

Ford's original PR man shares his memoirs



VICTORIA DIAZ

"Fifty Years Ahead of the News," by John E. Sattler (288 pp., \$19.95, Whittlestop/SL)

Did you know that the basic design of the Volkswagen Beetle was conceived at Ford Motor Co. during the early 1930s? That TV's Batmobile was originally an experimental car also created by Ford? That Henry Ford II destroyed nearly all of his personal papers before he died? That Ford's side of the story regarding Lee Iacocca's highly

publicized dismissal from the auto company has never been told?

Read this memoir, subtitled "A Lifetime of Practical Public Relations Experience," and penned by the man who, in 1945, established Ford Motor Co.'s public relations department, and you'll find out about all this. You'll also find out, in eye-opening detail, how public relations works to enhance the public image of big business and the powerful people who run the show.

Born in a railroad flat in Brooklyn in 1919, Sattler says he never heard the term "public relations" until 20 years after his birth.

After making a name for himself in the public relations field

during a World War II Army stint, Sattler accepted an offer from Ford at its New York offices at the close of the war. ("I was assigned to the New York office," writes Sattler, "but, in fact, there was no (PR) office . . . I was to establish it — from scratch.") One of the first things he learned on the job was that he couldn't always trust even in-house staff to give him a "straight story."

Sattler would remain with Ford for the next 35 years until his retirement in 1980. He spent 20 years in the New York offices before he and his wife, Elinore, moved to Bloomfield Hills in 1966. He concluded his career at Ford World Headquarters in Dearborn. (Though his story is almost relentlessly upbeat, his memories of the "inbred" atmosphere of World Headquarters are less than fond.)

While at Ford, Sattler was wit-

ness to much of the drama that went on behind-the-scenes of such events as the death of Henry Ford I; the introduction — and demise — of the Edsel ("primarily a case of bad timing"); Ford's financially shaky role in the 1964-65 New York World's Fair; Henry Ford II's troublesome drinking and declining health; and Iacocca's departure.

Scenes are sparked with brief, but sometimes up-close appearances by such 20th-century celebrities as Eleanor Roosevelt, Babe Ruth, Hank Greenberg, Monty Woolley, Walt Disney, Clark Gable, Irving Berlin, various members of the Ford family and a slew of others.

Some picks and pans: This self-published book could have used the loving touch of a more ruthless editor. Sattler tends to occasionally repeat himself and also

to ramble on at times — indulging, for instance, in writing at length about his homes in Michigan and New York, even to the point of including verbatim the text of an Indian deed to some Southampton acreage. What this has to do with his life in public relations is not clear.

But with all the distracting typos and printing glitches typical of self-publishers, you'll find this little book of recent history worthwhile, fun and user-friendly. Much of its success can be credited to Sattler's lively, highly accessible writing style. Reading the book feels a little like sitting down to visit with an old friend who is brimming over with great, sparkling conversation.

Clearly, this is a guy who can tell a story. More than that, he has a good story to tell.

To get a copy of "Fifty Years Ahead of the News," send \$19.95

to Whittlestop/SL Publishing, P.O. Box 1866, Portage, MI 49081.

Last words: A new booklet, the Detroit Women Writers Speakers & Writers Directory, is now available for anyone interested in contacting writers who teach or speak about writing. Copies can be ordered for \$5 from Detroit Women Writers, c/o Virginia Parker, 6269 Runnymede, Canton, MI 48187.

Victoria Diaz of Livonia, a long-time member of Detroit Women Writers, tracks the books and literary industry for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. She says she "has a lifelong interest in reading, everything from great novels to cereal boxes." You can leave a message for her on a touch-tone phone by dialing 953-2047, then her mailbox number, 1854.

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