

The river and its people: a long, rich relationship

In 1914, Henry Ford came home to the River Rouge. On a wide bend in the north branch, Ford and his wife Clara built their Fair Lane.

It was near this river that Ford's family began to settle in the 1830s. Ford's father and grandfather joined several of his uncles when they arrived from Ireland in 1848.

The Fair Lane estate encompassed the land once owned by Conrad "Coon" Ten Eyck who ran an inn on the banks of the Rouge and along the Detroit-to-Chicago Road.

But all of these were late-comers to the River Rouge, which had been a place of recreation, commerce, agriculture and industry since prehistoric times.

TWO GREAT Indian burial mounds have been found on the Rouge — the Great River Rouge Mound and the Great Circle Mound. One mound measured 40 feet by several hundred feet and was used by several generations and possibly different tribes living in the same area.

When the French arrived in the late 17th century the Potawatomi had a village near the largest of the great mounds. The Indians fished and hunted along the Rouge and settled along its shores.

But the French named it (for its red color) and used it to further their exploitation of the fur trade. The *voyageurs* and the *coureurs de bois*, explorers and trappers, used the Rouge as a passage to the interior from the Detroit River.

Along the Detroit, the French built their fort and began to make a permanent settle-

ment. It was here that the trappers brought their furs for the trip back to Paris by way of the St. Lawrence. Land was distributed for farming in narrow lots along the river, measuring 200 feet wide by several miles long. The ribbon farms were home for the habitants. As early as 1705, the more adventurous of the French settlers began setting up similar riverfront farms on the Rouge.

THE ROUGE was a place for recreation from the earliest days. French and later British and American settlers used to delight in skimming and racing the frozen river in light sleighs pulled by ponies.

Fishing was another favorite recreation of the early settlers. A contemporary of Coon Ten Eyck describes the fishing this way, "The days and nights spent fishing in the River Rouge will always remain a part of the history of the community. The fishing was done by dip nets as they were called and seines, which were large bag nets held by two men who would wade into the water and hold the mouth of the net open by means of a stake at each end."

SETTLEMENT picked up sharply in the interior following the defeat of Pontiac in 1763. The four branches of the river — upper, middle, lower and main — each drew settlers. The Quakers had established Farmington on the upper Rouge as early as 1824.

The Rouge had other uses as well. Jacques Dupereon Baby had opened two gristmills at the main forks of the Rouge in

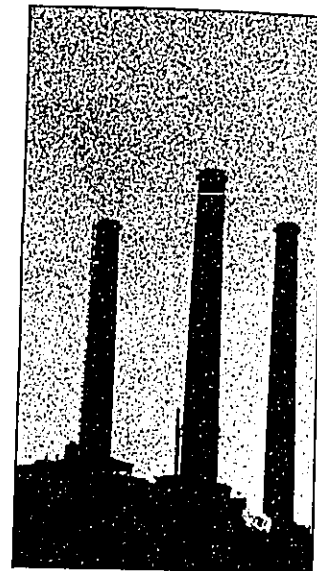
1776. Other mills followed.

But the most important development on the river was the Detroit Shipyard, built by the British just before the Revolutionary War. Between 1770 and 1780, 20 vessels were launched on the River Rouge. The Americans took possession in 1796, lost it briefly in the War of 1812 and then regained it. The shipyard continued in operation until after World War I. During that war, the Eagle Boat Works built a small boat used to fight submarines. It was here, in 1917, that Henry Ford came home to work as well as live.

Manufacturing was nothing new to the Rouge. In addition to various gristmills and sawmills, the Rouge by 1875 was the site of such companies as the Michigan Car Co. (maker of railroad cars), John Clark Shipyard and Drydock, the smelting operation of Detroit and Lake Superior Copper Co., Baugh Steam Forge, and Detroit Glass Works.

BUT IT WAS HENRY FORD who changed the nature and even the look of the Rouge. When the demand for the Model T became too great for Ford's innovative Highland Park plant, he began to look for a place where his company could do it all, from forging steel to assembly. The River Rouge plant would become the largest and most modern manufacturing facility in the world.

To do that, Ford, with government assistance, had to create access to the Detroit River. A major dredging operation created a deepwater canal connecting the Detroit



and Rouge rivers and forming the 400-acre Zug Island.

The Rouge is the major drainage system for the entire Detroit area and a site for numerous manufacturing facilities. But it is also the site of homes, golf courses and parks, including the large River Rouge and Hines parks and Ford Field, a gift from Henry Ford.

Ford sought the serenity, fresh air, cleanliness and peace of the slow flowing River Rouge for his home. Then, just a few years later, he created an industrial giant that forever changed the Rouge.

Hugh Gallagher

An icy bulldozer carved the terrain

"An inconsiderable stream," sniffed one writer.

The Rouge, now subject of an international cleanup effort because it pollutes the Detroit River, never has enjoyed a great reputation.

It drains, not too efficiently, western Wayne County with headwaters in neighboring Oakland and Washtenaw counties.

TO UNDERSTAND the Rouge, you have to visualize the last glacier receding to eastern Canada.

Like a giant bulldozer, the glacier had flattened southwestern Ontario and southeastern Michigan. It deposited rocks and gravel in a series of hills that run in a northeast-southwest pattern.

The modern cities of Rochester, Birmingham, Farmington, Plymouth and Ann Arbor sit on the edge of one of those hills, called the Defiance Moraine. If you were to see them 13,000 years ago, they would have been on the shore of the forerunner of Lake Erie.

The lake, in turn, would have covered modern Detroit, much of Troy, Southfield, Lathrup Village, Livonia, Redford, Garden City, Westland and Canton. Those communities sit on the clay and sand of the former lake bottom. These flatlands are drained by the little Rouge.

around Detroit is uncommonly flat, and in none of the rivers is there sufficient fall to turn even a gristmill."

Even the Indians considered the region unimportant. Geologist John A. Dorr noted that most Indian activity occurred on the Rochester-to-Ann Arbor moraine, not in the Rouge's flatlands.

"The beach ridge was the site of Indian trails and of the early roads because it was dry during all parts of the year, particularly in comparison with the clayey lowlands on either side; this route determined the pattern of towns and even of highways until fairly recent times."

BESIDES HAVING "fearful, horrible, black, sticky" roads, in the words of 1820s pioneers, the flatlands drained by the Rouge were "notorious" for their shallow ponds, breeding places for malaria- and ague-carrying mosquitoes.

Such land also was poor for underground water, and its wells yielded poorly.

The Rouge drains a relatively small area compared to its sister rivers, the Huron and Clinton, which start near Pontiac and flow in a giant pinchers around the metropolitan Detroit region. The Rouge carries less than half the waterflow of the Clinton and less than one-third of the Huron's.

Business economist Olin W. Blackett wrote of the flatlands:

"The area is not only without ground wa-

ter supply; it is also deficient in natural channels to dispose of spent water.

"The Rouge, the only river, is an inconsiderable stream except near its mouth when a channel is continuously dredged to keep it open for navigation.

"Despite the small flow of the Rouge, it is the chief outlet for Detroit's waste, and only its nearness to the river makes possible the disposal of waste from an outlet of these dimensions."

ONE CORRECTION needs to be made in that dismal assessment of the Rouge. When pioneer settlers arrived, it wasn't the only river around Detroit. There were two others.

One was the Savoyard, which flowed just outside the walls of the French Fort Pontchartrain. Although French boys fished it in the 1700s, the Savoyard was covered up as a sewer in the last century.

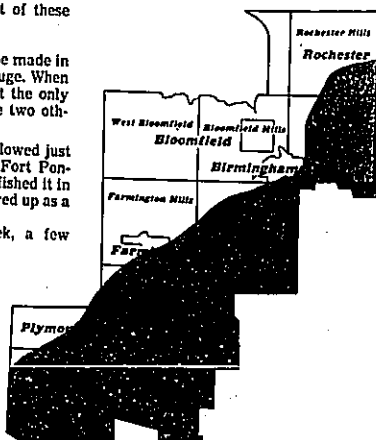
The other was Parent's Creek, a few

miles east of downtown Detroit. It gained the nickname of "Bloody Run" after Pontiac's uprising inflicted terrible losses on the British there in 1763.

Parent's Creek was filled in.

Thus, of the three rivers that Cadillac saw, only the Rouge is left.

Tim Richard



The forerunner of Lake Erie (shown in gray) covered modern Detroit, much of Troy, Southfield, Lathrup Village, Livonia, Redford, Garden City, Westland and Canton.