"End of the Line?"

The blacks and the whites just get along," according to Frank Weaver, a black welder with 17 years seniority at GM's Detroit Fleetwood plant. "Basically, you've really got the same worries, the same problems. You're in the same economic situation."

Fleetwood, like Detroit, had changed dramatically over the years. "We've got blacks in just about every area, every department that exists in the plant," President Joe Gaston of UAW Local 15 could boast. Gaston, serving his third term since 1971, was the first black to be elected President of Local 15. The plant manager, Thomas Clifford, was also black. So too were 28 percent of the plant's foremen, nearly equal to the proportion of minority workers in Fleetwood's workforce.

Black citizens represented 63 percent of the surrounding city's population, nearly twice the proportion of minority workers at Fleetwood. Nevertheless, the progress made in integrating the aging automobile plant was impressive. Change had not occurred overnight. When management appointed Wilburn Wheeler the plant's first black foreman in 1962, some white workers greeted him with racial slurs and refused to follow his orders. Twenty years later, Jim Buck, a black foreman in the plant's body shop, reported a far different attitude. "I'm accepted. It's just like you forget you are black."

It took decades to turn things around at Fleetwood. Unfortunately, it would take only a day or two to undo it all—a day in which management confirmed the many rumors the half-century old plant would close.

After 1979, it was the same throughout Detroit as plant closings and layoffs became all too common. Along with the jobs, wages, and hard-earned seniority workers had struggled to win, economic catastrophe destroyed the future.

"Who's going to hire a 56-year-old woman with a bad back?," worried Beatrice Mullins after Ferro Manufacturing laid her off in the winter of 1981-1982. Fifteen months after the company closed its Detroit plant, Mullins and nearly 80 percent of the former Ferro workers interviewed by the Detroit Free Press had not been able to find work. Most found only long lines of jobseekers chasing every notice in the
help-wanted ads. Employers, as Mullins observed, “can pick and choose now,” and most of the aging ex-Ferro workers found themselves shunted aside.

Their plight was shared by thousands of others. In Wayne County alone, 42 auto-related companies closed their factories between 1978 and 1981, and employment in this vital industrial sector fell by over 100,000. By the end of 1982, Detroit Edison’s partial survey of southeastern Michigan listed over 100 plant closings and liquidations since 1978—plants that once produced everything from automobiles, to chemicals, to retail drugs.

The litany of disaster included big factories and small, old plants and new. Chrysler’s Dodge Main and Uniroyal’s East Jefferson tire plant were both over 70 years old and already partially abandoned when management terminated their remaining operations in 1980. Chrysler’s Huber Foundry in Detroit and Ford’s Michigan Casting Center in suburban Flat Rock were, in contrast, relatively modern structures when management shuttered both facilities in 1981. And as these large plants went down, they took scores of parts supply plants with them: companies like Omega Stamping in Hamtramck, Machine Tool and Gear in Dearborn, and Webb Forging in Belleville, each employing between 25 and 125 workers.

By the fall of 1982, half the auto industry’s total factory capacity and two-thirds of the nation’s steel-making operations were idle. The padlocked gates and empty plants were silent testimony to the worst economic downturn since the 1930s. “It’s hard to take,” observed 51-year-old Simmon Blackmon when Guardian Industries closed its Detroit windshield plant. Blackmon worked 30 years in the plant as a laborer and boilertender before the company decided to fill its dwindling orders from a non-union facility in Ohio. “Who’ll talk to you about a job at my age? I’m too old to find work and too young to retire.”

Even in Detroit, a city long accustomed to sharp downturns in production, a slump of this magnitude seemed unimaginable in the 1960s and early 1970s. Between 1965 and 1974, metro-Detroit’s bustling auto plants produced over two million cars a year, 30 percent more than production averages of the previous decade. As late as 1977, when total U.S. output surpassed 9 million automobiles for the second time that decade, the Detroit area still turned out 2.1 million Chrysler, Ford, and GM cars.

But even in these boom years, there was an ongoing and ominous shift in worldwide production. During the very decade when autoworkers like Beatrice Mullins and Simmon Blackmon were setting new production records, American companies were losing the virtual monopoly in auto production they had enjoyed since World War II.

After 1945, the war-shattered industries of Europe and Asia were no match for American competition. U.S. and Canadian factories produced nearly 80 percent of all cars and trucks sold in the world in 1950, a year in which Japan’s tiny auto industry built fewer than 5,000 passenger cars. North America, as the world’s biggest and wealthiest market for automobiles, was the exclusive hunting ground of U.S. car manufacturers. They had little to fear from outside poachers.

This worldwide dominance could not go on forever. But while the U.S. monopoly lasted, America’s Big Three automakers were free to focus their entire production and sales strategy on high-powered (and high-priced) automobiles. So long as gasoline was cheap and there was little foreign competition, Americans bought these cars—if they could afford them. When the UAW, in a 1949 article called “A Small Car Named Desire,” advocated a fuel-efficient compact for low-income buyers, the industry scoffed. Even when Germany’s Volkswagen “Beetle” found a market in the

Inset: Detroit, circa 1932.
U.S. in the late 1950s, American manufacturers were unimpressed. The VW, said Ford designer George Walker, was “just a bathtub... Europeans may like it, but it doesn’t have American style.”

For U.S. auto companies, compact cars also lacked the American-style profits they were accustomed to. “Smaller cars,” Business Week observed in 1974, “produce smaller profits,” and maximizing profits was, after all, the goal of capitalist enterprise. Since the basic labor and overhead costs of production were roughly the same for any size automobile, “you’d just put a few bucks into a car to enlarge it,” admitted Leonard Piconke of Chrysler, “and then sell it for a lot more money.”

All the while, Europe and Japan were rebuilding and retooling their economies. Their car factories, steel mills, and electronics plants were brand new. Their machinery was often state-of-the-art, and their workers, by American standards, were underpaid. While America’s Big Three automakers continued to rely on aging but still profitable technologies, foreign carmakers broke into the U.S. market by investing in innovative production techniques and high-mileage car designs.

When gasoline prices suddenly skyrocketed after the 1973 Arab–Israeli war, American companies found themselves on the short end of the global auto industry. Foreign imports, already 15 percent of the U.S. market in 1971, rose to 20 percent during the recession of 1974–1975. The situation only grew worse after 1979, when the Iranian revolution drove gasoline prices still higher. The escalating cost of fuel, together with rising interest rates in the U.S. and the rippling effects of the 1980 and 1981 recessions, cut heavily into sales of high-priced, low-mileage cars built in North America. By 1980, imports had taken nearly 30 percent of the U.S. market, and, for the first time in post-war history, Japan’s production of cars and trucks surpassed America’s faltering output. U.S. and Canadian factories produced only 22 percent of the world’s motor vehicles that year, and Detroit-area factories turned out fewer than one million cars—the lowest figure in more than two decades.

The area where I worked had a whole industrial park,” remembered George Williams, a former production worker at Chrysler’s Lynch Road complex. “But they closed the whole thing down, three factories. It’s almost like a ghost town, like a gold town from the prospecting days. It’s pathetic.”

By the fall of 1982, Michigan’s “gold rush” was over for 730,000 unemployed workers. According to official statistics, 17 percent of the state’s workforce was unemployed and looking for work, but with thousands of discouraged job-seekers dropping out of the labor force and turning to relatives and friends for support, the real rate of joblessness in any one month was well over 20 percent. Roughly one in three of Michigan’s workers, when they looked back over the year, could count some period of unemployment.

The physical traces of this catastrophe were etched in Detroit’s crisis-pocked landscape. In nearly every neighborhood of the city and its blue-collar suburbs, there was at least one abandoned factory—a single or multi-story shell vacated within the last year or the last decade. From each abandoned workplace, the ripple effect of its closing left shuttered restaurants, deserted gas stations, half-empty bars, “for-sale” signs, and boarded-up homes.

A tour through any section of the city found equally vivid evidence of Detroit’s changing human landscape. In the downtown City–County building, a deputy sheriff stood in the lobby every weekday of 1982 and auctioned off foreclosed homes. Most of the 300 homeowners who lost their property every month in that year (up 80 percent from 1980) got only enough from the

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The partially demolished Anderson Brass plant in southwest Detroit. After 1980, the company moved its production of valves and auto parts to South Carolina.

Working Detroit 212 End of the Line?
Job Wars

In 1981, Bill Davidson, principal owner of the Detroit Pistons, owned two factories making windshield glass. One factory was non-union, with a young, virtually all-white workforce. It was in Sandusky, Ohio. The other factory was a UAW plant, with an older, multi-racial workforce. It was in Detroit.

In the summer of 1981, Davidson told the 200 workers in his Detroit plant they would have to take wage cuts. As the only unionized workforce in the 20 factories owned by his Guardian Industries, Davidson said they were too expensive compared to non-union workers in his Ohio plant.

“We never ruled out concessions,” recalled Sam Loiacano, local union leader in the Detroit plant. “But they had to show us. All they said was the plant was making money, but not enough. Hell, what’s ‘enough?’ We could never find out. Their books stayed shut.”

When union members struck against the company’s take-back demands, Davidson permanently closed the factory. Even when the union agreed to accept the concessions three days later, Davidson remained unmoved. The jobs, he announced, had already been moved to Sandusky.

Union pickets demonstrated at a Detroit Pistons game to protest the “runaway” move to Ohio, and union lawyers began legal proceedings against the company for withholding financial information during bargaining. Davidson, the union charged, had planned to close the Detroit plant no matter what the union did, and had expanded his Ohio factory accordingly. His concession demands were intentionally provocative, said the union, and the resulting strike only made it easier to close the Detroit plant.

The jobs were gone. But under mounting pressure from the legal rulings and wide publicity won by the union, Davidson finally agreed to pay each worker in Detroit a severance check of $300 per year of service (up from his initial offer of only $70), plus lifetime health and life insurance for retirees. The $2-3 million settlement was, according to the union, several times more expensive than the wage concessions originally demanded.

Above: One of several hundred UAW members leafleting the fans at a Detroit Pistons game.

Inset: The former Guardian plant in Detroit.

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public auction to pay their debts. They walked away with nothing.

On the city’s Northeast side, Solomon’s Temple Church announced in November, 1982, that it would distribute free Thanksgiving provisions to the needy. On the appointed day, over 10,000 people waited in the rain for hours to collect the donated food.

On the Northwest side, during August of that year, police patrolled the 22-square mile 14th precinct with just five squad cars. Because of extensive layoffs, a clerk and computer operator had to pair up in one police cruiser to meet minimum patrolling schedules. A local court bailiff, attempting to repossess a car, found neighbors forcibly blocking the driveway. His emergency call to the precinct headquarters brought only apologies—there were no available squad cars to help out. Neither were there enough officers to investigate the rising number of reported burglaries in the precinct.

“It’s like the frontier out here,” commented one officer. “The people aren’t getting the service they want, and we aren’t getting the support we need... Too many people don’t have jobs.”

Far from the 14th precinct, New York Times columnist William Safire evaluated the impact of unemployment in far more upbeat terms. The
benefits workers disastrous. Backed congressional spending service adjustment the unemployment. The failed, unemployment. Such Hooveresque commentary was not the media norm. Unlike the scolding press coverage directed at the unemployed a half-century earlier, TV and print coverage of jobless workers in the 1980s was generally sympathetic, if spotty.

Unlike the early years of the 1930s, Detroit’s jobless were not left to shift for themselves. For thousands, the welfare “safety net” first established during the New Deal provided emergency income and food subsidies that significantly cushioned the blow of long-term unemployment. By 1981, over half the city’s population depended on some form of public assistance, principally unemployment insurance, training allowances, food stamps, trade-adjustment benefits, or, when all else failed, welfare.

Yet just as the need for such income protection became most acute, the federal government cut these social-service programs and raised military spending instead. Most Detroit-area congressional representatives voted against the social-service cuts, but prominent leaders of both major parties backed the shift towards military priorities. The impact on Michigan was disastrous. In 1981, with 8,000 jobless workers running out of unemployment benefits every month in Detroit, the federal government cut $420 million from the state’s social-service subsidies.

To qualify for welfare benefits after these massive cutbacks, a family had to liquidate all but $1,000 of its savings and property—not counting their home or their car if it was valued below $1,500. “In Pontiac,” George Covintree of the Southeastern Michigan Emergency Food Coalition pointed out, “a lot of the workers at the plant bought a Pontiac car to help with the big campaign to buy what they build. Now they’re unemployed, [but] …that Pontiac puts them over the limit for eligibility.”

Even after selling off their few remaining assets, families had to wait months—sometimes a year—before they could collect benefits. The anguish and uncertainty of such a wait made the paltry benefits all the more humiliating. After federal and state budget cuts in social services, the maximum welfare benefit for a quarter-million Michigan families in 1981 was only $35 a week per family member. Many refused, as a matter of self-respect, to apply for welfare under these terms. Others had little choice when hunger began to wear down their pride.

Hank Wallace said he would stick it out as long as he could without turning to public assistance. “I am a very proud person,” said the unemployed auto-worker, two years after his plant closed in 1981. Without a family to support, the 43-year-old former maintenance man took up residence in his rusted automobile, parking it under the lights of a 24-hour diner to ward off prowlers while he slept. “I only wear what I can wash in public washing machines,” Wallace told a news reporter. He washed himself in gas station restrooms.

There were thousands of homeless people in Detroit like Wallace, living in cars, emergency shelters, or abandoned buildings. For the many other poor and unemployed who managed to hold onto their homes or find alternative shelter, life was only marginally better. In 1980, 414,000 people in metropolitan Detroit lived below the federally defined poverty level; by the end of 1982, the number had jumped past 600,000. Unemployment among the city’s blacks reached 37 percent by the end of 1982—68 percent among black teenagers. Unfortunately, many blamed themselves, not the economy, for their misfortune. As unemployment climbed between 1980 and 1982, the suicide rate rose by 20 percent in Detroit and Michigan. The number of suburban whites seeking counseling for heroin addiction jumped dramatically in these same years, while deaths by drug overdose more than doubled in the metro area.

Detroit’s desperate plight drew international comparisons and international aid. In the city’s most impoverished neighborhoods, the infant mortality rate rose to 33 deaths per 1,000 live births, equaling the death rate in Honduras, Central America’s poorest country. Cutbacks in government health programs, inadequate nutrition, and low birth weight accounted for most of the increase.

Autoworkers and civic organizations in West Germany, prodded by the grim news from Detroit, were moved to action. In 1982, they began sending canned goods and clothing to aid the hard-pressed citizens of America’s sixth-largest city.

The poor, unemployed, and elderly of Detroit’s Poletown line up for surplus food distributed by the city. In 1937, when the building was owned by the Mazer–Cressman Cigar Company, it was the site of a sitdown strike by 400 women cigar workers (site 42).
Detroit faces a winter of crisis," announced Mayor Young in December, 1982, as thousands of city residents fell through the tattered mesh of the welfare safety net. "It is the task of government and the responsibility of a concerned citizenry to see that no one starves and no one freezes."

The city, however, could do little on its own to meet the needs of an estimated 400,000 ill-nourished and impoverished Detroiters. The same crisis that forced thousands to seek public assistance also left many of the city's property owners delinquent on their tax bills. As crime rates rose, the city had to pare 1,500 officers off its police force, reducing neighborhood protection and undermining affirmative action. Even after voting to increase their income taxes in 1981, the city's residents could only look forward to further cutbacks in trash collection, public transportation, and other essential services.

Much of the burden of feeding and housing the unemployed fell to the soup lines, shelters, and emergency food pantries set up by private charities and self-help organizations. From the Salvation Army's Harbor Light center in the inner city, to UAW Local 735's emergency food program in suburban Ypsilanti, these 200 metro-area food providers were feeding upwards of 50,000 people a week in the closing months of 1982. "A year ago we maybe helped 50 to 75 families with food," reported the Reverend Wayne Pohl of St. Paul's church in suburban Trenton. "Now it's twice that number and more."

At the Capuchin Community Center on Detroit's East Side, the number of needy applying for food packages and meals rose with stunning abruptness. "Four years ago, we fed less than 500 daily, mostly men in their fifties," manager Lewis Hickson reported in November, 1982. "This last week, we have served on the average 2,000 people a day, men and women, most of them in their 30s."

Donations of food and money from unions, restaurants, caterers, farmers, and corporations usually provided enough to feed only the penniless. Applicants with even the smallest income were generally refused aid. "If we didn't have criteria, we'd have a line from here to Belle Isle," as Hickson put it. "There's absolutely no way we can pick up the slack that the federal government has created."

"They said it wasn't an emergency. Well what's an emergency?" asked one tearful woman turned away by the Center because she and her family got $372 a month in welfare. Her husband, a laid-off Chrysler worker, had exhausted his unemployment benefits the year before. "We're hungry... We didn't ask to be in this situation. My husband wants to work."

There was little chance, however, that laid-off Chrysler workers would soon be going back to work, and no chance they would be earning the same high wages that prevailed before 1979. When Chrysler lost $1 billion that year, it appeared that all the company's 80,000 Detroit-area workers would lose their jobs. Sales of Chrysler's big-car models had slowed to a crawl, and the company only averted bankruptcy by halving employment and appealing to the federal government for loan guarantees. Under federally-imposed bailout plans, workers, suppliers, creditors, and cities where Chrysler...
plants were located all took cuts to save the company. UAW members shoulder-
ed the lion's share of the burden: $720 million in wage and benefit concessions, or roughly $15,000 per worker over three years.

Chrysler, like GM and Ford, there-
after promised to bring more com-
petitive car models into production. But as Detroit’s auto manufacturers downsized and redesigned their cars to meet foreign competition, they also downsized employment levels and moved some of their parts production overseas.

“The expressed objective of our engineering staff,” according to a Chrysler memo leaked to the press in 1982, “is to increase the foreign content of our vehicles from the current 7 per-
cent [2 percent Japanese] to as much as 25 percent by 1990.” Company officials later characterized this policy as only a threat aimed at domestic parts suppliers and workers, but UAW researchers predicted an overall increase from 5 per-
cent foreign-made components in all U.S.-assembled cars in 1982, to 20 per-
cent by the end of the decade. Overseas plants supplying U.S. companies with engines and transmissions were already located as far away as Japan and as close as Mexico.

“It’s not hard to see why American companies like to make parts in these places,” Ford Facts, the monthly paper of UAW Local 600, observed in 1981.

“Last year, Mexican autoworkers earned one third what UAW members make. In Japan, autoworkers made just $7.20 an hour. In South Korea (where GM owns half of Saehan Motors) unions are outlawed and the typical autoworker earns a meager $2 an hour.”

At $11.62 an hour in 1982 wages, Detroit’s autoworkers, according to U.S. car companies, were simply too ex-
pensive, particularly with the added cost of pensions, health insurance, and union-negotiated work rules. If U.S. operations could not be made “cost ef-
fective,” as Ford’s Vice President for North American operations put it, “I’ll move to the place where I can get the product at a competitive cost.”

Ford, in fact, was prepared to actually buy the competition. In 1979, the com-
pany purchased 25 percent of Toyo Kogyo, maker of Mazda, and began im-
porting trucks and front-wheel-drive ax-
les from the Japanese car builder. GM already owned 34 percent of Isuzu and bought 5 percent of Suzuki in 1981, enabling the company to import engines, transmissions, and finished cars from its partners’ Japanese plants. Chrysler had

Above: Striking teachers in Woodhaven, Michigan, being led to jail in handcuffs and chains, April, 1980. That spring, over 1,000 members of the Michigan Educa-
tion Association (MEA) struck four south-suburban school boards that failed to negotiate new contracts. After six weeks of picketing, during which nine Woodhaven teachers and two MEA staffers were jailed for violating the Circuit Court’s no-strike injunction, the teachers and the school boards agreed to binding arbitration of unresolved issues—with no reprisals against striking teachers.

Inset: A member of the Detroit Federation of Teachers protests proposed cuts in teacher salaries and benefits.
owned 15 percent of Mitsubishi, maker of the Dodge Colt, since 1970, and acquired 14 percent of the French automaker, Peugeot, after selling its other foreign assets in 1980.

For Detroit’s autoworkers, the threat of additional “outsourcing” of work to these overseas sites marked a fundamental shift in their bargaining position. For forty years, their union had been able to win continuous improvements in wages and benefits. Now, for the first time in the industry’s history, the benchmark for wages in U.S. auto plants—particularly for parts manufacturing—was no longer the productivity or living standards of American workers, but the far lower labor costs American companies paid in their expanding overseas operations.

Among corporate leaders and economists, there was little doubt how American workers should respond to the threat posed by such low-wage competition. “It’s time for U.S. autoworkers to stop moaning about our economic plight,” said economist Robert Dunn in the December, 1980, Detroit News, “and do something about it. Like take a sizable wage cut.” The UAW, Dunn declared, “had priced itself and its employers out of the market.”

UAW President Doug Fraser saw things in distinctly different terms. “No one,” he declared in public rebuttals to Dunn and other critics, “has a bigger stake in the fight to remain competitive with foreign producers than the worker.” The problem, he argued, was not that American wages were too high, but that foreign wages were generally too low—to the point where many Asian and Latin American autoworkers rode bicycles to jobs producing cars they couldn’t afford.

“Competing on wages with countries that share only minimally the benefits of productivity with their workers can hardly be an appropriate national goal for America.” Such a policy, according to Fraser, would only undermine purchasing power in the United States and reduce economic activity still further. Far wiser, he argued, if the government first lowered interest rates from their artificially high levels, and then required both foreign and U.S. carmakers to build their cars where they sold them. Companies could then compete on the basis of design, engineering, and quality, but not on the price of human labor.

The price of human labor, as many Detroit workers saw it, was not high enough in any case, particularly as the price of everything else kept rising after 1979. Non-union workers and the unemployed saw their income and savings steadily eroded by this continuing inflation, but union members could negotiate and, if necessary, go on strike to protect their wage and working standards. In the fall of 1982, 5,000 UAW members struck the General Dynamics tank plant in suburban Center Line for two weeks to restore previous cuts in pay and benefits. In December of the same year, unionized musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra also walked off their jobs to win higher salaries and a continued role in selecting their conductor.

Other unions meanwhile fought just to keep what they had. Detroit’s teachers waged a three-week strike to block the School Board’s wage-cut proposals in 1982. Municipal workers, after voting down one set of concession proposals in 1981, finally forced the city to accept a two-year freeze on layoffs in return for the union’s agreement to freeze wages.

In these particular confrontations, the job security of most union members was not directly at stake. Detroit had already laid off 20 percent of its municipal workers by the end of 1982, but the city’s School Board could not move to South Carolina to escape the union; neither could the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. General Dynamics, as one of the nation’s leading military contrac-
Breadwinners and Roses

A summer evening in 1980. Leona Ruffin left the health clinic where she worked as a medical secretary on Detroit’s West Side, talking and joking with her co-workers as they walked to their cars. Married and mother of a baby girl, Ruffin did not rush home to care for her daughter and feed her husband. She lingered instead with the other women in the parking lot, hashing over the day’s small emergencies and disrupted routines.

Finally, she and several friends piled into a car and drove to Clark Park, stopping to pick up beer for the softball game they would play that night. Leona’s husband Eddie—laid off for nearly a year by Great Lakes Steel—would take care of the baby and fix dinner.

Tonight, Leona would play second base.

Fifty years before, such a reversal in traditional roles would have been dismissed as a rare, even freakish situation. But not after 1979, when economic catastrophe made women breadwinners all the more crucial to their families.

Even before the economy slumped, the traditional role of man as sole breadwinner had become the exception rather than the rule in Detroit-area households. By the late 1970s, over half the families in the metro area relied on paychecks from two family members, usually the husband and wife. In one of every five families with children, a woman was the sole parent and head of household; within the city limits of Detroit, women were the sole parent in 42 percent of all families with children. Whether single or married, a paycheck to support their families was the primary reason many of these metro-area mothers sought wage work.

The heavy layoffs that began in 1979 accelerated these trends. The industries hardest hit by the economy’s downturn—auto, steel, trucking, construction—employed a predominantly male workforce. Yet even as the Detroit area lost 130,000 of these blue-collar jobs in 1980, the number of clerical jobs—most of them held by women—remained virtually unchanged.

The net result in many households was that women became sole breadwinners and men became unemployed “house husbands.” This sudden change in roles, forced upon the family by outside events, created stress and conflict for both wife and husband as they tried to adjust to their new relationship.

For James Leija, a production foreman laid off by Chrysler in 1980, the prospect of taking over domestic duties in his St. Clair Shores home filled him with dread. “I resented very much having to stay home…. I felt slighted. I would pray and beg God to give me a job.” But there were no jobs for Leija, and when the family’s savings ran out, his wife returned to work as an attorney. Leija, ignoring the ribbing of friends who called him “Betty Crocker,” learned to plan meals, clean the house, care for his infant son, and still make time for classes in computerized information systems.

For Leona and Eddie Ruffin, the change in roles was especially difficult. “Eddie felt like he’d failed us,” said Leona, whose $140-a-week salary barely covered food, car payments, and medical expenses for their ailing baby. No longer able to afford their five-room apartment, they had to crowd into a single room of her mother-in-law’s house. “We went through a stage of him drinking—like four- and five-day binges. He only stopped this last Christmas after the baby had a seizure and he couldn’t even get out of bed to help take her to the hospital.”

For Fran Marchone, a full-time barmaid working in Detroit for $3.50 an hour plus tips, the transition to sole breadwinner became all the harder when her husband, after losing his trucking job, refused to do either housework or childcare. “I told him, ‘Hey, I just only have so many hours in the day. I can only do so much.’”

After considerable wrangling, he took most of the cooking, much of the laundry, and some of the childcare and shopping.

Men who agreed to take on these tasks often did so as a temporary expedient. They either expected to find work again in Detroit, or planned to look elsewhere if nothing turned up. Jean Carter’s husband, an unemployed driver for a carhauling firm, wanted to look for work in the South, while she, a press operator in a Livonia auto-parts plant, wanted to stay in Detroit. As a woman and a black, she did not look forward to surrendering ten years of hard-won seniority. “It’d be tough leaving my job, the situation I’ve set up, being a union officer, my friends and things. It would be a little hard for me to go down there and try and get a job. I don’t feel like I could just sit at home and do nothing.”

tors, was one of the few Detroit manufacturers in a growth industry: it could clearly afford to raise wages from the depressed levels that prevailed when Chrysler owned the tank plant before 1982.

But other employers who could not or would not raise wages often could—and did—leave the state. National Twist Drill, for example, not only could move south to escape the UAW, but had the incentive to do so when sales to Detroit’s car companies slumped after 1979. The company had already used profits made in Michigan to build a plant in non-union North Carolina during the mid-1970s. In 1981, it opened another new factory in South Carolina. After gradually shifting work south and reducing employment in its Rochester, Michigan, plant from 1800 to 250, National Twist Drill asked the remaining workers to take steep cuts in wages and benefits. The workers refused when the company would not guarantee their jobs, and in November, 1982, management announced plans to close the suburban facility altogether.

Such episodes were not limited to industrial settings. Non-manufacturing employers, prodded by declining profit margins and the precedent-setting Chrysler concessions, also demanded cutbacks in wages to keep their businesses open. Some even switched to non-union labor without leaving
In 1982, two Directors of CD Holding Company, after buying 29 Cunningham Drug Stores from their own firm, summarily fired the unionized workforce and reopened the chain as Apex Drugs. Collective bargaining agreements with Local 876 of the United Food and Commercial Workers and Local 337 of the Teamsters were ignored, and 400 clerks who had previously earned $6.17 an hour plus benefits suddenly found themselves on the street.

For Rex Gray, a former machine operator at GM's Detroit Diesel plant, a job would come "someday when things pick up." In the meantime, his wife worked both as a cashier at Montgomery Ward and as a part-time clerk at West Dearborn Vision. Rex worked full-time at home, raising three boys, washing diapers, cooking meals, cleaning the house. When he could find a job again outside the home, the housework would "definitely be a two-party thing," Gray promised. "I just don't see how she ever went through it alone."

For Gray and others like him, the crucible of unemployment recast all the norms of family life. Under the intense pressure, some families became more unified, while others fell to pieces. In no case, however, could the boundaries of traditional male-female roles remain unchallenged. "I don't want to raise my children with this idea that 'this is man's work and this is women's work,'" Helen Mauer explained. "I've come too far to go backwards."

Helen Mauer's role as sole breadwinner also had an air of impermanence. "I realize that we can't continue like this," she said of the secretarial job she took when Chrysler laid off her husband. "I don't make enough money... My husband plans to get in his car and drive south and call me on the phone and say, 'Helen, I got a job.' But for now, I enjoy our life, him being at home, taking over some of my responsibilities, learning to be closer to his children, and my going to work and coming home and my dinner being ready. It's nice."

Detroit unemployment line, June, 1982.

The only thing the manager told us was they were going to pay $3.57 an hour," recalled one female clerk with seven years seniority. "No insurance, no full-time work. We were not told a place to apply." Apex turned instead to the long lines of unemployed jobseekers willing to work for these near-minimum wages.

Peaceful picketing by Local 876 and Local 337 turned many customers away from Apex. But while the unions, in a series of lengthy legal proceedings, pressed charges against the company for breach of contract, the picket lines gradually thinned, the customers slowly returned, and Apex's owners ultimately reaped the harvest of their union-busting strategy.

Neither Ford nor GM was about to drive the UAW out of their U.S.-based operations. The future of those
operations, however, was very much in doubt in 1980 and 1981, particularly at Ford. Led by huge losses in its North American division, the number-two automaker lost $2.5 billion in the two-year period. Even GM, which had weathered the Great Depression of the 1930s without a single year in the red, lost $760 million in 1980.

Seeking the most immediate solution to their financial crisis, both companies called on the UAW to extend to them the same concessions granted Chrysler. Otherwise, predicted GM Chairman Roger Smith, "there will be more plants shutting down and more auto-industry jobs going offshore."

With laid-off union members at GM and Ford rising above 200,000, the UAW's elected Bargaining Councils at both companies voted in January, 1982, to discuss contract changes with management. "The situation in the industry," UAW President Fraser told union members, "has changed considerably since we last discussed this question. You have to review your policy in light of the circumstances."

The new contracts negotiated with GM and Ford over the next several months reduced labor costs by between $1 billion and $2 billion at each company, spread over 2 1/2 years. Union negotiators agreed to give up some holidays, to delay several cost-of-living allowances, and to drop a scheduled 3 percent raise for the 420,000 UAW members still working at Ford and GM. In return, the companies agreed to reconsider plans for foreign sourcing of parts, to share a portion of future profits with union members, and to guarantee another job or income-to-retirement for those high-seniority employees who suffered future layoffs.

This latter benefit, called the Guaranteed Income Stream, represented an historic step forward in the union's campaign for secure employment. But the wage concessions the union granted in return marked an equally historic turnaround. For the first time since World War II, the UAW's negotiations with GM and Ford had not focused on what union members would gain, but on what they would lose. This, in turn, provoked the most embittered debate within the union since the faction fighting of the 1940s.

The outcome of this infighting, as it continued throughout 1982, varied company by company, plant by plant. At Ford, where financial losses were the most serious, 73 percent of the UAW's voting membership favored the new contract. At GM, a majority also backed the proposed agreement—but only a slim majority of 52 percent. In many of the company's body and parts plants, members voted heavily for the new contract in the hope it would keep their factories open. But in major car-assembly operations, where the potential for foreign "outsourcing" by GM was not so immediate a threat, the contract was often defeated. Opponents resented having to freeze their wages when the company was making profits again in 1981 (even if reduced), and when GM's top 55 executives paid themselves salaries averaging $500,000 apiece—400 percent higher than the average $100,000 salary for Toyota executives.

The contract was narrowly ratified.
Despite these resentments, and the debate over union concessions at GM and Ford immediately shifted to the local level. Here, plant managers had long sought to amend locally negotiated work rules that defined job responsibilities, work schedules, transfer procedures, overtime, and seniority rights. Some UAW locals, under direct threat of plant closings or promises of future work, agreed to far-reaching amendments in these work rules. But many other locals either refused to alter the day-to-day job rights and protections they had won over the years, or agreed to only minor concessions.

The year-long turmoil that accompanied these concession debates ended with an especially bitter confrontation at Chrysler. After working nearly three years under contract terms that paid $3-an-hour less than GM and Ford, union members expected substantial improvement in their sub-par wages in 1982. When the contract negotiated in the fall of that year fell short of their expectations, workers voted by a 70 to 30 percent margin to reject the proposed agreement. Their lopsided “no” vote was the first contract rejection in the history of the UAW’s Big-Three negotiations. Another precedent was set in November, when Canadian UAW members struck Chrysler without the backing of their American co-workers. Canadian inflation was even higher than in the United States, and after three years without compensating wage increases, Canadian workers had run out of patience. Five weeks after the walkout began, the company agreed to raise hourly wages $1.15 in Canada and 75¢ in the United States. Union members on both sides of the Detroit River voted heavily in favor of the compromise settlement.

That same December, the UAW and GM agreed to divert $30 million from a union-negotiated education fund to unemployed GM workers. Each would receive $300. “With this $300, my 9-year-old daughter will have a Christmas,” said Lida Belcher, a former worker at GM’s Ypsilanti plant. In every other respect, the future looked as bleak as before. “I got my last unemployment check on November 22 and will be signing up for welfare next month. I have looked everywhere for a job but nobody’s hiring.”

The long months of unemployment would be harsh indeed for thousands of jobless workers who had exhausted their savings, their unemployment benefits, and their hopes of finding work. Some families pulled together through the crisis; others were pulled apart.

“The pressure is bad,” explained George Azzopardi, one year after Ford laid him off and the Hyatt Hotel cut back his wife’s laundry job. “My stomach is all nerved up. Sometimes we go a day or two without eating. When I got a minimum-wage job cutting grass for the city, they cut off our food stamps. We’re losing weight, hungry, nervous all the time. We don’t even feel like husband and wife anymore.”

For the Azzopardis and thousands of unemployed workers in the Detroit area, it appeared to be the end of the line for the region’s economy. Many, like the unemployed of the 1930s, would decide to leave Detroit behind, to pack their belongings and set out on the highway—headed for Dallas, Houston, or wherever else jobs were rumored to be.

Detroit, Woodward Avenue and Six Mile, 1981.