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# Overcoming Fear: Realizing Production at the Willow Run Bomber Plant

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Henry Ford's farm in Ypsilanti, Michigan, twenty-five miles west of Detroit became the site and home to the Willow Run plant. The fourteen-hundred acre farm produced soybeans and included an apple orchard. The farm was something akin to a boys camp. There, boys who had lost their fathers in World War I found a place to study and work during the summer months. In 1941, the trickling sound of the Willow Run creek that ran through the farm and from which the plant took its name, gave way to the sound of machines.<sup>1</sup> Bulldozers began clearing the site in 1941 to make way for the massive Willow Run Bomber Plant.<sup>2</sup> The main building alone was sixty-seven acres under one roof. By May 1942, thirty-thousand workers had produced their first B-24 Liberator.<sup>3</sup> Efficiency continued to improve and by November 1943 Willow Run had produced one-thousand Liberators. A month after D-day Ford Motor Company made good on its promise to build one bomber an hour.<sup>4</sup> At its pinnacle, Willow Run employed 42,331 workers. When production ceased in June 1945 the plant had produced a total of 8,685 Liberators.<sup>5</sup> The numbers are impressive but impersonal, because they mask the labor relation and housing difficulties both hourly and salaried employees had to overcome. To realize production at the Willow Run Bomber, workers had to overcome the culture of fear that existed at Ford Motor Company and their fear of an unfamiliar diverse workplace.

## Main Sources

In his book, *The Arsenal of Democracy: FDR, Detroit, and an Epic Quest to Arm an America at War*, A.J. Baime focused on the relationship between Edsel and Henry Ford. Their views differed on politics, business, family, and friends. This created a rather cold father and son relationship. Not content to live a comfortable life outside the company, the ailing Edsel chose to persevere and remain active within the company for three reasons. First, Edsel wanted to make a name for himself in his own right.<sup>6</sup> Second, he wished to groom the heir of the Ford empire, his son

Henry II. Third, Edsel wanted to shield Henry II from the darker side of the company business.<sup>7</sup> The dark side of the Ford Empire lay with the company's security division, the Ford Service Department, and its master, Harry Bennett. Baime dedicated an entire chapter to this company henchman entitled *The Ford Terror*. Baime also discussed in-depth the large migration of southern workers, both black and white, that came seeking work at the Willow Run plant. When they arrived, they found insufficient housing and public infrastructure; by-products of a defense industry created in short order, at the beginning of the Second World War.

In his memoir *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW/ A Memoir*, Victor G. Reuther documented the UAW's role in the labor movement. Victor G. Reuther, together with his brothers Walter and Roy, dedicated their lives to create and strengthen the United Auto Workers union. Both Walter and Victor survived assassination attempts; Walter in 1948<sup>8</sup> and Victor in 1949,<sup>9</sup> but this did not deter them from striving to create a workplace for UAW members rooted in equality and free of fear. To realize this at Ford Motor Company, they would have to get by men such as Harry Bennett. Bennett's involvement with the Battle of the Overpass in 1937 appears in detail. In addition, an excellent description of labor's struggle with General Motors provides a broad view of the labor movement during this period. Events such as the Flint Sit-Down Strikes that include the famous Battle of Bulls Run at the Fisher Body Two plant in January 1937 demonstrate a promising and strengthening labor movement.

Robert Lacey's *Ford: The Men and the Machines* begins with the Ford family arriving in America from Ireland in 1832 and ends with William Clay Ford in the 1980s. Indeed, the work discusses the company's fight with unionists but details sometimes forgotten figures that played a large part in the company's success. For instance, Charles E. Sorenson, a high-ranking production boss that provided instrumental leadership at both the Rouge and Willow Run, finds mention through much of the narrative. Henry Ford had offered a job to him in 1905<sup>10</sup> and he stayed with Ford until 1944.<sup>11</sup> Lacey discussed Henry II in depth. In 1945, Henry II became president of Ford Motor Company with full decision-making power. Nevertheless, he had inherited a company that had fallen well behind General Motors and Chrysler in sales and design. The old guard had run its course and one of Henry II's first acts as president was to remove Harry Bennett from the payroll.<sup>12</sup> The *Dark Angel*, as Lacey described him,<sup>13</sup> was gone.

In his book *Ford: We Never Called Him Henry*, Bennett places blame for the violence and dirty play on Henry Ford. "Nothing ever happened at the Ford

Motor Company without Mr. Ford's knowledge; that was a physical impossibility."<sup>14</sup> That he is so adamant about this suggests he is trying to redirect responsibility for his own questionable behavior. Regardless of what Henry Ford knew or did not know about Bennett's activities, Henry Ford is responsible for giving Bennett a free hand in the affairs of the Company.<sup>15</sup> As it was, Harry Bennett answered only to Henry Ford. He was Henry Ford's "eyes and ears"<sup>16</sup> of the company. So close was the relationship between Bennett and Henry Ford that Bennett believed Henry thought of him as a son.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, there was much conflict between Edsel and Bennett in this matter.<sup>18</sup> Also discussed are the fights with the unions. So antagonistic did Henry Ford and Bennett find the unions that they refused to speak the name Reuther or Frankenstein, rather, they referred to them as "union bosses."<sup>19</sup>

### Harry Bennett

Henry Ford met Harry Bennett in New York City in 1916 as a matter of coincidence. Ford planned to meet with the noted newspaper journalist Arthur Brisbane at the Ford sales headquarters for New York.<sup>20</sup> Bennett was a sailor. His enlistment was up and he was coming ashore with his friend from the S.S. *Nashville* in the port of New York the same day. Both men enlisted together and intended to reenlist together but were determined to have some fun as civilians first.<sup>21</sup> The fun began not long after Bennett stepped off his ship. On the dock, a fight involving Bennett broke out. Brisbane saw the fight unfold and were it not for Brisbane convincing the police that Bennett was defending himself and his friend, the police would have taken Bennett to jail. Rather than the inside of a jail cell, Brisbane, clearly intrigued by Bennett, invited him to his appointment with Henry Ford. Ford also found Bennett intriguing and questioned Bennett in matters of toughness and marksmanship. The conversation cascaded into a de facto job interview. When the conversation was over, Bennett had secured Henry Ford's interest and a position at Ford Motor Company.

Ford intended to send Bennett to the still under construction, River Rouge Plant in Dearborn, Michigan, or as it is more commonly known as *the Rouge*. With this in mind, Ford instructed Bennett to stay in New York and work under Gaston Plantiff, the New York sales manager.<sup>22</sup> Plantiff did not think much of Bennett and put him to work doing menial tasks with instructions to stay out of the way. Not satisfied with the situation, Bennett, who was originally from Ann Arbor, Michigan, left for Detroit to stay with his aunt. With the help of his personal contact, a Mr.

Stiemetz, he secured a meeting with the high-ranking company man Earnest Liebold at the Highland Park plant. Liebold informed Henry Ford that Bennett was poking around the plant asking to meet with him. Now in his charge, Liebold put Bennett behind a desk with no other instructions but to sit and wait.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps this was part of Henry Ford's plan—to test Bennett's patience and mettle. As such, Henry Ford refused Bennett's initial requests to meet with him but kept him around nonetheless. Tired of sitting at a desk doing nothing, Bennett secured a job in the art department. As Bennett was an unknown and favored by Henry Ford, he quickly won the disdain of his co-workers and superiors. When the harassment became more than Bennett wished to deal with, he quit. When Henry Ford found out about it he called him to a meeting and afterwards Bennett would return to his post. This cycle repeated for six months until Bennett had had enough of the hazing and settled matters with his fists. Bennett was five foot seven inches tall and weighed in at a hundred and forty-five pounds. His antagonist, a man under the charge of A.B. Jewett, was twice that but it mattered not. Bennett's victory in the fight began his career at Ford Motor Company in earnest. Perhaps this is what Henry Ford was waiting for, because soon after the incident, Ford called for Bennett and sent him to the Rouge as his personal liaison.<sup>24</sup>

By 1920, Bennett was head of the Ford Service Department and as such, had at his command one of the largest privately owned security forces in existence.<sup>25</sup> His office was located in the basement of the Rouge, complete with an underground garage. Thus, it was difficult for employees to know when he was there or when he left. Ford employees never knew where Bennett was, but they always knew he or one of his Service Men were close.<sup>26</sup> Workers were terrified of Bennett and his Service Department and as a result, many workers suffered nervous breakdowns and related illnesses such as the "Ford Stomach."<sup>27</sup> Roscoe Smith, a Ford engineer, recalled the atmosphere at the company. "I think it was just fear that caused this tension in the company. A lot of people, when [Bennett's men] came around and started taking them apart, just couldn't take it. They couldn't stand the pressure."<sup>28</sup> His staff included ex-convicts, underworld types, and football players all charged with keeping order as defined by Bennett. Through contacts at the Michigan State Prison in nearby Jackson, Michigan, Bennett secured paroled inmates to work for him. Of particular use to Bennett were his spies, and they were everywhere. One never knew whom they could trust and whom they could not. Saying the wrong thing, innocent or otherwise, could mean a beating in the men's room, on the way out the company gates or at one's home.<sup>29</sup> Nothing went on at the Rouge without Bennett knowing

about it. So brash was Bennett, that he paraded lions and tigers through the Rouge on a leash.<sup>31</sup> The intimidation aspect of this is clear and so was the message—speed up the line!

### The Eccentric Henry Ford

That Henry Ford favored a man like Bennett leads to questions concerning his rationality. One explanation may be eccentricity produced by a brilliant mind, and if nothing else, Henry Ford was eccentric. For example, he so despised Franklin D. Roosevelt that early on he outright refused to help manufacture goods for the war effort. A good example of this is the deal he backed out of in June 1940 to manufacture six thousand Rolls-Royce Merlin aviation engines for the British Spitfire fighter.<sup>32</sup> Yes, Henry Ford was a pacifist, and indeed, he had stated earlier that he would not produce war products for other countries.<sup>33</sup> But to go back on his word two days after the deal was agreed upon and made public, makes it clear he was provoking Roosevelt as a means to retaliate against his New Deal policies.<sup>34</sup> Bennett believed this is why Henry Ford accepted the Nazi Grand Cross of the Golden Eagle medal. Ford believed it would outrage FDR, and in that way, he could strike back at FDR's policies.<sup>35</sup> Regardless of how eccentric Henry Ford was or how illogical and questionable his decisions were, he still controlled the company outright and he ran it as he saw fit. He intended to do so without the presence of the unions.

### The Overpass

With the passage of the Roosevelt-supported Wagner Act in 1935, workers had the legal right to organize.<sup>36</sup> Ford felt Roosevelt's New Deal policies were an intrusion into his business, and he felt the same way about the unions. That Roosevelt supported the Wagner Act served to deepen Ford's resentment of both Roosevelt and the unions. Unbeknownst to Henry Ford at that time, his future employees at his Willow Run Bomber Plant would be members of the United Auto Workers. The struggle to unionize Ford Motor Company would not be easy. One of the most famous episodes in UAW-Ford lore is the Battle of the Overpass, May 26, 1937.

To allow its employees quicker access to the Rouge, Ford Motor Company built a pedestrian overpass at Miller Road near gate four. The company had built the overpass at its own expense but leased it to the Detroit Railway Commission. Thus,

it was open for public use and in this way, was not private property.<sup>37</sup> In early May, 1937, Walter Reuther, the future president of the UAW, applied for a permit to hand out union literature near gate four of the Rouge. The Wagner Act guaranteed unionists the right to do so. Make no mistake, Harry Bennett's network of spies relayed the information to him probably through a public official the day Reuther applied for the permit.<sup>38</sup> As it was, the entire city of Dearborn was under the influence of Ford Motor Company.<sup>39</sup>

As such, Bennett ordered his men to tighten security in the already tense atmosphere of the Rouge. Hourly employees dared not mention anything associated with the union as it was. Being overheard now could provoke a Service Man in the worst way.<sup>40</sup> Bear in mind, workers did not always know who Bennett's men were. To counter the fear of the Service Department and help strengthen the courage and resolve of Ford workers, the UAW took the fight right to the gates of the Rouge. Walter Reuther, together with other union officials including Richard Frankenstein, began handing out union literature on

the Miller Road overpass during shift change. It was not long before thirty or forty Service Men arrived. They began shouting at the unionists to leave, but they held

## Ford Workers

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# UNIONISM NOT FORDISM

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***Now is the time to Organize!  
The Wagner Bill is behind you!  
Now get behind yourselves!***

General Motors Workers, Chrysler Workers, Briggs Workers have won higher wages and better working conditions. 300,000 automobile workers are marching forward under the banner of the United Automobile Workers Union.

JOIN NOW IN THE MARCH AND WIN:

**Higher Wages and Better Working Conditions  
Stop Speed-up by Union Supervision  
6 Hour Day, 3 Dollars Minimum Pay  
Job Security thru Seniority Rights  
End the Ford Service System  
Union Recognition**

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**Organize and be Recognized - JOIN NOW!**

Union Headquarters	}	Michigan Avenue at Addison
for Ford Workers:	}	Vernor Highway West, and Lawndale

Sign up at Union Headquarters for Ford Workers or at any office of the United Automobile Workers

1324 Clay at Russell 2441 Milwaukee at Chene 11725 Oakland at Tuxedo 4044 Leuschner at Dwyer 11640 East Jefferson 10904 Mack at Lemay 77 Victor at John R.	8944 Jos. Campau at Playfair 11440 Charlevoix at Gladwin 1343 East Ferry at Russell 3814—35th Street at Michigan 2730 Maybury Grand at Michigan 4715 Hastings Street Room 509 Hofmann Bldg.
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Figure 1: A copy of the flyer handed out the day of the Battle of the Overpass. Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

firm. The Service Men attacked. They picked up Reuther and threw him to the ground at least eight times. While he was on the ground, they repeatedly kicked him in the head, groin, and mid-section. Richard Frankenstein fared no better. The Service Men pulled his jacket over his head thereby making him defenseless. Thus, administering the beating was straightforward. Women were not immune from the Service Men. They too were thrown to the ground and kicked. William Merriweather, a union member, tried to help one woman under attack and the Service Men were quick to turn their attention to him. He suffered a broken back.<sup>41</sup> Policemen were present but did not intervene.<sup>42</sup> However, newspaper cameramen were on the overpass when the attacks started and were able to capture images while the attacks were taking place. When the images made the newspapers around the country, public opinion turned in favor of the union.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the struggle to organize Ford workers continued for another four years, and were it not for Clara Ford, Henry's wife, the fighting would have continued. As it was, Clara had had enough of the violence and demanded that Henry settle matters with the union. If not, she was leaving him.<sup>44</sup> Henry was powerless at this point and later remarked, "Don't ever discredit the power of a woman."<sup>45</sup>



Figure 2: Harry Bennett. Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

## The Contract

In 1941, Ford workers had union representation and a contract that could counter Harry Bennett and the culture of fear that existed at Ford Motor Company. A copy of the contract with the International UAW dated 1942 offers a look into how the work atmosphere was at Willow Run. A section of the contract concerning a grievance procedure and one on seniority is poignant. Employees with grievances had the right to present their grievance to the company either directly to their foreman or through their union committeeman. With the grievance in hand, both the committeeman and the foreman negotiated in an effort to resolve the problem. If the issue persisted, the grievance went to the plant committee and a company representative. Both the company and the union had two weeks to resolve the issue. If the issue was still not resolved, it went before an appeals board.<sup>46</sup>

The contract also recognized seniority. Unlike the traditional Big Three Automakers two-week shutdown period in July, in the 1930s there existed an annual indefinite layoff. The layoffs began in June or July. Since there existed no system of seniority, the foreman had full control over one's fate. The foreman simply sent workers home and told them not to return until instructed to do so. Much to the disgust of their co-workers, if one pandered to the foreman's whims, he or she might receive an extra week or two of work. When the company issued recalls, workers reported to the Miller Road gate ready for work. The foreman choose who worked. Those not chosen waited outside the plant for an undetermined amount of time, sometimes days or weeks went by. If rehired, there was no guarantee of returning to one's previous rate of pay. For example, if a worker performed well and received pay raises in the past, he or she may well have to restart at the entry-level rate of pay. Even if employees exemplified quality work in the past, they might still find themselves jobless at rehire time.<sup>47</sup> The contract allowed the union local to decide precisely how seniority worked, for example, whether or not seniority was interchangeable within determined departments or plant wide.<sup>48</sup> However the local decided to implement seniority; it provided a measure of job security and alleviated the anxiety and uncertainty that accompanied the rehire process. Furthermore, to eliminate spying, Ford Service Men were to wear identifying attire.<sup>49</sup>

It is easy to see how the old system produced anxiety and fear.<sup>50</sup> Walter Reuther was well aware of the working conditions inside the automotive industry. He came to Detroit in 1927 and found work at "the slaughterhouse" or Briggs

Manufacturing Company. Though he was a tool and die maker, he took a position as a drill press operator. Later that year he gained a tool and die position at the Rouge. Without explanation, Ford Motor Company discharged and blacklisted him in 1932.<sup>52</sup> As he was an active organizer and openly supported progressive politicians, it is not hard to understand why. Nevertheless, by 1941 Ford workers were union brothers and sisters. An excerpt from a letter sent to Walter from his former Polish co-workers at the Rouge is telling of the change in attitude workers felt towards one another after unionization. "I thank you, brother Reuther, for what you and UAW has done for me. Once in the Ford plant they called me "dumb Polack," but now with UAW they call me "brother."<sup>52</sup>

### Housing

The tools the union provided promoted fair play, but it could not fully temper the racial and sectional tension the work force at Willow Run encountered. At the time of Pearl Harbor, a few thousand people were already working in the cavernous Willow Run plant while construction was still going on.<sup>53</sup> But the plant was far from realizing full production. The plant was twenty-seven miles from Detroit, and Edsel Ford, the man responsible for the project, was counting on the Detroit metropolitan area to house and support the forty-thousand workers that would work there. However, in an effort to conserve fuel and rubber, rationing laws forbid the twenty-seven mile commute. This resulted in workers setting up makeshift abodes adjacent to or very near the plant itself. After a short time, the view outside the plant was a maze of tents and trailers that grew daily. The local municipalities were not equipped to endure this mass migration. Public utilities such as sewers, electricity, and drinking water were a luxury to the newcomers, but after twelve years of economic depression, most people accepted the situation. Between 1940 and 1944, over two hundred thousand people migrated to southeastern Michigan to work.<sup>54</sup> So unprepared was rural Ypsilanti for the population explosion it was to endure, township officials scrambled to initiate its first health department. As it was, Ypsilanti Township already had a high infant mortality rate and outbursts of scarlet fever, but conservative officials refused to implement a health department. Nevertheless, the huge migration of defense workers that continued to flow into the area settled the matter. The city of Ann Arbor already had a health department and continued to administrate it. But in June 1941 Washtenaw County realized its first health department.<sup>55</sup>

The limited housing and infrastructure were responsible for high absenteeism thereby limiting the efficiency of the bomber plant.<sup>56</sup> With this in mind, union officials such as Walter Reuther proposed planned communities for Willow Run workers or "Bomber Cities" as far back as 1941. When it came time for planning in 1942, three sites proved promising. Two of the proposed sites were near the cities of Wayne and Inkster and one in Superior Township near Ann Arbor in Washtenaw County. All three sites were within thirteen miles of the bomber plant. Federally funded and coordinated by the newly created Public Housing Authority, the project met no opposition from the cities of Wayne and Inkster. However, conservative Superior Township opposed the project because they feared forty thousand union members would create a progressive voting bloc.<sup>57</sup>

Conservatives won a partial victory in their efforts to prevent Willow Run workers from living in their vicinity. The Federal Housing Commission (FHC) constructed temporary dormitories and apartments within walking distance of the plant not far from the originally desired location in Washtenaw County. The Wayne and Inkster locations received permanent housing structures.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, the much-needed housing would come well after the housing shortage was apparent. Until the housing projects were completed, workers had to make due in their shantytowns, living in close proximity with unfamiliar people.

The close quarters in the shantytowns ignited a culture clash. To find able bodies to work at Willow Run, Harry Bennett sent recruiters to the South to distribute bus passes to Willow Run. Indeed, candidates arrived, and with them, southern ideas concerning race.<sup>59</sup> Some openly voiced their opinion of the situation by stating they would rather see Germany or Japan win the war than work next to a black man.<sup>60</sup>

### Black Workers and Ford Motor Company

The First World War ended substantial immigration from Europe at a time when manufacturing was gearing up for war production.<sup>61</sup> With this pool of prospective workers cut off, industry realized a labor crisis. Eager for opportunity and to escape the Jim Crow South, southern blacks began moving to the North. This population movement, known as the Great Migration, produced striking numbers.<sup>62</sup> In 1900, five-thousand blacks lived in Detroit. In 1920, there were forty-thousand with more arriving every month. It is worth mentioning that Detroit served as part of the Underground Railroad to Canada.<sup>63</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, it

still served as a way to escape the oppression of the old South by offering jobs in the automobile industry. Ford Motor Company already had a history of hiring blacks when other car companies would not. For example, in the late 1920s, blacks represented ten percent of the Ford workforce. At Chevrolet, the number was three and one half percent and at Chrysler, it was one and one half percent.<sup>64</sup> Henry Ford's views on race, particularly his suspicion of the Jews, are well known. However, his reservations did not include blacks whom he vied as solid producers.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, the opportunities provided to black workers by Ford Motor Company came at a cost to both blacks and whites. Knowing that blacks had little opportunity outside of Ford Motor Company, Henry Ford was able to squeeze a considerable amount of work out of them. Married black men were the ideal candidates. Known as "Ford Mules,"<sup>66</sup> they were easy to identify by their dirty and exhausted appearance at the end of the workday. To be clear, the moniker "Ford Mule" was not limited to black workers. For example, Walter M. Cuningham, a white Ford worker in the 1920s who worked the midnight shift, overcome with fatigue, fell asleep on the streetcar on the way home. He woke well past his stop with his head resting on a black woman's shoulder. She noticed his Ford badge and was understanding.<sup>67</sup> She said, "It's alright white man. My man he done works at Ford's too, on de night shift so ah know how tired yo all is."<sup>68</sup> Management regularly pitted black workers against white workers. The pace at the Rouge was unrelenting. Production supervisors drove workers in an effort to speed up the line and out produce the production supervisor of the previous shift. If workers responded with an increase of production, they were expected to beat that mark as were the other shifts. So harsh were the production supervisors, Charles Sorenson earned the nickname Simon Legree. Legree was a slave driver in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.<sup>69</sup> It was commonplace for supervisors to put black workers and white workers in the same vicinity and drive them. "Get a move on! Are you going to let this [negro] get ahead of you?"<sup>70</sup> Indeed, black workers took jobs at Ford Motor Company whites did not want such as foundry work, but they also held positions in management with authority over whites.<sup>71</sup> This type of labor policy was both progressive and antagonistic. The presence of women workers, both black and white, added to an already unfamiliar diverse workplace.

### Women Workers

On June 25, 1941, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802. The

order encouraged companies issued defense contracts to include in its workforce “all citizens of the United States regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, in the firm belief that the democratic way of life within the Nation can be defended successfully only with the help and support of all groups within its borders.”<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, Ford Motor Company believed it had final say on whom it hired not the Roosevelt administration. In January 1942, the UAW met with the company to discuss wages at the Willow Run plant and addressed the issue of women workers. At this time, there were no women workers at Willow Run. When it came time to hire women, the UAW urged that the company include black women and that they should represent seven percent of the female workforce. On May 29, 1942, a committee supported by the UAW and composed of community leaders, met with Harry Bennett on the matter of hiring black women at Willow Run.<sup>73</sup> At this time, there were eleven-thousand white women working at the bomber plant but no black women and the UAW wanted to know why.<sup>74</sup> Bennett was not receptive to the committee. It seems Bennett disregarded his own past actions when he stated, “The unions were a bunch of cut-throats and liars and that they [Ford Motor Company] had the payroll locked up and he [the UAW] could not get to it.”<sup>75</sup> Bennett continued and implied the women at the bomber plant were creating scandals and Henry Ford was not going to stand for it. With this in mind, the women at the bomber plant should “go home and stay home.”<sup>76</sup> In a letter to Walter Reuther dated August 20, 1942, Horace Sheffield, a member of the UAW National Defense Employment Committee, updated him on the hiring practices of the company. At that time, there were thirty-thousand workers at the plant. Among them were three thousand women but no black women. Furthermore, the company failed to hire black men to work at the bomber plant. However, they did transfer four hundred and twenty-five black men from the Rouge. Ford Motor Company's stubbornness was clear. They were going to integrate workers at Willow Run at a time of their choosing.

## Conclusion

To realize production at the Willow Run Bomber Plant workers had to overcome the culture of fear, in large part, created by Harry Bennett. They also had to overcome their fear and suspicion of one another. UAW leadership, in particular, Walter Reuther, helped organize workers at Ford Motor Company. The Battle of the Overpass in 1937 was a pivotal moment. When the Company recognized the union in 1941 workers had a contract that included among other things a grievance

procedure and a system of seniority. This did much to counter the fear and intimidation workers had of the Ford Service Department. Even so, this did little to help the housing crisis that existed around the plant. This, coupled with the culture clash created by workers from the South and President Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802 created an unfamiliar diverse workforce. The Federal Housing Commission built the overdue bomber cities. When completed, workers had more suitable housing—a place to call home. This did much to alleviate tension at the plant. On a more personal level, all those involved at Willow Run had to face their fears and overcome their suspicion of one another. Workers had limited housing and public works but they pressed on. The stubborn Henry Ford and his henchman Harry Bennett had to come to terms with union officials like Walter Reuther. White workers from the Jim Crow South found themselves working amongst blacks. In addition, women workers, both black and white, worked at the bomber plant. All of this was something very new in its day and created uncertainty. In 1944, the Willow Run Plant met its goal of producing one B-24 bomber per hour. It is clear workers, both salaried and hourly, overcame their fear.



Figure 3. The Willow Run Bomber Plant. Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

## Notes

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2. *Ibid.*, 236.

3. *Ibid.*, 163, 177; Sarah Jo Peterson, *Planning the Home Front, Building Bombers and Communities at Willow Run* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1.

4. *Ibid.*, 277.

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6. *Ibid.*, 22.

7. *Ibid.*, 45.

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9. *Ibid.*, 285.

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18. *Ibid.*, 287; 292.

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22. Bennett, 7.

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26. Lacey, 368.
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30. Bennett, 2.
31. Lacey, 362.
32. Lacey 387; Baime, 78-80.
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34. Lacey 450; 362; 388.
35. Bennett, 210.
36. Reuther, 200.
37. Ibid., 363.
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45. Henry Ford quoted in Robert Lacey, *Ford, The Men and the Machine* (New York: Little Brown, 1986), 378.
46. UAW International Contract, 1942, page 7, in the John Cole papers at the Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University in Detroit Michigan.
47. Lacey, 352-353.
48. UAW International Contract, 1942, page 8.
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51. Reuther, 66; Lacey, 355.

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68. Walter M. Cuninghame quoted in Beth Tompkins Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit in the Henry Ford in the Age of Henry Ford* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 63.

69. Bates, 63.

70. Bill Mckie quoted in Beth Tompkins Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit in the Henry Ford in the Age of Henry Ford* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 64.

71. Bates, 64; Lacey, 222.

72. Franklin D Roosevelt, "Executive Order 8802" in the Victor G, Reuther collection box 7 at the Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University in Detroit Michigan.

73. Reuther, 238.

74. Horace L Sheffield to Walter Reuther concerning the hiring of blacks at Willow Run, in the Victor G. Reuther collection box 7, at the Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University in Detroit Michigan.

75. Zairo A Woodford, minutes of the meeting with Harry Bennett concerning hiring black women at Willow Run, in the Victor G Ruether collection box 7, at the Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University in Detroit Michigan.

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