

Fordisms: Farm to factory

Village Industries brought 20th century industry to rural towns

By Michelle Krebs

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Henry Ford couldn't get off the farm and into the factory fast enough, but he provided the best of both worlds to rural Michiganians when he created his innovative Village Industries.

Village Industries were a series of small factories established mostly in the 1930s. They employed local farmers to produce automobile parts while they maintained their farms. About 19 existed in Southeast Michigan within 60 miles of Ford's Rouge complex; most of them still stand today in some form or other. About 10 more were established in states as far away as New York and Wisconsin.

The plants built a variety of smaller parts for the Model T and Model A as well as other Ford, Mercury and Lincoln-Zephyr cars, some into the modern era. Ford Motor Co. records show that in 1939, nearly 2,500 people were employed in making welding points, lamps, drills, valves, taps, generators, starter switches and similar light products in the village plants.

Ford built some of the Village Industries buildings from scratch, for which he even employed famed Detroit architect Albert Kahn, and others were historic buildings, some already 100 years old, that he converted from sawmills and gristmills. His primary criterion for selecting a site was the availability of water power.



A 1937 ad for Village Industries.

The more complex question is why Ford established these tiny businesses, some of which employed as few as a dozen or so people. It seems a contradiction to Ford's construction of the then-largest auto assembly plant, the Rouge complex, which employed thousands to produce everything for the automobile. The Rouge was hailed as the world's industrial showcase of its day.

For labor experts, particularly, the answer is simple: Village Industries plants were a way for Ford, an ardent opponent of organized labor, to circumvent unions. For other historians, the

answer is more complicated.

"Henry Ford was a man of enormous contradictions," said Howard Segal, a former University of Michigan professor who teaches history at the University of Maine.

His book, *Recasting the Machine Age: Henry Ford's Village Industries*, will be published by the University of Massachusetts press next year. "Ford grew up on a farm and hated farming, but he wanted all of his employees to be part-time farmers. He lived in Dearborn outside the city but lured workers into the city. He was an industrialist but also an environmentalist. He built the giant Rouge plant but established the Village Industries."

Perhaps, suggested Segal, Village Industries were a way to preserve small-town America and perhaps to justify what he had done as an industrialist. "Maybe he felt uneasy or guilty about the conditions he created in his factories and cities," offered Segal.

In a 1939 pamphlet produced by the Ford Motor to explain the Village Industries concept, the automaker explained:

"What we have learned in mass production makes

decentralization possible," the pamphlet said. "Congregating to a center has the advantage of coordinating many parts into a cooperative whole; disseminating them again possesses the advantage of bringing them to further refinement as separate units. Both movements must be looked upon as parts of one whole, a progressive whole."

Employees, Ford argued, had the newest, most modern machinery to work with, and they were paid the regular wage of at least \$6 a day.

Ford's 1939 pamphlet described work life at a Village Industries plant: "He works in a small factory where noise and strain are reduced to the minimum. He lives in an American village - or on a plot of land near the village. ... His family has the advantage of the clearer air, the more natural tempo of life, the rather higher level of neighborhood character ... He is within an hour and a half of the big city. He probably indulges in a propensity for gardens and chickens, which supply some of his needs and lighten the pull on his income. His work is likely to be steadier."

Ford claimed its Village Industries workers were the most satisfied of all its employees, as evidenced from low turnover.

Indeed, Segal, who interviewed workers and supervisors in Village Industries plants for his upcoming book, said that although it was far from utopia, "working conditions were a heck of a lot better than that of conventional plants. ... People living and working in the same area was incredibly insightful."

At the height of Ford's Village Industries in the 1930s, Ford had aggressive plans to expand them further, taking operations out of the giant Rouge plant and moving them to other outside locations.

However, it never saw fruition largely due to the diversion of Henry Ford's interests to other matters and ultimately his death in 1947. The plants gradually were sold or closed, beginning when Henry Ford II took over.

The results and achievements of Village Industries are mixed. "Did they succeed? Yes and no," concluded Segal. His research indicates Village Industries never made money. "But, administratively, they were successful alternatives to large-scale manufacturing and production - and were pleasant places to work."

PHOTO: From the collections of the Benson Ford Research Center and the Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village and the Ford Motor Co.