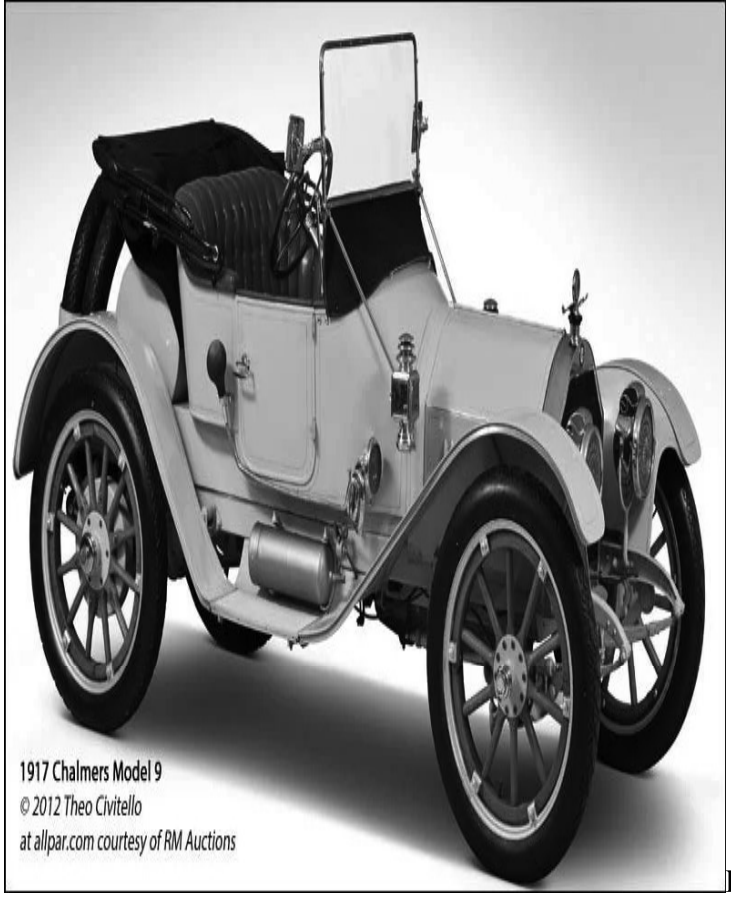
By 1937 Dodge Main was a major operation. This [slide] is a scene from the sit-down strike and how important that was in establishing the legitimacy of the UAW. This was one of several strikes, but this was a major one.

Interestingly, during this strike which lasted about 2 weeks, the plant was shut down, the people from Hamtramck would go to the windows and pass food and drink to their relatives who worked inside. Chrysler Corporation was going insane because they couldn't get the police to do anything, they couldn't get the courts to do anything. Nobody wanted to touch this situation. The local politicians said "all those people in the plant are voters! And all the people passing them food are voters." So the politicians had a complete hands-off approach.



After about two weeks, the Chrysler Corporation gave in and the strike was settled peacefully. That was interesting because not a person was hurt during the whole strike and that was a tumultuous time. It was significant that they were able to resolve the strike peacefully, there was a big parade. [A similar event occured at General Motors' Flint plant.]

The auto plants, and Henry Ford and the automakers, did not want to recognize the union. They [the workers] were trying to get the UAW recognized as a bargaining force for the employees. Conditions in the plants were horrendous in those days. The plants were very dirty; they were dangerous places to work. A lot of people were killed. Working conditions were bad. During the Depression when they laid off a lot of people they would then speed up the lines so that it became an even more grueling pace.



Both the Dodge Brothers themselves died in 1920, about 10 months apart. The family took over the operations of the plants but they didn't know how to run a factory. They sold it to a New York investment firm which also did not know how to run a factory. The investment firm in turn sold it to Chrysler Corporation in 1928. At that point there were many Dodge plants around so they started to refer to this facility as Dodge Main because this was the "big" Dodge plant, the main Dodge plant. That's the name that really stuck.

This [slide] shows the end of the strike when they are coming out. You can barely see the UAW banner hanging, it was a big occasion. As I said, there was a big parade down the street. That fence that you can see in the picture was one of the few remnants of the plant and it's now in Hamtramck and it surrounds the Pope statue on Joseph Compau Street at Pope Park. The mayor sent a crew over there when they were demolishing the plant and they pulled up the fence and took it off with them.

We were not able to get the "DB" plates that were installed in the fence, those disappeared; we are not sure what happened to them.

... All of these houses were thrown up in the span of a handful of years because they needed the space to house the workers. Eighty-five percent of the homes in Hamtramck today were built between 1915 and 1930. ... You go inside and they are divided. They were built as little rooming houses. Some have 6-8 rooms on the upper floor. Each room is like a cell, it's about 8 feet by 10 feet with a little sink in the corner and a tiny closet. Really tiny and they were for bachelor workers who came to work in the factory. There are a couple places like that still in existence in town.

A lot of people ask me about the original Dodge Main badges that the workers used to have. They have what looks like the Star of David on them so many people think the Dodge Brothers were Jewish. It has nothing to do with Judaism but it is the symbol of precise engineering.

Back inside you can see that we have women working in the factory too. It was a family affair for a lot of the families. It was tough. That's one of the reasons during prohibition we had speakeasies all over the place. I always say that prohibition in Hamtramck was an opportunity, and an opportunity that many people took great advantage of. There were bars all over the place. My dad remembers carrying buckets of beer down the street to the neighbors. We have a few stories of prohibition. We got a call down at the historic commission one day, a guy is renovating his house, he tore up the walls upstairs and there is a space between the walls. In the space there is a burlap bag hanging which he pulls up and it has a still in it. At the commission we have another complete still from prohibition.

Things got so bad in Hamtramck that in 1923 the state police came in and took over operations. They put out a map of all the places they raided in Hamtramck in one year. This map has got measles. Six houses in a row and I lived in one of them.

That's how wild things got. Our mayor was put in jail for their various activities, one of them was caught leading a convoy of liquor trucks into town, one of them was arrested and sent to prison, the people put out a petition to have him released from prison. The governor pardoned him; he was released from prison, re-elected mayor and then immediately elected to congress after that. It was not a stigma to be involved in prohibition and all the wild times.

Now some shots of the plant, this is 1945 you can see we are talking about just a huge operation; many buildings, gigantic. Even when I lived there, my dad was the manager of this plant for several years back in the 1970s, I drove by that plant every single day and I had no concept of how big it really was because you never got into the plant. It was so massive.

Chrysler's Dodge Main plant producing Dodge cars

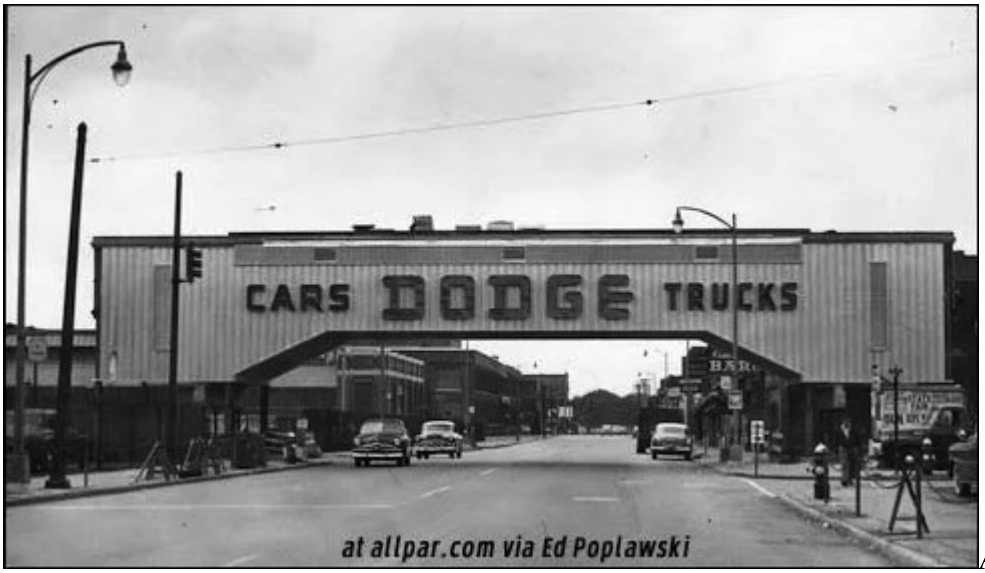
[slide] This is another aerial shot of the plant; this is much later, probably from the late 1950s or early 1960s. You can the see one of the two assembly line plants; the main office building, the Dodge brothers had their offices in this building, one on each side and the vault was right in the middle. Although you would think that would imply that they did not trust each other, in fact they did. They were so close to each other that if you sent a letter to John Dodge or Horace Dodge they would send it back; you had to send it to the Dodge Brothers. They were loyal to each other.

The viaduct was built in 1927 to keep workers from getting killed running between the trains trying to get to work. If you read the old newspapers from the period it was a common occurrence for people to be hit by trains. Some people were drunk, some were just trying to cross to get to work.

Power plant: eventually the big smoke stack that was here was torn down and that was converted into other use. In the interior, the paint factory was around here. The foundry was here. And that's the second power plant you can just see the smoke stacks.

By the mid 1940s, Dodge Main was one of the biggest factories in America. This was from *Collier's* Magazine, a major magazine, from about 1943 and it shows the things that they responsible for and their participation in the war effort. At this point there were about 45,000 people working in the factory. So we are talking a big, massive factory.

There were legitimate fears that the Germans were going to bomb that plant. They thought that they were going to use Norway to Greenland to Northern Canada to fly here and bomb the plant. We actually had air raid drills that were taken seriously during the war years.



About 1954 they put in the pedestrian overpass over here [slide], the parking lots were over here, because they needed a way for people to cross Joseph Compau safely. I drove under it many times. One of the saddest sights that I ever saw was when they started the demolition and they closed off this whole area and that was lying on the ground. It looked like a wounded animal.

People ask about the little Jewish cemetery that was formed in 1850 and closed about 1950. It was just the other side of this thing and it is still there. It is now on the grounds of the Poletown plant and it is open two days a year.

[slide] It was a nice looking plant from the exterior; this shot is from the 1960s. You can see the nice awnings here, nice shrubbery, nicely designed buildings that looked good.

Here is a much later shot [slide] from the 1960s; this was when it was operating at its peak. These are the 2 assembly line buildings here and here, the big power plant building over there.

But in the 1960s there were already rumors swirling around that Chrysler was in trouble and that Dodge Main was in big trouble. They kept it operating through the 1970s but it was becoming clear that the plant was in serious trouble. It was old, it was big, and it was inefficient. The plant used an enormous amount of power and water. It had conveyor belts on its exterior. I spoke to someone who worked there during this period and he said they would have a terrible time because the cars would come down the conveyor belt on the outside of the building, break loose and crash to the bottom and stop production.

The Chrysler Corporation eventually got into such severe financial condition that in 1979 Chrysler announced that they were closing the plant. This was truly devastating to the city of Hamtramck. The city lost one quarter of the operating revenue from the loss of income tax revenue when that plant closed. This city was in desperate shape at that point.

The plant stood empty for a year. It began decaying, weeds were growing in the parking lots, windows were starting to break and there was nothing anybody could do. Nobody could afford to tear it down; the demolition estimate was about $30 million and then what? You have a 135 acre empty lot. That doesn't do you any good either.

That changed when General Motors and the city of Detroit and Hamtramck came to an agreement to provide the space for Poletown plant. A lot of people think Poletown is in Hamtramck. The original Poletown was never in Hamtramck. It is south of Hamtramck. It got to be named Poletown from things that happened there in the 1880s. ... But it never extended into Hamtramck. The Poletown plant itself that is there today has only a small portion of it in Hamtramck. The vast majority of the property is in the city of Detroit.

There was much controversy during this proposal when they were clearing the neighborhood; they took down 1500 homes, 2 churches, a hospital and all kinds of other buildings. Hamtramck lost about 8 houses and the Dodge Main plant. For us this was a boon.

 dodge main, 1981

Chrysler sold Dodge Main to the corporation that was formed to build the plant; it was a complex legal setup with community plot grants, the City of Detroit, and General Motors. Chrysler sold the plant for $1. It was at this point that I got involved because I knew the city engineer [slide], this guy here, my old buddy Gene Berlin. Gene and I would go into the plant every Thursday morning. We would meet at the bar across the street, and it was like an earthquake because the 10,000 pound steel balls were hitting the building. They eventually had to dig trenches around the plant because the shock waves were damaging the water pipes.

Gene and I would go into the plant and this is one of the things we saw [slide] and I had to take a picture because it was something that one of the last employees wrote on there. Now when Chrysler closed it they basically walked out of the place. There were millions of documents blowing in the wind through there. There were pieces of cardboard……

Also see: Dodge cars of 1955 • Making the 1955 Dodges

Demolition photos from 1981

These were provided by J.P. Joans, whose father (among other things) designed the Chrysler dealer-auction system that kept resale values high while supporting short-term leases to rental fleets. The Dodge Main plant and a thriving Hamtramck neighborhood were demolished to make room for a huge General Motors factory, with full city and state financial support, in a use of eminent domain power that saw residents getting what many called extremely low compensation for their 1,200 homes and businesses. The factory that finally opened had much lower staffing than promised by GM, partly due to its extensive use of automation; it currently produces the Cadillac DTS/Buick Lucerne (originally it made the Riviera, Toronado, Eldorado, and Seville). Dodge Main had already been abandoned by Chrysler.

 site of Dodge Main plant, 1981

The Dodge Main complex began in 1910, under the Dodge Brothers. It included a hospital, a private telephone system, and a fire department. It was closed in 1979 under orders from Lee Iaccoca to save money at a time when Chrysler Corporation was close to bankruptcy; from 1979 to 1983, roughly half the jobs at Chrysler Corporation, both management and hourly, were lost, according to some sources.


plant, 1981