

BOOK REVIEW

The Ford Century in Minnesota

Brian McMahon

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, 264 p., Cloth, \$39.95).

Unlike the many articles and books about the history of the Ford Motor Company and its legendary and somewhat controversial founder, Henry Ford, *The Ford Century in Minnesota* provides a rare glimpse into the mutually beneficial and extremely complicated relationship between Ford (the company and the man) and the people and industries of Minnesota. Author Brian McMahon chronicles the planning, construction, and operation of two Ford assembly plants in the Twin Cities while weaving a compelling narrative about the Minnesotans who made it happen.

Those familiar with the ongoing rivalry between Minneapolis and St. Paul will be interested in McMahon's account of the political maneuvering that resulted in Minneapolis securing the first Ford assembly plant in the state. Now known as the Ford Center, the 10-story-plus-basement Minneapolis plant was built in the warehouse district in 1913 to house Model T assembly. When manufacturing processes necessitated a switch from vertical assembly lines to horizontal, McMahon explains how the University of Minnesota, Northern States Power, and the federal government joined the fray over a site with access to hydropower near Lock and Dam No. 1 in St. Paul's Highland Park neighborhood. In the end, the St. Paul Association, the business promoters behind the lost bid for the first Ford assembly plant, orchestrated Ford's move under the direction of Colonel Lewis H. Brittin, who had created the Northwestern Terminal, an industrial development in Minneapolis served by all major railroads. The story of the Twin Cities Assembly Plant demonstrates the power Ford wielded at city, state, and federal levels, influencing federal management of the Mississippi River as well as affecting infrastructure development in two large cities that hoped to reap the benefits from having the plant located in their municipalities.

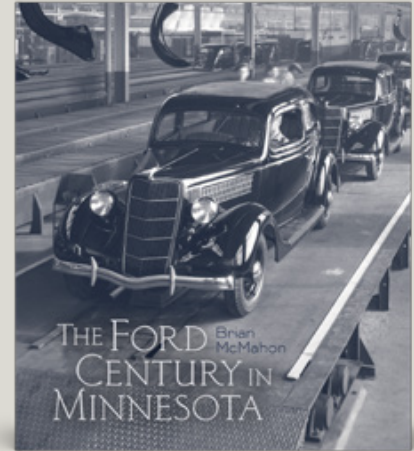
Readers hoping to better understand Ford Motor Company's direct influence outside the Twin Cities may be disappointed to see only cursory information about Ford facilities in greater Minnesota. McMahon covers Ford's introduction to the state in St. Cloud fairly well, but mentions other dealerships primarily within the context of their relationships with facilities in Minneapolis and St. Paul. McMahon does highlight Henry Ford's desire to better serve the farmers credited with the company's success in Minnesota, the most tangible expression of which was the Fordson tractor. In addition, Ford's extensive network of dealerships throughout rural areas gave rise to a new Minnesota industry focused on the invention of farming implements that could be attached to Ford's Model T. McMahon also describes Ford's obsession with how the broader agricultural industry could improve automobile manufacture,

resulting in unconventional business ventures to investigate everything from soy-based plastics to sweet potato-based biofuels. Much of this was done under the direction of Harry Gilbert Ukkelberg, an agricultural chemist from the University of Minnesota.

The book's high point is McMahon's use of first-person and contemporary accounts to explain how Ford employees in Minnesota influenced business and labor relations at Ford facilities across the globe and at other Minnesota companies, such as Hormel. From early relationships in the dealer, distributor, and branch agency system through the activities of United Automobile Workers Local 879, Minnesotans played a critical role in the evolution of working conditions at Ford. McMahon's description of the sense of community at the Twin Cities Assembly Plant begs the question of how Henry Ford's propensity to hire immigrants and his anti-Semitic leanings played out in Minnesota. Although McMahon touches on both of these topics, as well as the role of women in the Ford workforce, he leaves substantial opportunity for another book to flesh out those fascinating local narratives.

McMahon's personal passion for the topic is evident through his prose and in the number of illustrations included from his personal collection. The extensive Notes on Sources and bibliography demonstrate the sheer amount of research completed for this project and provide plenty of leads for future scholarship. The book would have benefited, however, from more rigorous editing. Repetition and a few temporal inconsistencies were exacerbated by the lack of in-text citations.

Although the Twin Cities Assembly Plant is no longer standing, Henry Ford's influence continues to reverberate throughout Minnesota. *The Ford Century in Minnesota* provides insight into how the people and industries of Minnesota helped shape Ford's success.



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