"A loyal Detroiter who scans the figures finds cause for the glorification of his city."

*Polk's Directory, 1929*

The figures Polk's cited were not for automobile production. As impressive as these were, the most visible source of pride for Detroit's civic boosters was the city's soaring skyline.

After 1910, new skyscrapers scaled upwards one after another in an unprecedented building boom, fueled by profits from the fast-growing auto industry. Overnight it seemed, Grand Circus Park (site 26) was surrounded by towering hotels and office buildings—the Statler, the Tuller, and the Whitney building, all completed in 1914. Five years later, GM began construction of the world's largest office building on Grand Boulevard, sparking a renewed burst of construction that culminated in 1927-1928. In that two-year period alone, the city's builders completed the 46-story Penobscot Building; the New Union Trust Building and Cadillac Tower, both 40 stories; the 38-story David Stott Building; the 28-story Fisher Building; and the 19-story Bell Telephone Building. Investment in new construction totaled $200 million in 1927, 33 times more than the $6 million spent in 1900. “Detroit has crowded more than three-quarters of a century of achievement,” Polk's enthused, “into a short space of two decades.”

The twin cylinders of Detroit's spectacular economic boom in the 1920s—the auto and construction industries—could not have been more different. The auto industry was characterized by the mass production of identical goods: each car exactly like the one preceding and following it on the assembly line. The construction industry, on the other hand, was characterized by specialty production: each skyscraper different in innumerable ways from its neighbor. While small homes and building materials could be standardized and turned out on a near assembly-line basis, Detroit's skyscrapers were each "tailor made."

The two industries were also organized along radically different lines. In auto, three giant corporations, GM, Ford, and Chrysler, dominated the world market by the end of the 1920s.
Backed by enormous financial and marketing resources, these corporate giants spread the cost of building a factory over millions of cars, allowing them to undersell their small-fry competitors. But skyscrapers were not built in factories. They required dozens of specialty contractors whose “capital” usually consisted of a few cement mixers, some trucks, and perhaps a steam-driven power saw. Anywhere from 30 to 60 separate sub-contractors collaborated on a large building, each specializing in a particular trade and employing only a handful of workers.

Each workforce was distinctly different. In auto, the division of labor into simple tasks reduced the proportion of skilled workers in the labor force to less than 15 percent. By Henry Ford’s estimate in the early 1920s, 85 percent of the jobs in his plants took only two weeks to learn, and 43 percent required only one day’s training. The majority of construction workers, in contrast, were skilled tradesmen: carpenters, plumbers, electricians, plasterers, painters, and others able to apply their life-long craft to varying job specifications.

New building technologies and mechanization dramatically changed construction work, but innovation tended to eliminate unskilled jobs as often as skilled. Engine-driven hoists run by skilled engineers replaced the “hod-carriers” who previously carried bricks and mortar on their shoulders; steam shovels and trenching machines, run by skilled machine operators, likewise replaced unskilled hand shovellers. Even new techniques that undermined old skills usually created new crafts in their place. While the use of steel and reinforced concrete in tall buildings reduced the demand for stonemasons, this same innovation created a new demand for skilled iron and cement workers.

Craft unionism continued to flourish under these conditions, with many skilled tradesmen—particularly ironworkers, electricians, and sheet metal workers—winning union recognition and the Closed Shop during the boom years. Wages rose steadily: from 65¢ an hour for Detroit’s unionized ironworkers in 1913, to $1.50 an hour by 1929. Several crafts were also able to maintain strict control over apprenticeship. Sheet metal workers required the future “mechanic” to go through three intermediate grades before qualifying as a full-fledged journeyman, with the union controlling job standards as well as testing.

Not all of Detroit’s tradesmen prospered. Painters faced growing competition from the newly perfected spray gun, and carpenters saw much of their skilled work eliminated as contractors introduced factory-made window and door frames, or replaced wood altogether with metal. In 1920, the Associated Building Employers of Detroit began a new Open Shop campaign that quickly
undermined older craft unions, particularly as employers hired non-union workers from Canada (called “nickel immigrants” after the 5¢ boat ride from Windsor). Seeking to stem the tide, the Carpenters Union in 1926 struck Vokes and Schaffer, a leading Open Shop contractor; union supporters intercepted Canadian carpenters at the Detroit River landing, and “stain bombs” were exploded on the woodwork at Vokes and Schaffer job sites. But to no avail. “By the time President Hoover got in, the Carpenters Union was pretty well shot,” recalled Walter Bertram, an early member. “I had to drop out in the mid-1920s, because every job was an Open Shop job, and they kept paying less and less. The only jobs that were union were those that could be boycotted, like theaters or amusement parks.”

Anxieties over changing technology and the spread of the Open Shop intensified the narrowly defined “job consciousness” of Detroit’s skilled tradesmen. To protect themselves, each trade staked out its “job turf” and fought to protect it against poachers from other crafts. The Carpenters fought with virtually everyone, claiming that anything once made of wood always remained carpenters’ work, even after it was replaced by iron or sheet metal. Detroit’s Ironworkers were unconverted. “Mr. Carpenter,” groused one Ironworker officer, “is hard to convince that iron was never wood at any stage.” These “jurisdictional” disputes poisoned relations between workers, with one group of tradesmen frequently resorting to strike action to protest encroachment by a competing craft. Who should paint a radiator—the Plumbers or Painters Union? Who should build scaffolds—the Laborers, Carpenters, or Bricklayers? Who should control electric welding—the Electricians or Sheet Metal Workers?

In the rough-and-tumble of such infighting, bonds of solidarity took a beating. Workers so fundamentally divided by craft rarely even saw themselves as “construction workers”; they were bricklayers, “woodbutchers” (carpenters), or “tinknockers” (sheet-metal workers). The prevalence of small-scale family businesses meant many workers identified with their boss as readily as their fellow worker; some became contractors themselves, with a few even maintaining their union membership after they became small businessmen. The skilled tradesman was often a man on the make, willing to wink at the occasional bribe some union leaders took from employers. Petty grafting was OK, many reasoned, so long as the union “Business Agent” did not steal dues money or flagrantly sell out the membership. “We had one of the crookedest BAs in the world,” recalled Willard Sarrach, a sheet-metal worker. “But he was the most honest man in the world for us fellows. He built the union.”

The construction industry was an idealized version of 19th century production: small-scale, competitive, and boasting a highly skilled workforce. Ironically, even as corporate-controlled mass production destroyed this form of economic life in most industries, the craft unionism of the building trades became the AFL’s dominant form of organization in the 1920s. In this decade, while red scares and repression drove many industrial unionists into early retirement from the labor movement, the AFL’s few industrial unions went into steep decline. Prohibition crippled the Brewery Workers, while mechanization and declining demand for coal undercut the Mine Workers. Only the construction crafts grew, even as the AFL’s overall membership declined. Where building tradesmen made up 20 percent of the AFL’s membership in 1920, they topped 30 percent in 1929.

These skilled workers saw the world through “hand-crafted” lenses, insisting that workers in mass-production industries divide themselves according to skill, even as skill levels were declining in most jobs. The results were disastrous in Detroit, where small groups of autoworkers could easily be isolated and replaced. “When we received a wage cut, my unit went on strike,” recalled Joe Hattley, a woodworker in 1925 at GM’s Fleetwood plant on West Fort Street (site 21). “But due to the setup under the old craft union, the metal finishers in the body shop, the painters, the trimmers and all the other units continued to work. Within three weeks time, we lost the strike and I was fired.” Auto, like virtually all the other mass-production industries, remained non-union.

It was becoming clear to many that only an industrial organization combining all the workers in a factory could hope to match the power of a large corporation. But industrial unionism was easier to argue in theory than achieve in practice. Between 1914 and 1926, the socialist leadership of the Machinists Union pushed for an Amalgamated union combining all the metal-working crafts—Machinists, Blacksmiths, Boilermakers, and Sheet Metal Workers. But merger efforts fell through, and even the class-conscious Machinists got cold feet when it came to surrendering their members in railroad workshops—who logically belonged in an industrial union of railroad workers. (In 1926, the national union’s socialist President, William Johnston, died and was replaced by more conservative leadership.)

In Detroit, only the Carryage, Wagon, and Automobile Workers Union attempted to organize auto workers on an industry-wide basis. Expelled from the AFL in 1918 for ignoring craft distinctions, the union’s Detroit local grew to 30,000 members before losing a series of strikes and collapsing altogether in the brief depression of 1921. Revived at mid-decade by Communist leadership and rechristened the Auto Workers Union, the AWU by 1929 had little to show for its efforts beyond an ongoing network of factory newspapers, each distributed by clandestine committees of committed workers.

As the AWU discovered, even some autoworkers were a bit starstruck in the “soaring” twenties, particularly the small elite of skilled machinists, metal finishers, and tool makers. Many of these workers continued to see themselves as distinctly superior to the unskilled “riff raff” in the industry. “They wanted to build a fence around themselves,” Nick DiGaetano recalled of the skilled metal finishers in his department at Chrysler-Jefferson (site 22). “The foundry men? ‘Hell with them.’ The assembly-line men? ‘Hell with them. They have no trade,’ they said. The polisher [metal finisher] was a big shot, like the molder, like the machinist, like the tool maker…”

Big shots” like these seemed to have it made in the late 1920s. Henry Ford was retooling his plants to produce the new Model A, and toolmakers, machinists, millwrights, and electricians were in heavy demand to build and install some 15,000 new machines and retool 25,000 others. All the while, auto production climbed ever upwards, increasing by 170 percent between 1919 and 1929.

As the Soaring Twenties drew to a close, however, these skilled and prosperous tradesmen were heading for a fall. With little warning, the industry they worked in, the city they lived in, the nation they belonged to—all would soon be sliding into the terrible abyss of the Great Depression.