



The Ford Century in Minnesota

Brian McMahon

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In 1903, before the Ford Motor Company was even incorporated, Stephen Tenvoorde signed a contract to sell “Fordmobiles” at his bicycle shop in St. Cloud, Minnesota. Four generations later, the Tenvoorde family still operates what is now the oldest Ford dealership in the world. Brian McMahon chronicles how the fortunes of the company and the state became intertwined during that century.

Ford assembled Model T cars in the world’s tallest automobile plant in Minneapolis and a three-story structure in St. Paul—both still standing. These factories quickly became functionally obsolete after the development of the moveable assembly line. The hunt for a new site to build a modern, single-story plant stirred intense rivalry between Minneapolis and St. Paul. Henry Ford took a rare personal interest in the search and selected a 125-acre parcel in St. Paul overlooking the recently built High Dam on the Mississippi River, which allowed for navigation and hydroelectric power. The Twin Cities Assembly Plant would go on to manufacture millions of cars, trucks, tractors, and military vehicles until its closure in 2011.

Henry Ford’s large-scale experiments with every aspect of the industrial economy sent ripples and shockwaves through the lives of Minnesotans—management and assembly line workers, dealers and customers, families and communities. First-person accounts of more than forty retired auto workers share what it was like to work at Ford—from the early years of the Minneapolis plant to the final hours of the Twin Cities Assembly Plant in St. Paul. McMahon documents the company’s transformation—through the Depression, the rise of the United Auto Workers Union, World War II, women joining the workforce, competition from imported cars, globalization, outsourcing, and the closing of the plant.

This publication was made possible in part by the people of Minnesota through a grant funded by an appropriation to the Minnesota Historical Society from the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund. Any views, findings, opinions, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the State of Minnesota, the Minnesota Historical Society, or the Minnesota Historic Resources Advisory Committee.

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