

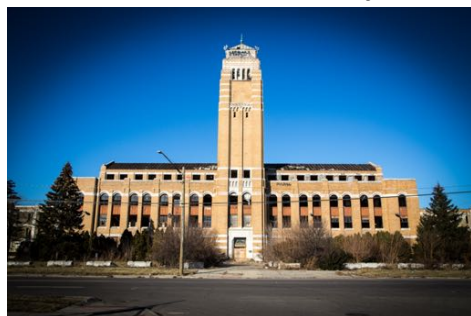
DETROIT AND ITS OLD CAR FACTORIES

Chapter 8 - by Dan Nelson

Before leaving Detroit, we need to visit two more factories. At the intersection of the Southfield Freeway and I-96, there is a white complex that was a tractor factory for the Ferguson Company from 1948 until 1953. Originally the plant was intended to be a Ford-Ferguson operation, but Ford dropped out and there was a nasty lawsuit. The British Ferguson Company merged with the Canadian Massey-Harris Company to form Massey-Ferguson in 1953. Tractors were produced here until 1982.



On Plymouth Road, just west of Schafer, is the former headquarters for American Motors. Originally it was the Kelvinator Corporation, which built refrigerators, and in 1927 they constructed a new factory and office in Detroit. In 1937, Kelvinator merged



with Nash Motors of Kenosha, Wisconsin to become the Nash-Kelvinator Corporation. They produced helicopters at the plant during WWII. I've read some stories about the weird machines buzzing over the building during the war. Nash-Kelvinator merged with Hudson Motors in 1954 to form the American Motors Corporation. Autos were never built at the plant, however it was used as a research and design facility for AMC and then Dodge/Jeep/RAM until 2009. Chrysler bought AMC in 1987. Now owned by the City of Detroit, the complex is slated to be torn down and replaced with an industrial development. Sad that such a beautiful office building will be gone, but it's often more expensive to refurbish an old



building than build a new one. Unlike the Michigan Central Railroad Station, that Ford is revitalizing, the interior of the Nash-Kelvinator building isn't anything special.

We are now going to Pontiac. At one time, Pontiac was a big time GM factory city. It had four final assembly complexes, as well as the headquarters for the Pontiac Motors Division. At the end of the 19th Century, the town was home to a number of buggy manufacturers. As we have seen, from my earlier articles, buggy and bicycle builders often became automobile manufacturers.

South of the city, along Woodward Avenue (Saginaw St. back then) between Osmun Street and South Boulevard, were two carriage companies. The Standard Vehicle Company was built in 1901 and is located on Osmun Street. It sits high on a hill with a view straight down Woodward, and I bet from the fifth floor one can see Detroit on a clear day. The Pontiac Transport Museum has a Standard in their collection. (see below)

According to the Sanborn Insurance Map, the building was a carriage factory in 1903. The structure was added onto and by 1909 it was being used by the Welch Motor Company for painting and trimming (upholstery & decorative trim). The Oakland Motor Car Company took over the building a few years later and it was used for auto body finishing until at least 1919. This building may not be historically significant when it comes to the auto industry, but it is 120 years old, in decent shape, and one of the rare structures remaining that was used by a carriage maker. It still has a ghost sign for Standard Vehicle at the top! Maybe it was covered over when the addition was built and that help preserve the sign. The addition came down at some point. After its life in the auto world, it was used by Sears as a warehouse.

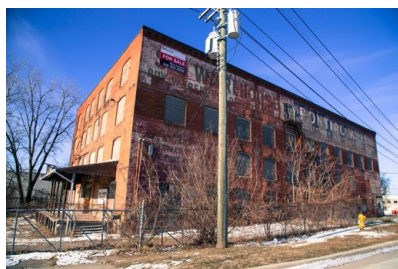


On the south side of the structure were tracks for the Michigan Air Line Railroad. Grand Trunk & Western eventually took over the trackage. As I mentioned in Chapter One, factories followed the tracks. Also on Osmun, was the buggy builder Hodges Vehicle Co. Welch took over its building as it expanded operations. A bit east was the Pontiac Body Company which built auto bodies. That particular building then went on to be part of the Monroe Body Company. The founder of Monroe, R. Frank Monroe, teamed up with Billy Durant to build the Monroe auto in Flint from 1914-1918. The Monroe Body Company produced bodies for a lot of auto makers including Cartecar, which was across Woodward.

A.R. and Fred Welch were bicycle makers in Chelsea. They produced a car there for two years and moved to Pontiac in 1905 where they started the Welch Motor Car Company with the afore mentioned factory on Osmun, and another a few blocks south at Woodward & Jessie. The "Welch Tourist" was an innovative, but expensive, car priced right up there with Peerless, Pierce-Arrow and Packard. General Motors purchased the company in 1910, mostly for their engineering, moved production to Detroit, and phased out the name in 1911.

Across Woodward, Walter Flanders (EMF, Rickenbacker and other companies) had the Flanders Electric Company where electric cars were produced in 1912-1913. GM would soon gobble up the property for their GMC truck complex. Skipping GMC for right now, we head north on Woodward a half mile to one of my favorite buildings, the former Pontiac Spring and Wagon Works factory. As you can see from the photos, it's just a big red brick box but it has a history!

At the turn of the century, Pontiac Spring and Wagon Works was the largest manufacturing plant in Pontiac. Built in 1899 to build wagons, the owners soon decided to manufacture



their own automobile. They called it the “Pontiac” and it initially had 38” tall wheels. Pretty much a standard buggy with a 12 hp motor. Byron Carter was busy building the Jaxson Steamer and Jackson car in Jackson, Michigan but left his company in 1905 to build the “Cartercar” in Detroit. In 1907 operations were moved to the Pontiac Spring building. The buggy company owners sold to Carter a year later and then GM bought Cartercar and Oakland Motor around 1909-1910. The “Cartercar” was produced here until 1915. Olympian Motors Company built the “Olympian” auto at the plant from 1917-1919. The Pontiac Transport Museum has a “Pontiac”, a “Cartercar” and an “Olympian” auto in their collection. The Friends Motor Corporation purchased the building in 1920 and produced the “Friend” auto there for a couple of years. The following 100 years saw the building used for furniture manufacturing and as a

warehouse. It is now for sale. After so many owners, it’s amazing there’s still a Pontiac Spring ghost sign on the building. Someone buy it and please don’t tear it down!



1908 Pontiac

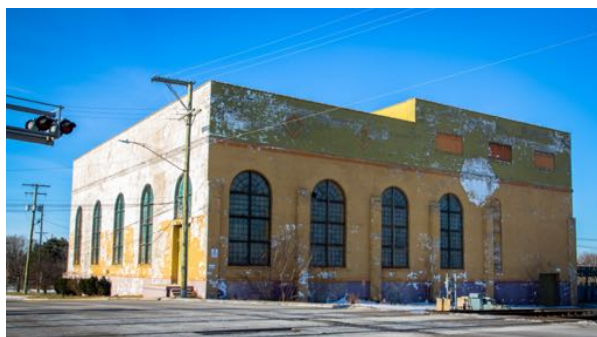
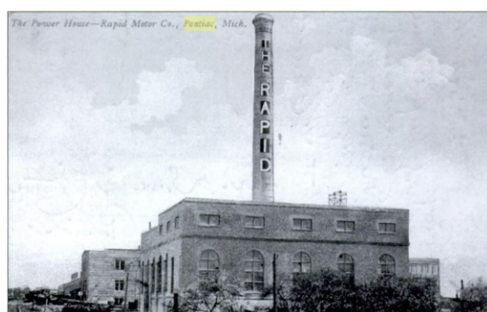


1914 Cartercar



1917 Olympian

Most of you know that the truck name GMC name stands for General Motors Company - or Grabowsky Motor Company. Huh? What’s a Grabowsky? Anyway, heading south on Woodward from Pontiac Spring, we come the old powerhouse for the Rapid Motor Vehicle Company. Max & Morris Grabowsky sold their first commercial vehicle in 1902. They used space at the Pontiac Spring and Wagon Works building to build the “Rapid” truck. One of the owners of Pontiac Spring, A.G. North, took control of Rapid in 1905 and built a large factory on Woodward north of South Boulevard. The new Rapid truck was called a “Power Wagon.” Simultaneously, another truck was being produced by the Reliance Motor Car Company which was headed by Frederick Paige. If you remember from Chapter 7, Fred Paige went on to start the Paige-Detroit Motor Company which eventually became the Graham-Paige Company. I know, it’s all so confusing.





1926 Pontiac race car and a Rapid Pullman

In 1908, the General Motors Company started buying up Rapid and Reliance stock to become part of their family of vehicles. They began calling trucks “GMC” in 1912.

The large Wilson Foundry & Machine Company was nearby the GMC plant and in the late 1930’s GM started buying up its buildings. This complex would become what was known as “Pontiac West Assembly.” The brick walls and big windows were eventually covered in tan aluminum. The original Grabowsky plant was demolished in 1981 and by 2008, all the other buildings had been leveled, except for the power plant which sits steadfastly on the corner. For a number of years it was “Planet Rock” where people would go to rock climb on special walls built inside. The rest of the GMC property has been turned into the M1 Concourse. It’s a place where those with really fast cars can go really fast on the 1.5 mile racetrack without the worry of red & blue lights pulling you over.

Heading north on Woodward we take a few odd turns and come upon Cesar Chavez Avenue, just north of downtown. A few blocks north we come to a five-story office building that, in the 1920’s, was the headquarters for the Oakland Motor Car Company and then Pontiac Division’s HQ until 1970. Oakland began building a car called “Pontiac” in 1926 and soon less expensive “Pontiac” was outselling the Oakland and so in 1931 GM eliminated the Oakland to just make the Pontiac.



Behind the of headquarters building there stands a portion of the original Oakland factory. In 1903, on this plot of land, were four carriage builders with the Pontiac Buggy Company owned by Edward Murphy being the largest. He called his first car in 1907 a “Pontiac” but, since that name was already taken, he renamed his horseless carriage the “Oakland.” Murphy died

unexpectedly on 1909 and the company was scooped up by GM. There’s a portion of the building with a saw-toothed roof which, according to the 1919 Sanborn Map, looks like it could be original to the Oakland factory.

Heading north on Baldwin to Montcalm, we come to what is roughly a square mile of GM plants and offices once known as Pontiac Assembly. This was the home of Pontiac Motors for eight decades. Oakland opened an assembly factory here in 1926/27 and GM used it for assembly until 2010. To the west is a large concrete lot that once hosted a Fisher Body plant that supplied bodies for Oakland and Pontiac. That factory built the two-seater Fiero from 1983-1988 and was torn down in 2013. There is still a huge factory building that is a stamping plant and other metal related functions. It is now called The Pontiac Metal Center. Some of it may be original to the Oakland era. The building has been encased in aluminum siding but a brick entrance has been kept as a tribute to the

plant's origin. Sadly, other manufacturing facilities within the square mile have been torn down. Still remaining are a number of large office buildings on Joslyn to the east. The signs say "General Motors Global Propulsion Systems." It's where teams of brilliant engineers design new gasoline and electric motors, as well as hamster wheel and warp drive engines. I guess??? The white building to the right became the Pontiac Division administration headquarters in 1970.



Returning to Woodward, we head back towards Detroit and go east on South Boulevard. Pontiac Central Assembly and Pontiac East Assembly sat on a 160-acre triangle bordered by South Blvd., Opdyke and the Grand Trunk Railroad tracks. I've spent most of the last 18 years driving into Detroit and never realized that Pontiac Central Assembly was built in 1928! The long office building has been refaced and looks new. The factory still looks old, but has been resided in all white. These buildings were used to build transit busses, as well as a mix of medium and heavy-duty trucks. Engineering offices were also there. In the 1920's, the Yellow Truck and Coach Manufacturing Company produced busses and other mass transit vehicles in Chicago. It was a subsidiary of the Yellow Cab Company. GM purchased the majority stake of Yellow Coach in 1925 and in 1943 completely acquired the company and moved its operations to Pontiac to create the GM Truck & Coach Division. Arvid Kallen came to the US from Sweden in 1915 and got off the boat with empty pockets. By 1928 he was president of Yellow Cab and would later become president of GM Truck & Coach. For many years GM built most of the civic busses in the US. During WWII, this plant built the amphibious DUKW (the Duck) and the smaller CCKW. GM stopped making busses in 1987 and heavy-duty truck production ended in 1988. The long building today seems to be offices and the smaller building houses mixed manufacturing, including a Penske Vehicle Services operation. Some of it may be original to the GMC development.



Pontiac East Assembly was also known as GMC Truck & Coach Division Plant #6. It fronted on South Opdyke Road. I used to see the roof full of smokestacks when I passed by the access for I-75 at Square Lake on my way Up North. It opened in 1972 and built trucks of all sizes throughout its history. Pickup truck production began in 1986 and lasted until the plant closed in 2009 with demolition in 2011. Alas, bankruptcy and reorganization killed off the the GMC & Pontiac assembly operations, along with the Pontiac Division in 2009. The Racer Trust was set up during the reorganization to sell off the General Motors properties that "were no longer needed." Their website lists all the property that was sold and what is still for sale throughout the country. I will conclude my journey of old car factories next issue.

