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# DETROIT – “THE MOTOR CITY”



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BRASOV 2020

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# Argument

The topic that I chose for this certification paper might not be the most popular in the world, but it means a lot to millions of people who rely on affordable, well-engineered vehicles every day. Cars have fascinated me for my entire life. For as long as I can remember, I have enjoyed researching them, finding out how they work, and understanding how they are made.

Cars are not only a means of transportation, they represent probably the most complex piece of engineering that the average family owns. They come in a wide variety of styles, expressing their owners' tastes the way music or art does. For some, they are a way to mix up feelings that make them forget the problems that they face daily. For others, cars are almost religious objects. Tire smoke, the roar of a well-built engine, and the smell of gasoline replace incense, singing, and myrrh every Sunday morning.

I refuse to imagine a world without cars, without experiencing G-forces, without feeling the adrenaline in a safe manner on a racetrack. This idea makes me feel numb, just like Detroit nowadays.

I would like to present one of these styles, the American one, and how Detroit became the biggest and the most important automotive city in the world, home to more than 50 factories. I've chosen this particular region also because of its controversial history and I am going to show relevant information and my point of view on why Detroit cannot be saved anymore.

# Summary

My certification paper is an astonishing journey through the roots of Michigan's enviable industry, All great American brands, united in some square miles and 60 factories, worked in harmony, shaping an entire culture from zero, a culture that has been venerated for one century. These pages may change your whole perspective regarding the essence of what Detroit is all about. Next time you'll see a Mustang or a Corvette on the street hopefully you will remember the following facts and it will trigger the nostalgia because they represent a dying breed.

Here you can find a brief history of the most famous and successful city the automotive industry has ever seen.

From the very beginning you will be introduced in Detroit around a century ago through photos dating certain periods of time, and you will have to follow a chronological path. In this journey you will meet Mr. Henry Ford and you will see how he revolutionized the entire industry, you will face the rise of the Detroit empire with all its quirks and features. You will stop for some moments in the 50's, when Detroit reached its peak and another chapter of the journey starts.

This is going to be the darkest period Detroit has ever faced because you will be part of the Oil Crisis and the Detroit riot. You will see people losing their jobs and many other negative aspects of this period of time.

By the end of the journey, I will reintroduce you in our days to walk on the streets of the Motor City safely to see what it looks like nowadays and you are going to receive a ticket to visit Henry Ford Museum.

# Introduction

Detroit took on the name “Motor City” being long recognized as the historic heart of the American automotive industry. But how did this Midwestern city capitalize on one of the greatest inventions of the time to the extent that it became the Motor City?

Michigan’s automotive industry provided the model for mass production that other industries later adopted, when Henry Ford pioneered the use of the assembly line using driven conveyor belts. In this way, the factory workers put different parts together quickly and inexpensively.



Many dreams started here and many people did what they loved, creating a whole culture, more than just a huge number of metal pieces arranged in a certain way to give birth to horsepower and raw sound. The first steps toward a new direction were taken in Detroit, where everyone had the same principles and the same blood diluted in petrol. The first three-colour traffic lights, the first road marks, the first burned tires were in Detroit, doing donuts and leaving tire marks on the tarmac, alongside with smoke and exhaust sound.

Located in the Great Lakes region on the border with Canada, Detroit is arguably not the obvious place to launch a motor manufacturing industry. Although Michigan was once rich with natural resources, such as timber, copper and iron, by the time the motor car came to town these had been depleted.

The unbelievable truth is that a single person discovered the potential of this unremarkable corner of North America. His ideas led directly to the automotive industry’s golden decades.

Trends have changed greatly from decade to decade. In the middle of ‘The American Century’, Detroit – the Motor City – was a powerhouse of the American Dream, spewing out rocket-finned Cadillacs as if there were no tomorrow. Yes, cars still have four wheels and some seats, but the Americans have always produced mainly large cars with big engine displacement. It hasn’t been a problem until tomorrow came,



the first oil crisis started, moment when everybody wanted fuel efficient cars from the east instead of the thirsty American ones. Detroit lost business to Japan, workers lost their jobs and, in July 2013, the city finally filed for bankruptcy.

Although the last 50 years haven't been as great as Henry Ford's era, Detroit cannot be uncrowned by any other city. There's only one "Motor City"





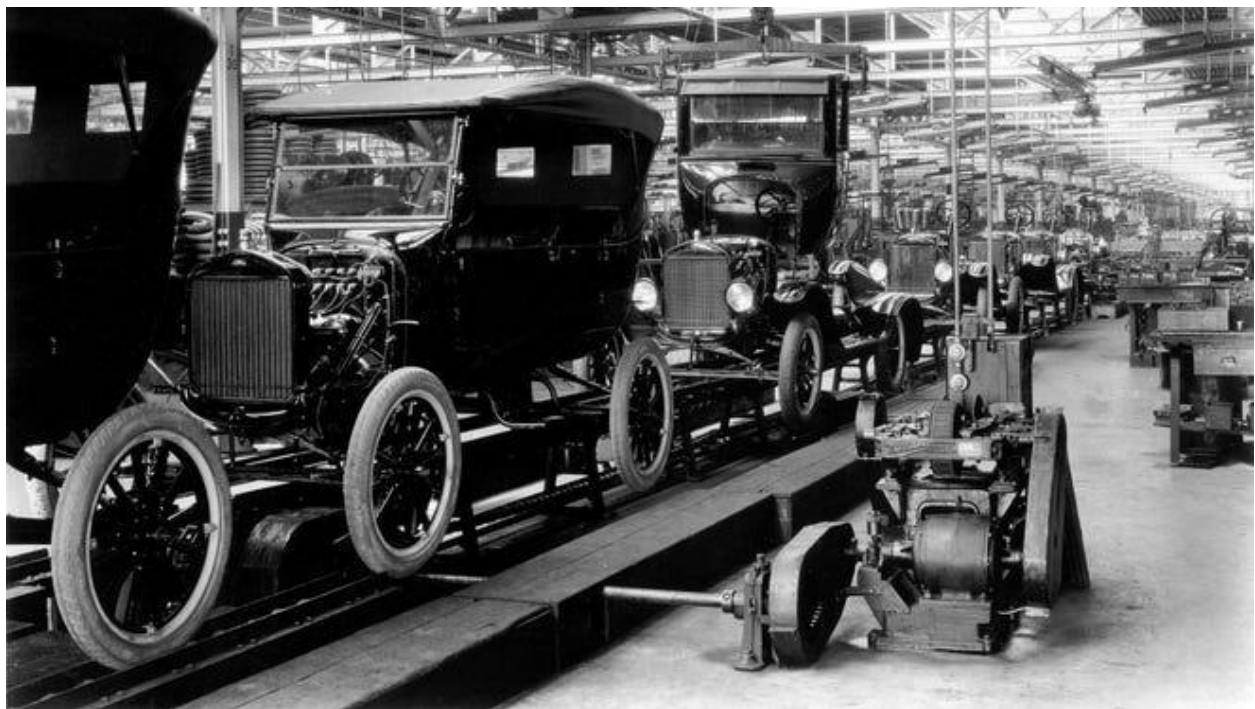
# The Rise

The auto industry thrived in Michigan for a number of reasons, but one of the simplest explanations is that key innovators lived and worked in the region: Henry Ford was born on a farm in nearby Greenfield Township, and Ransom Olds settled in Lansing from 1889. These two would go on to be two of the most important pioneers in the industry by the turn of the 20th century.

Detroit's geographical position between Chicago and the east coast, together with its bountiful natural resources made it a good location for manufacturing. It seemed like Ford and Olds had everything they needed to set up their businesses.

The two pioneers needed seed capital for their fledgling automobile companies. Although Ford is widely credited with the invention of the assembly line, the concept was patented by Olds and used in his own car factory in 1901. But it was Ford who perfected the line by incorporating driven conveyor belts.

Ford himself began experimenting with motorised vehicles in 1892 in a one-storey brick structure in downtown Detroit on the site of what is now the Michigan Building. Ford's "two-cylinder machine, mounted in a light frame geared to bicycle wheels" marked the beginning of the Ford Motor Company, which played a major part in the automobile industry that changed the face of Michigan and the world.





Olds is also responsible for Detroit's boom, with his decision to outsource the manufacturing of parts for his Oldsmobile, which meant that a wide range of companies and individuals were exposed to the growing industry and developed their own skills and knowledge. Notable suppliers include Henry Leland, who supplied engines to Olds and went on to found Cadillac and Lincoln; Benjamin Briscoe, who later helped to launch Buick; and the Dodge Brothers, who were also initial investors in Ford before starting their own company in 1915. The Olds Motor Works was bought by General Motors in 1908.



With the rapid growth of industrial workers in the auto factories, labor unions such as the American Federation of Labor and the United Auto Workers fought to organize workers to gain them better working conditions and wages. They initiated strikes and other tactics in support of improvements such as the 8-hour day/40-hour work week, increased wages, greater benefits and improved working conditions.

The city became the 4th-largest in the nation in 1920, after only New York City, Chicago and Philadelphia, with the influence of the booming auto industry.

#### *change of work shift at Ford Motor Company*

Detroit, like many places in the United States, developed racial conflict and discrimination in the 20th century following rapid demographic changes as hundreds of thousands of new workers were attracted to the industrial city. The Great Migration brought rural African-American population from the South. They were outnumbered by southern white population who also migrated to the city.

Apart from its own disruptions, caused by wartime and the Great Depression, Detroit grew as a centre of excellence for car production from its formative days until at least the 1950s. In 1929, for example, GM, Ford and Chrysler accounted for three-quarters of US car sales, understandably earning the collective nickname 'Big Three'. The auto industry had 296,000 manufacturing jobs in Detroit, and the name Motor City was in wide use





In the 1940s the world's "first urban depressed freeway" ever built, the Davison, was constructed in Detroit.

The intersection of Woodward and Michigan/Monroe was said to be the busiest intersection in the world.

Jobs expanded so rapidly that 400,000 people were attracted to the city from 1941 to 1943, including 50,000 African Americans in the second wave of the Great Migration, and 350,000 white people, many of them from the South. Some European immigrants and their descendants feared black competition for jobs and housing. The federal government prohibited discrimination in defense work but when in June 1943, Packard promoted three black people to work next to white people on its assembly lines, 25,000 whites walked off the job. The Detroit race riot of 1943 took place three weeks after the Packard plant protest. Over the course of three days, 34 people were killed, of whom 25 were African American. Approximately another 600 were injured, 75% of whom were black people.



As for the global market, according to figures from the International Organization of Motor Vehicle Manufacturers (OICA), the US produced nearly three-quarters of the 10 million worldwide vehicle sales by 1950.

Industrial mergers in the 1950s, especially in the automobile sector, increased oligopoly in the American auto industry. Detroit manufacturers such as Packard and Hudson merged into other companies and eventually disappeared. At its peak population of 1,849,568, in the 1950 Census, the city was the 4th-largest in the United States, before its long decline period.

# The Fall

As the first chapter presents, in the mid-20th century, Detroit was an icon of the motor industry and the backbone of America's blue-collar aspirations. Today, the legendary manufacturing plants lie in ruins and the city is a shadow of its former self. How did this empire fall?

The western car industry failed because of an influx of cheaper, more reliable vehicles from Japan. Indeed, the fall of Detroit from its iconic status as the Motor City is considered an allegory for the general decline in western motor manufacturing. However, the truth was far more complicated.

American auto makers were highly successful into the early 1970s, dominating the domestic auto market, producing huge numbers of cars, turning massive profits. But they had put together a mix of products that could not withstand the oil shocks of the mid-1970s. That opened the US market to a flood of more fuel-efficient imports that devastated the American manufacturers' market share.

But for Detroit, the problems started much earlier. In the late 1940s, the major manufacturers began moving production out of the city, partly so they could build new, more efficient plants elsewhere, partly to shift production away from what had become a union stronghold. By the late 1950s, even at the point when the US was producing the majority of the world's cars, Detroit was already experiencing dramatic de-industrialisation which strained the city's social fabric in horrific



ways. This strain culminated in the infamous 1967 Detroit riot, which caused 43 deaths and the destruction of some 2,000 buildings in a five-day period. mostly in black residential and business areas. Thousands of small businesses closed permanently or relocated to safer neighborhoods. The affected district lay in ruins for decades. It was the most costly riot in the United States.

The riot put Detroit on the fast track to economic desolation, mugging the city and making off with incalculable value in jobs, earnings taxes and corporate taxes. The money was carried out in the pockets of the businesses and the white people who fled as fast as they could in a 'white exodus' that jumped from 22,000 in 1966 to 67,000 in 1967 and 80,000 in 1968. In fact, the fall of Detroit in population terms alone is staggering: in 1950, it was America's fourth largest city with 1.85 million





inhabitants. By 2011 there were just 714,000: the lowest for a century.

Although it's easy to blame Detroit's problems on the decline of the motor industry, there's more to it than that. Most commentators blame a complicated mix of poor political leadership, racial tension and lack of investment. Detroit is an extreme case of problems that have afflicted every major old industrial city in the US. It's been 60-plus years of steady disinvestment, depopulation and an intensive hostility between the city, the suburbs and the rest of the state.

The gasoline crises of 1973 and 1979 also affected Detroit and the U.S. auto industry. Buyers chose smaller, more fuel-efficient cars made by foreign makers as the price of gas rose. Efforts to revive the city were stymied by the struggles of the auto industry, as their sales and market share declined. Automakers laid off thousands of employees and closed plants in the city, further eroding the tax base. To counteract this, the city used eminent domain to build two large new auto



assembly plants in the city. By 1980, domestic luxury cars with a 130-inch (3.3 m) wheelbase and gross weights averaging 4,500 pounds (2,041 kg) were no longer made. The automakers had begun phasing out the traditional front engine/rear wheel drive layout in compact cars in favor of lighter front engine/front wheel drive designs. A higher percentage of cars offered more efficient four-cylinder engines. Domestic auto makers also began offering more fuel-efficient diesel-powered passenger cars as well.

Although not regulated by the new legislation, auto racing groups voluntarily began conserving. In 1974, NASCAR reduced all race distances by 10%; the 24 Hours of Daytona and the 12 Hours of Sebring race were cancelled.



Previously a major population center and site of worldwide automobile manufacturing, Detroit has suffered a long economic decline produced by numerous factors. Like many industrial American cities, Detroit reached its population peak in the 1950 census. The peak population was 1.8 million people. Following suburbanization, industrial restructuring, and loss of jobs (as described above), by the 2010 census, the city had less than 40 percent of that number, with just over 700,000 residents. The city has declined in population in each census since 1950.

High unemployment was compounded by middle-class flight to the suburbs, and some residents leaving the state to find work. The city was left with a higher proportion of poor in its population, reduced tax base, depressed property values, abandoned buildings, abandoned neighborhoods, high crime rates and a pronounced demographic imbalance.

## Can we go back, please?



Today Detroit suffers from unemployment, poverty and other social problems although there are large urban renewal projects ongoing. Sadly a number of neighbourhoods have become no-go zones with houses left derelict and abandoned, a virtual ghost town in some areas. Many of the city's social problems have been documented by the rapper Eminem both in his music and in the movie 8 Mile, named after a road in the working class area of the city in which he was raised. The abandoned buildings have become hives of criminal activity and it

is feared it will be many years before Detroit begins to recover.

Unfortunately, Detroit is never going to be the industrial centre it once was, and certainly not the auto capital. It will have to build a new economy.



*downtown Detroit in 2010*

However, the city can be rebuilt from its downtown outward, with high tech driving the transformation. Gilbert's Rock Ventures group subsequently purchased more than 60 downtown properties as part of an initiative he calls Detroit 2.0, and his various businesses employ some 11,000 people in the city. According to Boyle, firms such as Google, Twitter, Uber and Microsoft Ventures have rented office space and Starbucks has returned to the city after a six-year absence.



These days, if you search for tourist activities in Detroit, you'll soon come across The Henry Ford Museum and its offshoots (including Greenfield Village, River Rouge factory tour and the inevitable IMAX theatre). There are also tours of the Ford Piquette Plant, which assembled nearly 12,000 Model Ts between 1908 and 1910, before the Highland Park facility opened. While this represents a commendable celebration of Detroit's automotive

history, a city cannot live on history alone. Luckily, there are already signs from the motor industry itself that Detroit may recover.



In September, GM announced that it will start building a new Cadillac sedan at its Detroit-Hamtramck plant on the city's east side from 2015. "The objective for this upcoming model is to lift the Cadillac range by entering the elite class of top-level luxury cars," said president Johan de Nysschen. The new Caddy is part of a \$384m investment in the assembly plant, which also makes the Opel Ampera, Chevrolet Impala and Cadillac ELR, a luxury version of the hybrid electric Chevrolet Volt.

Detroiters share their stories about the environmental work they're doing in the city, unearthing the growing number of urban farms gardens and mom-and-pop farms sprouting up in Detroit.

Despite activities within the car plants, the streets are where a city makes its image, and there is no denying that Detroit has an image problem. The downtown area still has more than its fair share of 'vacant lots', currently used as car parks, and dilapidated structures surrounded by security fences. Apartment buildings in the once exclusive Palmer Park Historic District, reflecting a melange of architectural styles from Art Deco to Venetian, are boarded up and falling apart. Visitors are discouraged from visiting some of the poorer neighbourhoods.



# Conclusion

Whatever anyone's personal taste towards cars, there's no denying that Detroit and Henry Ford built not only the perfect industry, but also denomination and has given the city a purpose.

Although it seemed like the Americans have discovered the recipe to conquer the global market, time has proven that no trend lasts forever. Many people still hope for Detroit's comeback for decades and until some years ago, things got worse and worse. Maybe turning everyone into decent gardeners is a cheap solution to dodge bankruptcy, but no soil will ever grow engines. No water will replace gasoline and photosynthesis is actually the opposite of what Detroit's products are supposed to do. Detroit won't ever produce cars in the way it used to.

Even if the next generation of automakers were to set up factories in Detroit, the world they are creating cars for has changed. American innovation is happening in other industries now, and it's up to today's Detroiters to find a modern expression for their powerful manufacturing culture.



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