

The Story of Reo Joe: Work, Kin, and Community in Autotown, USA. By Lisa M. Fine. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004. xii + 239 pp. Index, notes, appendix, illustrations. Cloth, \$69.50; paper, \$22.95. ISBN: cloth, 1-592-13257-X; paper, 1-592-13258-8.

Reviewed by James M. Rubenstein

Thousands of companies tried to make and sell cars in the United States during the early twentieth century. A century later, only two U.S.-owned carmakers—Ford and General Motors—survive. Lisa Fine's *The Story of Reo Joe* is based on one of the thousands of casualties, the Reo Motor Car Company.

Reo has been relegated to little more than a footnote in most automotive histories. The company was founded in 1904 by Ransom E. Olds, better known for establishing Oldsmobile seven years earlier. Olds left the company bearing his name after losing a fight with his financial backers. Olds wanted to concentrate the company's resources on a high-volume, low-priced car, whereas his financial backers—following the conventional wisdom of the time—preferred a low-volume, high-priced model. After being run into the ground by subsequent managers, Oldsmobile was sold in 1908 to Billy Durant, who added it to his newly established General Motors.

After being forced out of Oldsmobile, Ransom E. Olds started a second company, which he named for his initials. Reo enjoyed modest success at first, actually outselling Oldsmobile in 1906 and exceeding all carmakers except Ford in sales in 1907. The company failed to keep pace with the rapid expansion of Ford and General Motors during the second decade of the twentieth century, though it continued to make a few thousand cars per year before halting production in 1936, during the Great Depression. Reo lingered as a minor manufacturer of trucks until 1960, when it was acquired by White Motor Company. The former Reo factory turned out a few more trucks under absentee owners, until it was closed in 1975.

Why write about such an obscure company? The more precise question is why write about the workforce of such an obscure company, because the book provides few details of the corporation's existence. The justification is clear and compelling. The story of

Reo's workforce is really a chronicle of the company's hometown, Lansing, whose history is far different from that of Detroit or Michigan's other automotive centers.

The conventional labor history of the U.S. automotive industry follows these lines: early automotive workers were skilled craftspeople who exercised considerable control over their workplaces. The moving assembly line and other mass-production innovations resulted in the diminishment of workers' skills, especially between 1910 and 1920. The auto industry's rapidly increasing demand for unskilled workers was filled by Eastern European immigrants and African Americans from the rural South. Poor conditions in the factories, heightened by cutbacks during the Great Depression, induced worker militancy, which culminated in recognition of the United Auto Workers union in 1937.

The story of "Reo Joe," a typical Lansing autoworker, does not follow the conventional history, according to Fine. Rather than relying on Eastern Europeans and African Americans, the Lansing company staffed its factories primarily with farmers from the surrounding countryside. These men were law-abiding, tax-paying, God-fearing, socialist-hating, Republican-voting family heads, who asked for little more than a secure job and time off in the autumn for their favorite sport of hunting.

Lansing's rural-based workforce was remarkably homogeneous by auto-industry standards. Reo refused to hire African Americans and other persons of color, few of whom moved to Lansing in any event, as they would have been received with hostility, and the few Jews who were hired were subjected to stereotypical anti-Semitism. With so few blacks and Jews in Lansing, the locally active Ku Klux Klan directed its attacks primarily against the city's Catholics.

Ransom Olds, the Reo management, and the Lansing business community regarded autoworkers as members of a large, happy extended family, both literally and figuratively. According to a Reo manager, "All other things being equal, a man with a family, who is buying a home, paying taxes and who has given the Reo good loyal service for a number of years, should be given the preference over a man who has no dependents, or who would not feel the sting of unemployment as keenly as the former" (p. 45, quoting from a 1925 letter by Reo superintendent Cy Rath).

The workers, for their part, responded favorably to corporate paternalism. "Reo workers were encouraged to save, buy their own homes, become involved in community

activities, keep the Sabbath, tend a garden, and be good husbands and fathers” (p. 55). Wives were treated with what Fine calls “chivalry”: their job was to “encourage their husbands to be industrious, ambitious, sober, and careful; to make their homes tidy, clean, comfortable and cheerful; to make good food; to send their husbands to work with a smile and a word of cheer; to make the husband think of her while he is at work” (p. 55, quoting from a 1916 Reo company publication, “How Wives Can Prevent Accidents”).

One wonders how the UAW gained a foothold inside Reo’s “happy family” during the 1930s. Reo even had a sit-down strike in 1937, which was overshadowed by the more famous one in Flint that led GM to recognize the UAW. Fine offers this explanation for the Reo event: workers were protesting against the national economic conditions that caused layoffs and wage reductions rather than against Reo management specifically. Although supported by more than 90 percent of the workforce, Reo’s sit-down strike was more a festival than a tense standoff, according to Fine’s description. The strikers entertained themselves with wholesome activities like singing, while their wives delivered food and their children played outside the factory.

The story of Reo Joe is the story of a dinosaur. A comparison of Fine’s workforce figures with annual sales figures from other sources shows this to have been a company that more often than not was producing less than one vehicle per worker *per year*. Such jobs have long disappeared from the auto industry, even in Lansing.

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