

Detroit was a bustling city in the early 20th century. A new industry was starting to take shape in the city, and would soon make its presence known on a global scale. Mass production of automobiles put Detroit on the map as the “Motor City.” Two of the biggest automobile companies, Ford and General Motors, were located in Detroit. It is said Detroit put the world on wheels. It could also be said that one of these Detroit automakers, Cadillac, a branch of GM, put the world on *fancy* wheels.

Cadillac Motor Car Company began construction on its new Clark Street plant in 1919. The building was completed two years later, but automobile production did not begin until 1927. At the time of completion, the enormous four-story, 2.5-million-square-foot building was considered the “most modern automobile complex in the world.”¹ Just two years before production began, in 1925, Clark Street had been widened by 10 feet and paved with asphalt in order to ease the heavy traffic already being experienced by the plant’s builders.² By the time Clark Street Cadillac began production, auto manufacturing in the United States was already running at full speed, and so was Cadillac.

While its competitors generally outperformed the company, Cadillac definitely had the upper hand and the capacity to take a hold of as much of the luxury automobile market as possible. However, within just a couple of years, the depression hit and sales fell dramatically throughout the auto industry. After several rough years that included very low production rates, primarily in the early 1930s, Cadillac sales began to increase and Clark Street workers were working two shifts to keep up with the incredible demand. In fact, by 1936, the Clark Street plant, a mere nine years after its opening, was producing nearly 50 percent of all luxury cars in

1. Lolita Hernandez, *Autopsy of an Engine: and Other Stories from the Cadillac Plant* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004), 12.

2. Cadillac. *The Cadillac Craftsman*, Volume 5, No. 29, June 24, 1925.

America.³ Production numbers continued to ascend in the late 1930s, with the peak number of cars produced reaching 43,768 — most of which were the Cadillac LaSalle.⁴ These impressive production numbers and sales meant Clark Street was taking over the luxury automobile industry from another Detroit-based automaker — Packard — which ended its automobile production in 1956 after close to 60 years in business.⁵

Cadillac's Clark Street plant was a big plant with an even bigger impact on the American automobile industry. It was a plant — and a company — that made an excellent class of cars that are still revered today. Many have argued that its impact mirrored that of Ford's Piquette Plant, which had been “the factory that built the middle class.” In time, Cadillac's Clark Street plant would become quite the opposite — it was the factory that moved the upper class by engineering some of the finest luxury automobiles in the world.

In the 1960s, with business booming and cars rapidly coming off the assembly lines, Clark Street Cadillac expanded. The plant grew by 1.5 million square feet, which made it four million square feet in total, adding a fifth-floor paint shop and a second assembly line for increased production.⁶ At its peak, the Clark Street Cadillac plant employed an incredible 12,000 workers.⁷ Not only was this good for the production of Cadillac cars, but for the surrounding neighborhood as well. Bars, restaurants and local shops were flourishing just like the assembly lines at Clark Street were.

3. “Old Factories: Cadillac's Clark Street Assembly Plant,” Auto Trader Classics, accessed October 31, 2012, <http://www.autotraderclassics.com/car-article/Old+Factories%3A+Cadillac%E2%80%99s+Clark+Street+Assembly+Plant-192294.xhtml>.

4. Jeffrey D. Shively, *It Came Out Fighting! Cadillac Motor Car Division's rise to dominance of the luxury car market after World War II* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2008), 117.

5. “Last Packard produced,” History, accessed November 17, 2012, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/last-packard-produced>.

6. Auto Trader Classics.

7. Ibid.

But, of course, as the old saying goes: all good things must come to an end. The Clark Street plant, just like the auto industry as a whole, started showing a decline in the late 1970s. Auto Trader Classic said by the early 1980s, Cadillac's Clark Street plant became a bigger part of GM. It wasn't strictly a Cadillac assembly plant, but a Cadillac, Oldsmobile, and Chevrolet plant. It was also building police cars and taxicabs. General Motors was now consolidating platforms to optimize costs. The Cadillac name and assembly plant became just another GM plant. The uniqueness was gone as well as the perception of a precision, quality automobile. It marked the beginning of the end.⁸

And that's exactly what happened at Clark Street — the end. In 1986, General Motors announced that it would close 11 Midwest plants, including Cadillac's historic Clark Street plant. The assembly line shut down around a year after the announcement, and 7,300 jobs were eliminated.⁹

In 60 years of production at Clark Street Cadillac, workers made the greatest automobiles on the planet. The Cadillac name still holds prestige today with well-known phrases such as “it rides like a Cadillac.” Clark Street Cadillac may not have been the first automobile factory in Detroit, nor was it the most well-known, but it was the plant that put Southwest Detroit on the American map.

“The Plant that Built America's Luxury Automobile”

Cadillac's Clark Street facility devoured a massive chunk of land in Southwest Detroit. At the time of purchase, Cadillac had acquired around 47 acres of land at Clark and Scotten

8. Ibid.

9. James Risen, “GM to Close 11 Midwest Plants, Cut 29,000 Jobs,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1986, accessed October 31, 2012, http://articles.latimes.com/1986-11-07/news/mn-15593_1_plant-closings.

streets. The site was primarily chosen due to its location, as it was just east of where the Grand Trunk and Michigan Central railroads met.¹⁰

When the brand-new plant started automobile production in 1927, it started with the LaSalle. This luxury vehicle was the first American production automobile to be styled professionally. Prior to the LaSalle, functionality, not style had been the key concern for manufacturers.¹¹

When Cadillac first started producing the LaSalle, it was known as a luxury car in quality, but not in price — something that was new to the industry.¹² With the birth of the Clark Street plant, Cadillac saw an incredible rise in sales. In 1921, Cadillac made \$1,682,365 compared to 1929's over \$5.6 million in sales.¹³

As a plant that built luxury automobiles, Clark Street Cadillac always strived to produce the best cars in the industry. The plant did not just build luxury automobiles — it essentially built the upper class. In *It Came Out Fighting!* the author notes, “Not only was [the Cadillac town car] chauffeur [*sic*] driven, but the driver sat in an exposed compartment for all the world to see. During the boom times of the 1920s, such displays were almost essential for some in the upper class.”¹⁴

Cadillac was practically the industry standard for the upper class at the time. Owning a Cadillac was much more than just owning an automobile — it was showing a sign of wealth and status. Of course, men who in a lot of cases could not afford the automobiles that they were building actually *built* the Cadillacs, it was the marketing department at General Motors that built the Cadillac image and geared it toward the upper-class buyer. It is the same image that

10. Auto Trader Classics.

11. Shively, 12.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 18.

most people with any American-made car knowledge have today — the image that Cadillac is a smooth ride, and has a distinct look that leads people to recognize it as the best luxury automobile in America.

The vision of Alfred P. Sloan, who came to General Motors as a director in 1918 and rose to president by 1923, was to really *sell* the automobile to his customers.¹⁵ Sloan manipulated the idea of the American class structure to sell cars. His marketing genius at GM started with the “ladder” concept:

[He] envisioned a young couple buying a Chevrolet as their first new car. As their fortunes rose, they ascended the GM ladder. The next rung was Pontiac, followed by Oakland, Oldsmobile, Viking, Marquette, Buick, and LaSalle. When they finally reached the pinnacle of economic success, Cadillac was waiting for them. In the 1930 model year, General Motors produced then distinct lines of cars, ranging in price from \$495 for a base Chevrolet, to \$9,700 for Cadillac V-16. When [Sloan] sold a Chevrolet to a consumer, he fully expected someday that he would sell him a Cadillac.¹⁶

Meanwhile, as General Motors was producing these highly sought-after Cadillac automobiles, its workers were displeased with the lack of job security in the plants. In the years of the Great Depression, workers were often laid off. The company just could not afford to keep employees, and would often fire them or lay them off without cause. In these tough times, favoritism was rampant in the hiring and firing process.¹⁷ This was not just at the Clark Street

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid, 13.

17. Steve Babson et al., *Working Detroit: The Making of a Union Town* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 67.

plant, but in most of Detroit's auto factories. Workers were understandably resentful over the possibility of being fired or laid off so easily.

Charlie Westphal, a maintenance man at GM's [Clark Street] Cadillac plant ... vividly recalled the day Cadillac workers were lined up for rehiring after a long layoff in 1933. "It was raining, a cold, real cold rain. They wouldn't even let us inside the gates, and we had a couple of thousand people out there in the rain. So we came down at the foot of Clark Street, and there was a bar there...and that's where we organized what we called the AF of L Independent Auto Workers."¹⁸

Dangerous plant conditions also plagued workers at Clark Street, and all over America. In September 1933, conditions in the plants improved when Cadillac workers went on strike. There was an immediate stop to wage cutting, and improved conditions were forced in all Detroit plants.¹⁹

A strike on a grander level occurred four years later on January 9, 1937, from mostly members of the United Auto Workers. 3,800 employees at the Cadillac plant staged a sit-down strike, and the first picket lines were seen on Clark Street. Three days later, workers at other Detroit and Flint, Michigan, plants followed suit. They too staged a sit-down strike against General Motors. That strike became history when on February 11, GM agreed that the workers would have representation.²⁰

Charles Westphal, the Clark Street maintenance man who helped organize the AF of L Independent Auto Workers, became the first unit president for Cadillac at UAW Local 174, and

18. Babson, 67.

19. "Will the Auto Industry Strike Next?" Marxists, accessed November 1, 2012, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/swp-us/willauto.htm>.

20. "Local 22 History," UAW Local 22, accessed October 31, 2012, http://www.uaw22.org/?zone=/unionactive/view_article.cfm&HomeID=22489.

was also the unit plant chairman when UAW Local 22 received its charter. He would later serve four terms as president and six terms as plant chairman for Local 22.²¹

So, with enhanced rights in the workplace and a safer work environment, Cadillac employees at the Clark Street plant continued to make some of the world's greatest luxury automobiles.

A year later, in 1938, a new type of luxury car was created. Up until this point, luxury automobiles were chauffeur driven for the sake of prestige and class status. It was a sign that a person belonged to the upper class. However, E.L. Cord of Auburn Automobile had the idea in 1934 for personal luxury cars, driven by the elite themselves, rather than their chauffeurs. With that idea in mind, Cadillac produced the 1938 Series 60 Special. They had wide grills, which gave the front an impressive stance, and two doors that mimicked the appearance of convertibles.²²

Cadillac had transformed the luxury automobile, placing the steering wheel in the hands of the car's owner rather than a chauffeur. Cadillac, and Clark Street, was well on its way to becoming the premiere luxury car at the beginning of the 1940s. After all, the company had been eliminating most of its luxury automobile competitors in previous years.²³ In fact, it had also seemed to be moving ahead of Packard, longtime king of the luxury market (also based in Detroit). The public's excitement for the 1941 Cadillac, however, was hard to ignore, especially in comparison to its competitors.

Unprecedented rave reviews started pouring in as Cadillac dealerships across the country were packed with thousands of excited buyers. Telegrams of congratulations literally stacked up

21. Ibid.

22. Shively, 27.

23. Ibid, 30.

at the Clark plant.²⁴ October 1940 was the best sales month on record at Cadillac Motors, outstripping the previous record by six hundred units. By November, 23,000 orders had been placed, and Cadillac President Nicholas Dreystadt announced a twenty percent increase in production just to meet demand. As far as the company was concerned, the lean times of the 1930s had finally come to an end.²⁵

Cadillac may have been taking control of the upper-class and even upper middle-class consumers, however, there was an unexpected event that would occupy most of Cadillac's time over the next few years. Clark Street put a halt to the mass production of new Cadillac cars, and focused their efforts on World War II.

“We have the RIGHT JOB to do!”

On December 7, 1941, the United State naval base at Pearl Harbor was attacked in what was most definitely “a date which will live in infamy,” as President Franklin Roosevelt had proclaimed. However, that was not when Cadillac's involvement with the U.S. military began. General Motors had actually been doing defense work prior to tanks rolling off Cadillac's lines in 1942. In fact, GM had taken on \$4.14 million worth of defense work a year before the events at Pearl Harbor. Most of that total involved Cadillac, which produced numerous internal parts for Allison aircraft engines.²⁶

Cadillac had produced 15,000 tanks and parts for 70,000 aircraft engines during the war, starting in 1939. However, Cadillac's part in the war effort extended well beyond the Clark Street factory. Since someone had to service the products after they left the plant, GM created the War Service Program, a three-point program, under the direction of Vice President of Engineering C.L. McCuen.

24. Ibid, 35.

25. Ibid, 36.

26. Ibid, 71.

The program (1) prepared mechanics to service tanks and aircraft, (2) had experienced engineers observe the performance of the products under wartime conditions and suggest possible changes, and (3) made sure that both the army and navy had sufficient spare parts. The cost of the War Service Program was projected to exceed an incredible \$5 million in the first year alone.²⁷

In November 1941, the M-5 tank was just one of the machines that was in full production at the Clark Street plant. Cadillac had put two automotive V-8 engines on the tanks, one on each driving track. The War Department had been so impressed by the tanks that they ordered 75 of them.

In 1942, after three years of defense production, Cadillac put an advertisement in the *Saturday Evening Post* under the headline: “We have the RIGHT JOB to do!” It read:

Today, there is only one thing of fundamental importance to a manufacturer engaged in armament production: *build it well and build it fast, so our gallant soldiers and sailors may have fighting tools to match their skill and their heroism.*

Here at Cadillac, that is our one aim; and accomplishing it is our one great satisfaction.²⁸

The advertisement goes on to say that the company will be even better equipped for its work during peacetime. These ads, and the numerous others that Cadillac published throughout World War II, were integral in getting consumers to stay with the Cadillac brand even though new cars weren't even being produced during wartime.

By making the most essential parts of many of the U.S. war machines, such as the P-40 and P-38 aircrafts and the M-5 tank, among others, Cadillac reinforced its image of quality, even

27. Ibid, 74.

28. Ibid, 59.

though the engines in the planes and tanks they were building bore little resemblance to automobiles.²⁹

Cadillac's last war ad, in 1945, helped reinforce this image of quality to an even greater extent. The ad featured a sophisticated-looking woman above the headline: "I know what I'll buy *first!*" Below the headline, Cadillac plays on its customer loyalty, citing a poll that asked motorists to express an opinion as to what they expected their next car to be. According to the ad, Cadillac led the owners of all makes in saying they intended to be repeat buyers. The ad also tied the company's wartime efforts into it, saying, "Wartime driving has made it clearer than ever that Cadillac quality stands alone."³⁰

But, could Cadillac transition back to producing civilian cars? The answer was a resounding "yes!" During the war, Cadillac had the opportunity to modernize its facilities and improve its drivetrain at the War Department's expense, an advantage not given to its luxury rival Packard, a company that would soon meet its demise. At the end of World War II, it was only a matter of time before Cadillac would permanently remain the dominant producer of luxury automobiles in the United States.

From "Main Happening Street" to "Ghost Street"

Not only did Cadillac become the dominant producer of luxury automobiles, it put its main rival, Packard, out of business. In its final year of production in 1958, Packard made just 2,622 cars compared to Cadillac's 121,778.³¹ Cadillac went on to make innovations to not just the luxury industry, but the automotive industry as a whole.

29. Ibid, 88.

30. Ibid, 70.

31. Ibid, 118.

In 1953, Cadillac introduced the Eldorado, a front-wheel drive vehicle with a “sleek, modern design.” A year later, Cadillac became the first automaker to offer power steering and automatic windshield wipers as standard equipment.³²

From 1956 to 1965, Cadillac immensely outperformed its primary luxury competitors Chrysler, Lincoln, and the near-defunct Packard. During those years, Cadillac produced 1,512,504 cars compared to 338,982 from Lincoln (including the Continental, which was only produced from 1956 to 1960) and 181,862 from Chrysler (which produced the Imperial). Packard produced only 36,266 cars in three years, and they went out of business in 1958.³³

The sheer dominance of Cadillac carried over to its workers at the Clark Street plant. As Lolita Hernandez, a former employee at the plant, noted, “Clark Street was the main happening street.”³⁴

People used to be thick on that street, especially in the summer at lunchtime. On a summer day you could see them sitting on the curbs, the administration building ledges, under shade trees. They were cooling off, discussing line speeds or department gossip; they were waiting to return to those big, beautiful, shiny Caddies. How people loved to say that they built Cadillacs ... the ultimate luxury car of the nation. How people loved to let the name Cadillac roll off their tongues the way those babies rolled off the line.³⁵

That’s what Clark Street was throughout its history. It was home to thousands of workers who, on a small scale, boosted the economy of Southwest Detroit, and on a larger scale, were able to produce the best luxury cars in the nation.

32. Greg Tasker, “Cadillac: General Motors' benchmark for luxury automobiles,” *Detroit News*, September 16, 2008, accessed October 31, 2012, <http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20080916/AUTO01/809160321>.

33. Shively, 118.

34. Hernandez, 13.

35. *Ibid.*

It continued to do just that until the auto industry began to decline in the late 1970s. Marking the beginning of the end, the motor line moved to Livonia, Michigan, in 1979.³⁶ By the early 1980s, Clark Street Cadillac became a larger part of General Motors. No longer did it solely produce Cadillac cars. It now produced Oldsmobile and Chevrolet vehicles, as well as police cars and taxicabs.³⁷

Any trace of the plant's uniqueness as a Cadillac-only facility had disappeared. The final car assembly line shut down in December 1987, and moved to Arlington, Texas. Plating discontinued operations in March 1993. Finally, Engineering closed in March 1994, marking the official end of the Clark Street plant.³⁸

“If you have a mother or father dying slowly, you see them diminish,” said Hernandez, “The end is coming; you should be prepared. But when your loved one crosses that nodal line from which there is no return, you are still in shock. You still grieve.”³⁹

This is what workers at the plant felt during the final days of Clark Street Cadillac. Thousands of employees were losing a loved one in the Clark Street factory. But that was just on the individual scale. Clark Street was a place where thousands and thousands of luxurious Cadillacs were assembled, one right after the other, for 60 years. It was a place where World War II was fought, and won. It was a place that was familiar for so many people in Southwest Detroit and the entire city. And it produced a stellar product that was familiar to people on an international level.

And, as if it were a cruel metaphor for the city of Detroit as a whole, it was a plant that was vacated. What remains today, however, is not a vacant property. It's Clark Street

36. Ibid, 12.

37. Auto Trader Classics.

38. Hernandez, 12.

39. Ibid, 18.

Technology Park, which provides Detroit with a first class technology park with primary tenants being suppliers to the automotive industry.⁴⁰ The old Cadillac plant may not remain standing between Clark and Scotten, but its memory remains under the hoods of thousands of priceless cars.

40. "Clark Street Technology Park – Land," Pure Michigan, accessed November 18, 2012, <http://ref.michigan.org/medc/services/sitedevelopment/selectsites/combo.asp?cat=184&ContentId=1D05120B-0C94-4187-9875-80E91EAE7B7D&QueueId=1&ContentTypeId=10005>.

Bibliography

- Auto Trader Classics. "Old Factories: Cadillac's Clark Street Assembly Plant." Accessed October 31, 2012. <http://www.autotraderclassics.com/car-article/Old+Factories%3A+Cadillac%E2%80%99s+Clark+Street+Assembly+Plant-192294.xhtml>.
- Babson, Steve, Alpern, Ron, Elsil, Dave, and Revitte, John. *Working Detroit: The Making of a Union Town*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986.
- Cadillac. *The Cadillac Craftsman*, Volume 5, No. 29, June 24, 1925.
- Hernandez, Lolita. *Autopsy of an Engine: and Other Stories from the Cadillac Plant*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004.
- History. "Last Packard produced." Accessed November 17, 2012. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/last-packard-produced>.
- Marxists. "Will the Auto Industry Strike Next?" Accessed November 1, 2012. <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/swp-us/willauto.htm>.
- Risen, James. "GM to Close 11 Midwest Plants, Cut 29,000 Jobs." *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1986. Accessed October 31, 2012. http://articles.latimes.com/1986-11-07/news/mn-15593_1_plant-closings.
- Pure Michigan. "Clark Street Technology Park – Land." Accessed November 18, 2012. <http://ref.michigan.org/medc/services/sitedevelopment/selectsites/combo.asp?cat=184&ContentId=1D05120B-0C94-4187-9875-80E91EAEBB7D&QueueId=1&ContentTypeId=10005>.
- Shively, Jeffrey D. *It Came Out Fighting! Cadillac Motor Car Division's rise to dominance of the luxury car market after World War II*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2008.
- Tasker, Greg. "Cadillac: General Motors' benchmark for luxury automobiles," *Detroit News*, September 16, 2008. Accessed October 31, 2012. <http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20080916/AUTO01/809160321>.
- UAW Local 22. "Local 22 History." Accessed October 31, 2012. http://www.uaw22.org/?zone=/unionactive/view_article.cfm&HomeID=22489.

Images, Links for More Information and Dead Ends

Lolita Hernandez's *Autopsy of an Engine* and Jeffrey Shively's *It Came Out Fighting!* were both terrific sources. They are great reads, and I would suggest that they are featured on the web treatment along with some of the following links. Some of the links include photos that could be potentially used on the web treatment also. Photos of Cadillac ads can be found in *It Came Out Fighting!* As for dead ends, there are no photos in the archives at the Burton Historical Collection or much else written on Clark Street. Also, I couldn't find anything at WSU's Reuther or DPL's Skillman branch. There is information on plant strikes at the Reuther, though I didn't really get into it as that's not where my focus was.

This link has photos of the inside and outside of the plant. It gives a brief history of the Cadillac plant similar the first section of this paper.

<http://www.autotraderclassics.com/car-article/Old+Factories:+Cadillac%E2%80%99s+Clark+Street+Assembly+Plant-192294.xhtml>.

This link has a short history of Cadillac, and includes its days at the Clark Street plant.

<http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20080916/AUTO01/809160321>.

This link goes directly to a really cool picture of an old Cadillac.

<http://www.cadillac1956.eu/fotoindex/cad56garage01.jpg>.

This link has miscellaneous photos from the Clark Street plant.

<http://dlxs.lib.wayne.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?type=bbaglist;view=bbthumbnail;bbdbid=309>.

This link goes to a video that shows the plant's body drop in its current home...the Detroit Historical Museum.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDW7flxdZiQ>.

This link has some cool photos from the mid 1970s.

http://www.bicentennialeldorado.com/generalmotors_new.html.

This link has some information about UAW Local 22.

http://www.uaw22.org/?zone=/unionactive/view_article.cfm&HomeID=22489.

<http://www.autotraderclassics.com/car-article/Old+Factories:+Cadillac%E2%80%99s+Clark+Street+Assembly+Plant-192294.xhtml>.