

Recasting the Machine Age: Henry Ford's Village Industries. By *Howard Segal*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005. xv + 244 pp. Illustrations, maps, photographs, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN: 1-558-49481-2.

Reviewed by Judith Sealander

Recasting the Machine Age, the first book-length examination of Henry Ford's nineteen village industries, is an intriguing, but unsatisfying, work. Impressively researched, richly reliant on extensive interviews by the author as well as on materials housed at the Ford Archives and the Reuther Library, the book is nevertheless poorly organized and ultimately unpersuasive. Howard Segal, Bird Professor of History at the University of Maine, asks a fascinating question: why would the creator of River Rouge build decentralized alternatives to it? Part of Segal's answer is easy to accept. Ford's creation of a chain of nineteen small-scale auto-parts plants within a sixty-mile radius of company headquarters in Dearborn was a logical extension of the industrialist's famous ability simultaneously to look forward and back. Ford wanted a future that relied on sophisticated machine-age inventions, made in settings that reinforced connections to America's agricultural past. And yes, Ford certainly intended the dispersed facilities he built along several Michigan rivers during the last two decades of his life to be influential models, experiments that would humanize the machine age and change American society. But were they, as Segal asserts, "indeed, a better idea" (p. 159)? No one dared challenge Henry Ford during his lifetime, but other company executives regarded the plants as wasteful indulgences and couldn't wait to shut several down almost immediately after the founder died in 1947. In fact, were the village industries actively counterproductive to Ford's vision of an industrial America where large numbers of people continued to farm part time? Did they instead allow rural boys to follow Ford's own lead and escape the land more quickly?

The village industries attempted to unite farm and factory. Built between 1920 and 1944, they varied, though all manufactured parts used in automobile construction. Some were refurbished nineteenth-century gristmills. Others were completely new structures. All were well-ventilated, well-heated, scrupulously clean buildings flooded

with natural light. However, these characteristics were hallmarks of all of Ford's plants. The village industries' big difference was in the size of their workforces. The smallest, Sharon Mills, employed fewer than twenty; Ypsilanti, the largest, just over one thousand. More than 100,000 people labored at the huge Ford complexes at Highland Park and River Rouge. Interestingly, Ford personally demanded that his model "industries in the country" hire the physically handicapped as well as former alcoholics. But almost all were white, in contrast to the Dearborn facilities, which employed significant numbers of African Americans.

Did the village plants achieve Ford's vision of less highly structured environments where employees could efficiently, and more independently, perform their tasks, then return to the land to farm during slack times? Segal's many interviews suggest that workers were content. However, he focused on retired employees, with thirty-five to forty years of service, and did not conduct parallel conversations with workers at the company's urban factories. Would a similarly chosen group from River Rouge, reminiscing in old age after spending an entire work life at Ford, have also expressed generally positive views?

Too dependent on the possibly romanticized recollections of elderly, loyal former employees, Segal's picture of actual life at Ford's decentralized plants does make one thing clear. Few "farmer-machinists" were in residence. In fact, the chance for a comparatively well-paid job seems to have prompted a number of locals to abandon farming altogether. If the village industries did not really unite farm and factory, they also may not have been the greatly efficient "little factories in a meadow" (p. 11) Ford's publicists tirelessly promoted as the future for American industry. Perhaps they never even turned a profit. They were not company experiments but one of Ford's many personal projects. As such, as Ford engineer Charles Voorhess explained in conversations with Segal, they were not required to provide budgets or even summaries of ongoing expenses. In fact, they reflected, in an extreme fashion, one of the oddities about the Ford Motor Company before 1947. A corporation that championed the latest, cost-cutting manufacturing technologies also tolerated sloppy accounting. Managers at Ypsilanti didn't have to write a budget at all. Worth noting, however, was that managers at River Rouge did little better. Without clear knowledge of corporate bottom lines,

which remain matters of notably deep company secrecy even now, how can Segal depict the village industries as a potentially financially viable “better idea”? They weren’t during their lifetimes. And freed by Ford’s death, company executives openly dismissed them as “deadwood” (p. 129). Most soon were sold.

If his own subordinates felt free to mock the deceased founder’s ideas, Segal makes abundantly clear that, while alive, Ford had many contemporary supporters. Academics, New Deal officials, even quite a few hard-eyed businessmen, praised the principle of decentralized industry. Demonstrating his wide breadth of knowledge about many subjects, Segal convincingly recreates the international intellectual context from which the village industries emerged. Though not a vision peculiar to the era, the idea that cheap electricity and a good transportation grid could empty crowded, dirty, dehumanizing cities, scattering their inhabitants to productive jobs in the countryside, enjoyed its heyday in the decades between the wars. Disconcertingly, Segal provides this contextual information midway through his analysis, rather than as an introduction to the book.

And, in an equally strange organizational decision, Segal’s assessment of the late-twentieth-century revival of decentralized work in high-tech America does not end *Recasting the Machine Age*. But however ill placed, it raises interesting questions about village industry as a “better idea.” In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, companies decamped to the country. Citicorp, for example, moved its billing operations to small-town Sioux Falls, South Dakota. But instead of enjoying a rural idyll, thousands of geographically isolated and nonorganized data-processors received lower pay than they might have commanded had the jobs remained in cities. Indeed, were Ford’s village factories primarily a failed attempt to shape a cheaper, ethnically white, docile, decidedly nonunion workforce?

The possibility deserves greater emphasis than it receives in a book that recasts Henry Ford in a more positive light than do many other scholarly analyses. But, as Segal wisely reminds readers, recasting Ford will never be any easy task. The man embodied contradiction, as does the history of his village industries.

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