

The
Story
Of

REO



JOE

LISA M. FINE

Work, Kin,
and
Community
in
Autotown,
U.S.A.

THE STORY OF
REO JOE

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COMMUNITY

IN AUTOTOWN, U.S.A.



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THE STORY OF RED JOE

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Introducing Reo Joe in Lansing, Michigan

Between 1904 and 1975, on a now-polluted site on the south side of Lansing, Michigan, one could find a complex of offices and factories committed to the manufacture of motor vehicles. Over the years the names and faces of the workers, managers, and owners changed many times, but one symbol provided continuity for the events that occurred at this place: the name Reo, an acronym for the founder of the company. Ransom E. Olds, the famous automobile pioneer and inventor, began the Reo Motor Car Company after he lost his first corporate venture, Oldsmobile. If you lived in Lansing during these years and someone told you she worked at the “Reo,” not only would you know exactly what this meant, you would associate the name with a place of pride.

During its first two decades of operation as a producer of automobiles and trucks, Reo and its community prospered; consumers would have found it hard to predict which of the two prosperous Lansing-based companies, Reo or Oldsmobile, would last 100 years. (Nineteen-ninety-eight saw the 100th anniversary of Oldsmobile, although the Oldsmobile line was discontinued in 2001, even as GM builds new assembly plants in Lansing.) On the eve of the Great Depression, Reo produced very popular cars and trucks, employed more than five thousand workers, and was an important and—in its technological

innovations, production techniques, and labor-management relations—a progressive local employer. The events of the 1930s seriously affected the company. Reo introduced expensive luxury models just as it became impossible for the vast majority of Americans to afford them. The UAW-CIO staged a successful month-long sit-down strike in the spring of 1937. The company almost failed because of poor management. A major corporate reorganization that limited production to trucks only, an infusion of capital from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, and the first of many government military and ordnance contracts kept the company afloat.

World War II and the Korean conflict breathed new life into the company. Reo Motors successfully competed for military contracts and tentatively began to diversify its product base to consumer goods such as lawnmowers, children's toys, civilian trucks, and buses. As a leaner, smaller, locally owned corporation making products with a good reputation, Reo was vulnerable to buyouts and corporate raiding. From the mid-1950s until the company's demise, Reo was taken over several times, first by Detroit-based Bohn Aluminum, then by White Motors of Ohio; then it was combined with Diamond T of Chicago for its last incarnation as Diamond Reo, which was bought by a private entrepreneur in 1971. In 1975, the year Vietnam "fell," so did Reo, only two years after its last owner had begun selling off and gutting the plant and its inventory, depriving loyal employees of their pensions. The fire that destroyed the shell of the plant ended a representative story of twentieth-century industry.

In hindsight, the story of Reo follows a familiar script, a story of small, local entrepreneurial capitalism unable to keep up with national and international political and economic forces. In automotive history, this is the story of one of thousands of failures that brought about the oligarchic structures and global corporations of the late twentieth century. Reo's demise can also be interpreted as the failure of the union movement to pose a meaningful challenge to globalization and domestic pro-business policies. The closing of the plant in the mid-1970s foreshadowed the de-industrialization and the creation of the midwestern rust belt characteristic of the last two decades of the twentieth century. The padlocking of the plant caused unemployment, dislocation, and depression.

During the company's lowest point, in the late 1930s, J. R. Connor, writing in the AFL's *Lansing Industrial News*, described a Capra-esque

everyman called Reo Joe. Connor described a scene in which “a rather spare figure . . . drifted into the grocery store, appraised the stock, picked out needed provisions, paid cash and went away—silently. He carried his modest purchase a little proudly down the street to his South Lansing home. Never had he asked for credit, never had he asked for charity, never had he spent a nickel that wasn’t honestly earned.”¹

The grocer reflected,

I remember when Joe started with Reo about 13 years ago. He was a big, strong, husky chap who took pride in his work and displayed the Reo spirit. Used to take part in the Reo entertainments. He lived for his family and the Reo. . . . I remember when the union started up. . . . Said he was getting pretty good pay but thought he ought to go along with the boys. When the sit-down came he stayed right with them loyal to the union but still proud of the Reo products. He was mighty happy when the sit-down ended and the boys went back to work.²

But the bad times had taken their toll on old Joe.

Joe started to cut down on his buying, even on cigarettes. He would order cheaper grades of meat, but often I would slip over a pretty good cut on his order. He’s awful proud, that Joe, but shucks, he’s been a good, steady customer that I like to do him a favor. For months past there has been a blank look in his face—that terrible dread you see in men’s faces when they are out of regular employment. Joe finds odd jobs here and there, but his heart is still with the Reo.³

The grocer hoped that the new reorganization plan would not only help old Joe but would also provide him with some return on the few shares of Reo stock he kept for sentimental reasons. He concluded with his belief that “it’s people like Joe who have made America what it is today—folks who like to build cars and other things.”⁴

This book is about Reo Joe and his world: a city, an industry, and ideas about work, manhood, race, and family. Reo Joe was not Joe Hill or Walter Reuther or Sidney Hillman or Eugene V. Debs or George Meany, although he may have heard of all of these men. Reo Joe was a union man, but he may also have belonged to the Masons, the Ku Klux Klan, the Republican or Democratic Party, a sportsman’s club, baseball team, or a church. Much of labor history, as it has been done in the United States in the past thirty years, has represented Reo Joe as a “regular Joe,” the universal white male worker. In the mid-1940s Ely Chinoy came to Lansing, which he called Autotown, to investigate “what opportunity looks and

feels like to a group of automobile workers in a middle-sized midwestern city.” He chose Lansing because it was a key site in the development of the automobile industry, and because “its size, location, and population composition [made] it a less complex setting for research into the problems of opportunity and aspirations than any of the other automobile cities.” Locally owned manufacturing plants like Reo contributed to “greater stability and promise” for Lansing’s workers.⁵ Today Reo, with its overwhelmingly white, native-born, male workforce presents the perfect opportunity to reexamine working-class formation, unionization, corporate welfare, working-class leisure and consumption, and de-industrialization, with the race and gender of the overwhelmingly white male workers as self-consciously employed categories of analysis.

This book was conceived in frustration over the continued reluctance of many U.S. labor historians to acknowledge and employ gender as a category of analysis for labor history.⁶ The proliferation of excellent works on women workers seemed only to reinforce the ghettoization of female workers’ lives and experience within the larger labor history narrative. According to one influential labor historian, scholars whose central organizing concept is class believe that “what defines people as workers is their economic activity,” while historians of women are interested in “the construction of gender ideology, the ways that ideology limits the opportunities of women, and the efforts of women to overcome the restrictions of gender role.” Thus, because of their different categories of analysis, women’s historians and labor historians belonged to different “tribes.”⁷ This unfortunate bracketing of experience misses male gender identity. Recent scholarship on working-class masculinity as a part of masculinity or men’s studies has prompted a rethinking and a decentering of the male worker experience.⁸

Gender, therefore, was foremost in my mind as I began this book, but before long it became clear that race was also an important element in working-class life in Lansing. That workers in Lansing and Reo were overwhelmingly white and native-born was no accident. Racial minorities found few opportunities in Lansing. Malcolm Little (later known as Malcolm X) recalled his family’s painful experiences in Lansing during the late 1920s and 1930s and the small community of African Americans in the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*:

Those Negroes were in bad shape then. . . . I don't know a town with a higher percentage of complacent and misguided so-called "middle-class" Negroes. . . . Back when I was growing up, the "successful" Lansing Negroes were such as waiters and bootblacks. To be a janitor at some downtown store was to be highly respected. The real "elite," the "big shots," the "voices of the race," were the waiters at the Lansing Country Club and the shoeshine boys at the state capitol. . . . No Negroes were hired then by Lansing's big Oldsmobile plant, or the Reo plant. (Do you remember Reo? It was manufactured in Lansing and R. E. Olds, the man after whom it was named, also lived in Lansing. When the war came along, they hired some Negro janitors.) The bulk of the Negroes were either on Welfare, or W.P.A., or they starved.⁹

Malcolm X's family experienced brutal treatment in Lansing: his father was killed, his mother was institutionalized, and the Little children were separated and put into various foster homes. To another interviewer Malcolm X articulated the other important lesson of these stories of segregation, brutality, and racism. "They didn't have too many Negro doctors or lawyers, especially where I grew up. They didn't even have any Negro firemen when I was a youth. When I was a youth, the only thing you could dream about becoming was a good waiter or a good busboy or a good shoeshine man. Back when I was a youth, that's the way it was and I didn't grow up in Mississippi either—I grew up in Michigan."¹⁰ Malcolm X knew what historians have only recently started to assert: even if it took different forms, racism in the twentieth century could be as virulent in the North as it was in the South.¹¹

Historians' recent explorations of the way whiteness operates in U.S. labor history have revealed the importance of race in working-class formation, working-class politics, and class consciousness and identity. "White racial identity," writes one historian, "serves as a token of privilege and entitlement, though sometimes unacknowledged, in American society."¹² The Reo factory and Lansing were overwhelmingly white, and Malcolm X's experience underscores the power of white hegemony in Lansing for much of the twentieth century. "Whiteness" alone, however, neither fully explains the ways Lansing's working class and the larger community understood itself nor accounts for its activities.

As I delved into the life of this company and its workers and their community, I found that religion and local identity were also extremely important. Even though they lived through significant national and international

events, Reo's employees regarded politics through the lens of localism. Because of their background and orientation, some Reo workers could side with employers during the wet/dry controversy of the 1910s and the Americanization efforts of the 1920s. When they began to assert their rights and independence on the basis of class and to form their union in the 1930s, workers did not evoke a "culture of unity"¹³ embracing all skill levels, ethnic and racial groups, and sexes; rather, Reo Joes made a union of their own, a union of white, Protestant, tax-paying, home-owning, respectable, male worker-citizens.

Reo's worker-citizens maintained a strong local orientation in their working-class activism and politics throughout the twentieth century.¹⁴ Their desire for local, grassroots control of their community, company, and workplace allows us to understand seemingly disparate and inconsistent sympathies. The mainstream politics of the second Ku Klux Klan enjoyed some local support in Lansing during the gubernatorial election of 1924. During the sit-down strike of 1937, workers justified their resistance by demonstrating their restraint and respectability as tax-paying male heads of households. During the period of labor unrest during and after World War II, workers resorted to a "pure and simple syndicalism," demanding workplace justice and equity from the company, the national labor authorities, and the sometimes indifferent or resistant international union.¹⁵ Their antipathy to outside interference from the nation-state, international unions, or radical organizations could sometimes lead them into alliances with the business class.

The local orientation of Reo's workers was rooted, in part, in their rural origins. Many Reo workers came from farm families and grew up on farms close to Lansing. Many lived on farms and commuted to Lansing. Workers returned to farms during hard times, aspired to farming as a means of independence, or worked at Reo to keep a marginal farm operating. Many more Reo workers retained their ties to the land by participating in the most popular leisure activity and the third-most important industry in Michigan: hunting. Increasingly, throughout the twentieth century, the white male automotive working class demanded access to public lands, the right to fire arms, and the right to hunt game.

Reo's employees saw themselves as part of a factory family and described the atmosphere in the plant as having a family feeling. First devised by

management during the 1910s and 1920s, rhetorical and institutional expressions of the factory family tied white male auto workers to their employers through the shared values of masculinity. This paternalistic bargain, based on job security, a family wage, and fair treatment in exchange for workers' quiescence and cooperation, formed the basis for what recurred in different versions throughout the twentieth century. As it organized in the 1930s, the union appropriated this family rhetoric by casting its members as dependent sons seeking freedom from an infantilizing paternalistic bond. Evocations of the factory family waned during the disruptive World War II period but experienced a revival during the 1950s and persisted until Reo's demise. The post-World War II factory family ethic evoked the past while reflecting the new realities of women workers, geographically remote owners, and the presence of the union. As workers experienced the uncertainty and turmoil of Reo's last two decades, the memory of the factory family bound employees to each other and to Reo's past. In the era after the plant's demise, this family feeling took on a nostalgic cast, as retirees continued to recreate the factory family as a way to reconnect with a world they had lost. A 1991 article in the *Lansing State Journal* that reported on the sixth annual Reo reunion was entitled "The Family Spirit Never Leaves."¹⁶

These evocations of family suggest that we need to refine our understanding of how gender operates as "a primary way of signifying relationships of power."¹⁷ For those who worked at Reo during the twentieth century, gender identity was understood through family roles. Scholars who examine paternalistic relationships between groups with unequal power, whether within the institution of slavery, an oppressive factory, or a village community, almost invariably report that understandings of family roles inform hierarchical power relationships.¹⁸ The authors of *Like A Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*, for example, found that "people chose a family metaphor to describe mill life." This was not simply a way to "express their dependence on a fatherly employer" but a way to explain their relationships to one another. Mill workers evoked "family, as an image and as an institution," in complicated and overlapping ways.¹⁹

At Reo, rhetorical and institutional expressions of family remained a powerful way not only to structure relationships of power and hierarchy but also to organize and enforce privilege. Describing and treating individuals

within the community, the company, and working-class organizations as family involved the creation of clear, and sometimes cruel, distinctions between those within the family and those excluded from it. This rhetoric, therefore, was not always a benign device allowing for human connection; sometimes it created and enforced a kinship that excluded others.

The Story of Reo Joe is an experiment in perspective; it is labor history that is rooted in the life of a company, and it is local history that explores the impact of national and international events on a moderate-size mid-western town. Reo's workers experienced and participated in many of the important trends and events of the century, but when viewed through their eyes, these trends and events often take on a different meaning.

A great deal has been made of the sea change in party politics ushered in during the New Deal era in industrial centers. Workers "made a new deal," became Americans, and turned their gaze from their employers to the federal government to supply services and safety nets. They sacrificed local control and shop floor militancy for the legitimacy and authority of their national unions, a seat at the table as a respectable, disciplined "American" interest group, and the opportunity to participate in the fruits of the "successful restoration of the mass consumer economy"²⁰ during the Cold War era. Certainly the Great Depression and the New Deal had a profound effect on working-class people, labor organizations, and labor relations. Reo Joe probably voted for Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 and 1936, but he may well have voted for Republican candidates both before and after these two elections.²¹ During World War II and Korea, the bureaucratic requirements of the warfare state presented new opportunities and challenges to workers and their employers. In the 1950s it was to the company, not the national government, that Reo Joe and his union turned to get fringe benefits: pensions, cost-of-living adjustments, and health insurance.

Exploring Reo's history over the course of the twentieth century also challenges labor history's conventional chronology, altering our understanding of change and continuity. The factory family was not simply a product of the nonunion era at Reo, extinguished forever by the rise of the union and the turmoil of the 1940s. A new version of the factory family took shape in the 1950s, attesting to the endurance of this company culture. When examined during the period between 1904 and 1975, Reo's workers do not fit neatly into political categories of radical, syndicalist, conservative, social democratic, or liberal. The Klan had a strong base in