When Henry Ford's grandfather, John Ford, arrived in Michigan in 1848, the bustling wilderness town of Detroit must have been a welcome contrast to the Ireland Ford had known. For John Ford's homeland, unlike Detroit, was a crisis-ridden land, full of death and despair.

Ireland's "troubles" stretched back at least as far as the 1650s, when English landlords took over most of the country's good farmland. Their land seizures forced the Catholic peasantry to crowd onto marginal plots barely large enough for one-room shacks. A small class of farmers (many, like the Fords, Protestants) did rent enough acreage from the landlords to produce wheat and beef for export to England, but the overwhelming majority of poverty-stricken families lived on a diet of potatoes and milk. High rents drove even tenant farmers to the verge of bankruptcy.

Ireland's poverty increased all the more in the 1800s when the English began evicting peasants from their small plots to make way for cattle and sheep grazing. In the mid-1840s, a deadly potato blight also destroyed the peasantry's last source of available food. Disaster followed: while English landlords continued exporting beef and wheat to England, the Irish starved. Since starving peasants could not pay their rents, mass evictions became commonplace.

"There is a very prevalent feeling among the landlord class," wrote Irish revolutionary John Mitchel in 1847, "that the people of Ireland ought not to be fed upon the grain produced in this country... and that it is desirable to get rid of a couple millions of them." The combined impact of the potato famine and evictions did just that. Between 1846 and 1851, of an estimated 8½ million Irish, one million died of starvation and disease and another million were forcibly removed from their plots of land.

"I am sick of Ireland," wrote Irishman John O'Donovan lamented in 1848. "I would leave it exultingly, retire among the Backwoods of America... there to learn a rude but sturdy civilization that knows not slavery or hunger." As the Irish economy collapsed, even once prosperous Protestant households like the Ford's felt the same despair, the same
loring for a “sturdy civilization.” In 1847, the Ford family reportedly was evicted from its farm for non-payment of rent; with no land and no future in Ireland, John Ford and his 21-year-old son William (Henry’s father) gathered the family together and set out for America. The Fords were not alone in their trek to America’s backwoods. In Germany, Scotland, England, and Scandinavia, millions of people abandoned their homelands in the same years. Their reasons for leaving were similar to, if less intense than, the reasons motivating the Irish: all across northern Europe, landlords were usurping peasant lands and consolidating huge estates to produce wheat, livestock, and wool for Europe’s fast-growing cities. Rapid population growth in rural areas also forced much of the “surplus” population to abandon the countryside. And all the while, the expanding cotton factories of England were underselling the handloom weavers who made cloth in their village workshops.

Crop failures, economic depression, and revolutionary upheavals set millions more adrift in the 1840s. They moved from one rural area to the next, from rural areas to nearby cities, and from one country to its neighbor, always in search of employment, land, and food. Between 1845 and 1854, three million people left Europe altogether and set out for America.

“Go further west,” one guidebook advised its emigrant readers. “Not until you reach Koshkonong [Wisconsin] will you find America.” Thousands of these pioneer settlers “found America” in the wilderness of Michigan, and, as they poured into the region, Detroit grew by leaps and bounds—from barely 2,000 residents in 1830, to over 30,000 in 1855. Two of every three Detroiters in the later year were foreign-born, most of them German, Irish, English, French, and Scottish. They found Detroit a hard place to live. Clearing the towering, dense forests of eastern Michigan took a heavy toll in labor, and the town’s primitive sanitation caused repeated outbreaks of disease. During one cholera epidemic in 1834, 7 percent of the town’s population died in one month.

Michigan was nevertheless a “land of opportunity” for most immigrant settlers, a place where hard work and individual striving would be rewarded—or so one hoped. By 1850, thousands of immigrants like the Fords had managed to clear land and cultivate farms in the area around Detroit, while many others established their own workshops or stores in the fast-growing town.

Detroit had just entered the industrial age when John Ford and his family arrived in 1848. Michigan’s ample supply of lumber, copper, and iron ore provided the resources for this budding industrialism, with railroads and shipbuilding adding to the quickening pace of economic growth in the 1840s. These early industries were, however, quite small by today’s standards: the city’s single largest employer, the Michigan Central Railroad, employed only 200 men in its machine shops on West Jefferson Avenue, while hardly a dozen of the city’s lumber mills, machine shops, and metal foundries employed more than 30 workers. More typical was “Wesley’s Cabinet Shop” on lower Woodward Avenue, employing only ten “hands” in 1848. At Eiling and Brewer’s “Candle Factory” on Fort Street near Brush, just two workers produced 50,000 pounds of candles each year. Whether woodworker, candlemaker, shoemaker, tailor, or saddlemaker, most of Detroit’s skilled “artisans” worked with hand tools in 1850, many of them in their own homes or neighboring workshops. Some became “Master” workmen, taking on
young apprentices and hiring a few "journeymen"—skilled workers who traveled from town to town in search of work. But Master workmen continued to labor alongside their handful of hired shophands.

Detroit's store owners did sell ready-made factory goods from the East to the thousands of pioneer settlers passing through the city. But many of these storekeepers also had workshops in their back rooms, where they and several journeymen turned out shoes, clothing, or furniture, much of it custom-made to suit a buyer's wishes. When these retail merchants expanded into wholesaling and began distributing goods to stores in outlying towns, they either subcontracted the added work to outside craftsmen, or hired more journeymen and increased their "in-house" production.

By 1850, George and Isaac Miller had turned their tobacco store on Woodward Avenue into a small factory, where between 20 and 30 workers bunched and cut tobacco leaves in the store's attic and basement. H.P. Baldwin's Boot and Shoe Store in the same neighborhood employed 20 journeymen shoemakers, each using his hand tools and all-around shoemaking skills to fill orders for Baldwin's wholesale and retail business.

Apprentice, journeyman, Master, and merchant: it was supposedly one big family, free from the class conflict that characterized Europe and the eastern United States. Like any family, disputes did periodically erupt—as in 1837, when high inflation followed by a temporary business slump provoked the city's first strike. "Yesterday," the Detroit Daily Advertiser reported on April 4 of that year, "our streets were paraded by a large company of respectable looking journeymen carpenters carrying standards bearing this pithy couplet: "Ten Hours A Day/Two Dollars For Pay.'"

This demonstration was exceptional in a town where journeymen and employers frequently united in educational organizations like the Detroit Mechanic's Society. Founded in 1818, the Society built a large meeting hall at Griswold and Lafayette streets in 1834, and maintained a library of 4,000 books for members drawn from dozens of trades and professions. The Detroit Typographical Society, formed in 1839, was also open to both print-shop owners and journeymen printers. In an era when many journeymen hoped to settle down and become Masters of their own print shop, a separate organization for journeymen made little sense. The Society applied itself to improving trade practices, providing sickness benefits, and furthering the "moral and social improvement of its members."

Nonetheless, Detroit's skilled workers were losing their independence. Instead of selling directly to customers for full value, workers frequently turned products over to a merchant, who paid a wage and often provided production materials. Cheap "ready-made" goods became common, and custom work slowly declined. Merchants also began to hire "two-thirders"—workers who had learned only part of the craft and who worked for less money, often in their own homes. Journeymen in an employer's workshop frequently had to compete with these underpaid subcontractors.

Conflict grew. "We agreed...to the lowest possible living prices for custom work," the Committee of Journeymen Tailors protested in the fall of 1851, "believing that, under the arrangement, [we] would have seats in the shops of [our] employers." Yet employers continued to have custom work done outside their shops, "for very little more than half the established bill of prices."

In desperation, the tailors announced they would refuse to work until owners agreed to "get their custom work done on their premises and pay the established bill of prices."

Similar disputes between journeymen printers and their employers rapidly transformed the Detroit Typographical Society after 1850. Workers were particularly angered by the growing number of underpaid apprentices and two-
thirders hired by management to replace fully qualified journeymen. In 1853, disgruntled printers expelled the larger employers from the Society and turned it into a union, affiliating their organization with the National Typographical Union (NTU).

When Detroit's Local 18 of the NTU announced its formation that year, the city's first permanent trade union was born.

Detroit recorded many other firsts in the 1850s. Railroad connections with Chicago and the East were completed; the Detroit and Lake Superior Copper Company built the world's largest copper smelter; and the city's shipbuilders launched Detroit's first large-scale floating dry docks. In 1853, George Russell's workshops on the East Side set another precedent by turning out 25 railroad cars—the first rolling stock built west of Albany.

The pace of growth and change quickened dramatically after the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Detroit's tanneries, lumber mills, foundries, and shipbuilders all expanded production to meet the demand for war material. Smaller companies merged and new companies formed: the Detroit Bridge and Iron Company, the Michigan Car Company (building railroad cars), and the Detroit Stove Works. In 1863, Detroit's machine shops began building marine steam engines; in 1864, the first Bessemer steel-making furnace in America was built in nearby Wyandotte.

The wilderness town John Ford first saw at mid-century had become an industrial city, with a highly diversified and booming economy. Detroit was the biggest shipbuilder on the Great Lakes, the biggest stove maker in the United States, and the biggest copper refiner in the world. The city's population swelled proportionately, reaching 80,000 by 1870 and 116,000 by 1880.

As Detroit grew, so did class segregation. Wealthy residents moved into exclusive new districts along Woodward, Cass, and West Fort streets. In large workplaces, day-to-day contact between workers and owners disappeared. Indeed, the entire scale of production was being fundamentally transformed. In 1856, a drugstore owner named Frederick Stearns began manufacturing prescription drugs in a one-room workshop with a single assistant; by 1881, Stearns' company was one of the nation's major drug manufacturers, with a multi-story factory employing 400 workers.

Stearns was only one of the "self-made men," as they called themselves, who built huge fortunes during Detroit's rapid industrialization. Hazen Pingree, a former leather cutter in a Massachusetts shoe factory, came to Detroit in 1865 with virtually no savings. Finding a job in H.P. Baldwin's small boot-and-shoe factory, he accumulated a modest bank account and, with a single partner, invested $1,360 in his own workshop the following year. At first, he employed eight workers; by 1886, he had 700 employees, and the entire process of shoemaking had changed from skilled hand work to semi-skilled machine production. Daniel Scotten's rise was equally meteoric: beginning with a small tobacco store purchased for $1,500 in...
Land of the Half Free, Home of the Unequal

Our government is formed by, for the benefit of, and to be controlled by, the descendants of European nations.

Michigan Senate, 1842

When the state of Michigan was formed in 1837, its first Constitution abolished all legal protection for the owning or sale of slaves within its borders. That same Constitution, however, also granted voting and civil rights to white men only.

According to the prevailing racism of the day, whites regarded all non-white races as mentally inferior, morally lax, and generally incapable of democratic self-rule. Subordination was supposedly the “natural” condition of blacks, and in the South, slave owners guaranteed this outcome by making it a crime to teach black slaves to read or write.

In 1837, there were fewer than 700 blacks in the entire state and barely 150 in Detroit. Their numbers slowly grew as black mechanics and tradesmen from Virginia migrated to Detroit after 1840, and as field slaves fled north after 1850. Hoping to find a haven from the degrading slave system of the South, they found a society that recognized them in theory as “free men,” but in practice barred them from virtually every public place and industry.

Blacks could not serve on Detroit’s juries, could not enter the “front rooms” of hotels and restaurants, and could not find work or training in most trades. They were compelled to pay school taxes, but the public schools would not admit black children. Marriage between blacks and whites was legally prohibited, while customary practice and occasional violence restricted most black residents to a small area on the near East Side.

Ironically, it was the Irish—previously brutalized by the British—who enforced Detroit’s racial caste system with a special vengeance. Many Irish feared that black laborers would take away the unskilled jobs they relied on, and economic competition fueled the race prejudice common to a nation where slavery was still practiced in the South. Resentment peaked in the Civil War year of 1863, when a predominantly Irish crowd, angered by the military draft and enraged by fabricated rape charges against a black tavernkeeper, rampaged through Detroit’s black enclave, killing two men and setting fire to 30 buildings.

This demoralizing turn of events could not turn back the 40-year campaign of Detroit’s blacks to defeat slavery in the South and win political equality in Michigan. As early as 1833, a crowd of blacks from all over Michigan and western Ontario attacked Detroit’s jail and freed two runaway slaves before the Sheriff could return them to Kentucky. Over the next 30 years, Detroit served as the major terminus on the Underground Railroad—the illegal network of hiding places and “safe houses,” operated by blacks and sympathetic whites—that helped fugitive slaves escape to Canada.

“All history shows, and our experience proves,” Detroit’s Colored Vigilante Committee resolved in 1842, “that the Rights and Liberties of a peo-
people must be obtained by their own exertions.” Acting on this principle, Detroit’s black community organized a half-dozen petition drives, several court suits, and two unsuccessful referendum campaigns in 1850 and 1867 to win their voting rights. Finally, six years after President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation abolished slavery in the South, Michigan’s white voters narrowly passed a Constitutional amendment in 1870 extending voting rights to non-white men.

Four years later, Michigan’s male voters turned down a referendum proposal that would have further extended the “suffrage” (voting rights) to women. Many of those who demanded votes for women in this first of several unsuccessful referendums took their cue from the decades-long campaign to abolish slavery. Women who had learned to organize public meetings and demand human rights for blacks saw no reason why the same tactics and principles, embodied in Detroit’s Women’s Suffrage Association, should not win equal rights for women.

Their public campaign clashed head on with centuries of religious dogma. Christian churches (with the exception of the Quakers) had long prohibited women from speaking in meetings or becoming ministers, basing their outlook on the biblical teachings of St. Paul: “Let the women learn in silence with all subjection.... I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over a man, but to be in silence.”

Scientific opinion was equally contemptuous of the demand for equal rights. According to Females and Their Diseases, written by Dr. Charles Meigs in 1848, women had “a head almost too small for intellect but just big enough for love.” Based on such pseudo-scientific rationalizing, Michigan barred women from its universities until 1870 and denied them the vote throughout the nineteenth century, allowing them only the limited right to vote in School-Board elections.

Many middle-class women found these restrictions on their political rights intolerable, but working-class women probably found the immediate issues of family survival far more pressing. Among newly arrived immigrant groups, the majority of men surveyed in the 1880s did not register to vote and, presumably, their wives and daughters were no less indifferent to the issue of suffrage.

Elite standards of family authority, characterized by an absolutely dominant husband and a submissive, frail, “sensitive” wife, also had little relevance in working-class families. Although women were expected to follow the lead of their fathers and husbands, women in rural Europe and America did household and agricultural chores roughly parallel to the work of men. When husbands migrated to nearby districts to find temporary work, women ran the households and the farms; when such migrations eventually brought the entire family to a city like Detroit, women carried the full responsibility of household production if their husbands worked outside the home.

Women who also worked for wages generally saw their wage-earner status as temporary. For those with grievances in their work or life, they looked to the church, the ethnic association, or the union (if it admitted women) for support, not to politics or the Women’s Suffrage Association.

D.M. Ferry Company, a national distributor of seeds, employed German women to cultivate its 300-acre seed bed on Grand River Avenue, circa 1870.

however, as the frontier moved steadily west and Detroit’s factories grew larger and more numerous.

In the 1880s, when families spent at least 90¢ a day for the bare minimum of food and rent, Detroit’s skilled trade-

men earned daily wages averaging $2.25 (machinists and printers) to $3.21 (iron puddlers). But these craftsmen were at the top of the wage scale; unskilled laborers averaged only $1.33 a day, and half of all wage earners in the city made less than $1.50. Since a wide range of in-
dustries, from construction to railroad-
car manufacturing, closed down during the winter months or slack season, most workers experienced prolonged unem-
ployment every year. Under these condi-
tions, only 6 percent of the workers surveyed in Wayne County in 1884 could afford to even open a savings account.

Most workers lived on the borderline of poverty and minimal comfort, moving from one status to the other as they were laid off from one job and hired in-
to the next. Once hired, work dominated their days. “We go on duty at 5 o’clock
Until the invention of the Linotype machine in the 1880s, these skilled journeymen printers hand-set, letter-by-letter, Detroit’s newspapers, periodicals, and books.

The title of “journeyman” had a literal meaning, for many workers “tramped” from city to city, joining the constant stream of tradesmen, settlers, and peddlers moving throughout the country. Their union traveling card insured that in towns with a union printing industry, they could count on a meal, a roof, and either assistance finding a job, or transportation to the next stop if work was scarce. The union’s “tramp fund” thereby helped unemployed printers find work, and protected employed printers against the low-wage competition of desperate job seekers.

in the afternoon,” one group of bakers said of their work schedule in 1884, “and usually get through about 8 or 9 o’clock the next morning...and on Saturdays not till 12 or even 1 o’clock.” Their 15-hour workday was longer than average, but by the 1880s, most wage earners worked at least 10 hours a day, six days a week.

For factory workers, those 10 to 12 hours a day could be especially grueling. Craftsmen, working with hand tools, could set their own work pace, but in mechanized factory production, machines and supervisors drove the less-skilled workers at a constant rate of exertion. Carpenters in a seed-box factory “are compelled to keep up with the machines,” one worker reported. “At night when they quit work, and come out into the fresh air, the men can be seen hawking and spitting, and they blow great quantities of black walnut dust from their nostrils.” Older workers who could not maintain the pace were “turned out like old horses to search for a living.”

Craftsmen in the shoe industry were also turned out as machines replaced many hand tools. “The world has come to such a pass with its ceaseless hum of industry,” the Detroit Free Press reported in 1889, “that the shoemaker no longer makes the shoes of his generation...His occupation is usurped by the big shoe factory, its cunning machinery, and its 700 workmen.”

There were workwomen as well. Skilled men cut the shoe leather into the proper patterns, but hundreds of lower paid women operated the sewing machines that stitched the different parts together. For each sewer, “it is the same little stitch forever and a day,” the Free Press reported, “...as all day long the iron wheels ring the monotonous song of the shoe.”

Paying women, on the average, only 825 a day, factory employers who replaced men with women cut their labor costs in half. Hiring children at 50c a day, they saved still more. In 1884, the Director of Michigan’s State Bureau of Labor Statistics found “children of 10 and upwards are frequently employed from sunrise to sundown” at the brickyards on Detroit’s West Side. As men produced bricks “with the aid of machinery,” women and children “set to work piling the bricks in rows, to the height of five feet... Some of the children employed,” the Director reported, “are not over seven.”

Between 1860 and 1885, such scenes were all too common. In 1880, barely half the school-age children in the East Side’s Third Ward actually attended school. The balance worked to supplement the income of their parents, usually as low-wage factory hands.

Detroit was prospering as it grew. But prosperity meant one thing to the “self-made” men who profited by it, and something else to artisans, factory workers, and unskilled laborers trying to scratch out a living.

Some of the former workers and shopkeepers who rose to positions of wealth preserved an enduring sympathy for the majority of working people who could not or would not claw their way to the top. But many of the “new rich” who built their fashionable homes along Woodward Avenue and West Fort Street, nurtured a far less generous attitude—a belief their success signified Christian virtue, while the relative poverty of the majority was evidence of their “backwardness.” Government should not help the poor, these businessmen concluded; the poor should help themselves—“like I did.”

“Self-help” took on a different hue, however, when Detroit’s carpenters, machinists, iron molders, and other craftsmen emulated the printers and formed unions in the decades after 1860. Employers bitterly denounced these early organizations as “criminal conspiracies” to deprive them of their profits, yet some craft unions survived and grew. Their strength was based on an important feature of the new industrial system: even as factory production came to dominate the economy and eliminate many old skills, this same process of industrialization also created new trades and new skilled workers that owners could not do without.

In Detroit’s stove factories, for example, the owners managed the financing and marketing of the product, but had little direct control over the work process. Skilled iron molders organized the actual production of stoves on a contract or piece-work basis: they owned their own tools, and hired, trained, and directed their own unskilled helpers. In other industries, skilled machine builders, iron and steel workers, bricklayers, and other craftsmen exerted the same kind of control over their work.
So while some crafts were undermined by large-scale factory production—shoe-making and tailoring among them—other crafts were rising. Even in the declining trades, some skills were indispensible to production. While clothing manufacturers replaced the all-around skills of the journeyman tailor with specialized sewers and machine stitching, they still depended on the skilled patternmakers and cutters who shaped the pieces of fabric to be sewn.

The organizations these skilled workers formed were "craft unions," open only to members of their particular trade. Machinists and iron molders working in the same factory maintained separate unions, and the unskilled laborers in the plant did not belong to any organization. Given the extreme hostility of many employers to unions, only the hard-to-replace skilled tradesmen had enough bargaining leverage to defend their organizations. Few craft unions were eager, therefore, to admit unskilled helpers who would "dilute" the craft and undermine wages. An employer who hired such "green hands" to replace skilled journeymen typically provoked a strike and boycott against his business.

Yet even if Detroit's craftsmen made little room in their organizations for green hands, some went out of their way to aid the less skilled when they formed their own unions. The Sewing Women's Protective Association relied heavily on such support after demanding, in 1865, a new scale of wages for sewers in Detroit. "When a case of oppression of sewing women is made known," reported ships' carpenter Richard Trevellick, President of the newly formed Detroit Trades Assembly, "every trade is notified and the members all cease trading at the obnoxious establishment. Sentinels are placed around notifying people of the facts, and in every case the offender is brought to terms." Employing a tactic frequently used during strikes, the Detroit Trades Assembly also rented a hall and donated eight sewing machines to a cooperatively-owned workroom, allowing women sewers to support themselves during the boycotts. The fruits of the women's labor, noted one union newspaper, would go to them "instead of into the capacious pocket of the capitalist."

There were many craftsmen who wished to become, if not "capacious" capitalists, at least owners of a workshop that produced custom-made goods for specialty customers. The prospects for such individual enterprise, however, were not as favorable as business advocates claimed. The number of small workshops in Detroit did grow steadily during boom years, but many of these were being opened by downwardly mobile cigarmakers, shoemakers, and other skilled artisans competing with the factories that displaced them.

In the meantime, wage earners with no capital and nothing to sell but their brains and brawn doubled in number during the 1880s. Many of these were unskilled workers who could sometimes move up to semi-skilled jobs, but only one in ten—one in five among craftsmen—of those who stayed in Detroit could hope to escape wage-work and become white-collar professionals or businessmen. Starting a pharmaceutical business, for example, had been much easier in the 1850s, when Detroit was relatively small and not fully enmeshed in the national economy. It was another thing altogether when huge corporations like the Stearns Company were already on the scene, extending their control over a national economy tied together by railroads and telegraph lines.

Opportunities for advancement narrowed dramatically after 1873, when stagnation and decline in new railroad construction threw the national economy into a severe depression. Over-
extended manufacturers who could not pay off their creditors and overstretched banks which could not pay off depositors triggered a wave of bankruptcies, layoffs, declining consumer demand, and more layoffs. Nationwide unemployment reached an estimated 20 percent by 1877, with another 40 percent of the labor force unable to find work for more than seven months of the year. As sales plummeted, companies lengthened the workday of their remaining employees and cut wages as much as 40 percent in an effort to protect their profits.

In 1877, when workers in dozens of cities demonstrated against the continuing wage cuts, panicked authorities responded by ordering police to arrest or shoot the protesting workers. In July, the violence peaked when federal troops and state militias across the nation mobilized to gun down striking railroad workers and their supporters in dozens of industries. In two weeks of pitched battles in the streets of Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and other cities, over 100 workers were killed.

In Detroit, an unprecedented concentration of business and government power was mobilized against the striking workers of the Michigan Central Railroad. Three hundred reserve policemen were called out, additional "emergency volunteers" were recruited, and businessmen formed their own Protective Association to move against public demonstrations. There was no bloodshed—just sheer intimidation. By year's end, the combined impact of this employer repression and the continuing economic depression had destroyed all but a handful of Detroit's unions.

The bitter conflicts and hardships of 1877 reinforced a feeling among some wage earners that they were a separate and exploited class. Activists now called for "working class" organizations that could match the owners' growing economic and political power, and before the year was out, Detroit's German cigarmakers had formed a local chapter of the Workingman's Party of the United States. Their call for class solidarity appealed to Judson Grenell, a journeyman printer and the son of a Baptist preacher. For the first time, Grenell later recalled, he "saw an effort to explain the cause of poverty in the midst of plenty.... Wage workers, these Social Democrats insisted, were continually creating surplus wealth which became the property of the employing class.... The way to avoid this was to create a cooperative commonwealth with workingmen their own employers." Together with another journeyman printer, Joseph Labadie, Grenell founded a weekly labor paper, *The Socialist*, to promote the same message among native-born workers.

"Absolute liberty is the thing to be contended for," the paper announced in an early issue. "Labor must control capital," and the surest path to that goal was "political victory.... The capture of Federal, state, and municipal governments by votes." In 1877, E.W. Simpson, President of the Carpenter's Union and a member of the Socialist Labor Party, fell far short of that goal when he garnered only 6 percent of the vote as the Workingman's candidate for Mayor. But three years later, a growing sentiment in favor of working-class politics carried Simpson to victory in his race for a City Council seat.

By then, Detroit's union movement was already rallying from the demoralizing effects of 1877. Though few realized it at the time, the recovery had begun in the fall of 1878 when a handful of representatives from Detroit's most hard-pressed crafts—the shoemakers and cigarmakers—secretly formed the first local Assembly of the Knights of Labor, headed by Labadie.

"The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor," initially organized in Philadelphia, established itself in 1878 as the first truly national organization of working people in America. Founded by Uriah Stephens, a skilled garment cutter, mason, and former Baptist preacher, the organization combined all these elements into a unique whole—part union, part fraternal organization, part religious crusade. "The tabernacle—the dwelling place of God—is among men," said Stephens, and the Knights of Labor would therefore build upon "the immutable basis of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man." Reliance on such religious imagery was commonplace in the Knights. Jesus was a humble carpenter and God a builder of mountains: "He is not less because He worked," Richard Trevelllick, a convert to the Knights, told his Detroit followers, "[and] neither are you."

Infused with this evangelical spirit, the Knights promised to replace the present "pauperization and hopeless degradation of the toiling masses" with a system that would "secure to the toilers a proper share of the wealth that they create." To that end, they not only favored restricting monopolies and corporations, but hoped also to "abolish the wage system" and replace it with an economy of worker-owned cooperatives; only then, the Knights declared, could workers together secure the full
value of what they produced. By 1886, the Order had organized 700,000 workers nationwide, with membership open not only to skilled craftsmen, but also to unskilled laborers from “all branches of honorable toil...without respect to sex, creed, color, or nationality.”

In Detroit, the Knights of Labor initially maintained a low profile, calling themselves the “Washington Literary Society” to confuse anti-union employers and protect members from immediate dismissal. As the economy picked up and unemployment fell, the Knights emerged from secrecy and, together with the Detroit Trades Council (successor to the Trades Assembly), grew from 1,500 members in 1880 to 13,000 by the end of 1886.

The 70 local Assemblies the Knights organized during the 1880s took every conceivable form. A few, including the original Pioneer Assembly, were mixed locals combining workers from dozens of trades. Most of the other Assemblies were craft organizations limited to a particular group of skilled workers. The biggest locals, however, were all industrial Assemblies combining both skilled and unskilled workers from a single workplace. The Garland Assembly, for example, united skilled iron molders and unskilled laborers from the Michigan Stove Works. Women shoe and cigar workers had their own local, the Florence Nightingale Assembly, and Detroit’s German community organized seven different Assemblies for German workers.

Whatever their form, these diverse groups were drawn to the Knights for one overriding reason: the Knights provided a national and city-wide organization that could counter the power of large companies. When the Pingree and Smith shoe workers struck in 1885, the District Assembly of the Knights called on each local to buy stock in the strikers’ cooperative shoe company, while the National organization helped organize a nationwide boycott of Pingree and Smith shoes. When the company’s sales began to fall, Pingree and Smith finally capitulated in March, 1886.

The Knights extended the labor movement’s reach into politics and culture as well as industrial organizing. In 1884, the movement’s Independent Labor Party helped elect five state representatives from Detroit. By 1886, weekly labor newspapers were appearing in English and German, and singing societies, a workers’ theater group, and a debating forum—“The Dialectical Union”—were active. A cooperative barrel factory and an iron foundry were also organized in addition to a shoe co-op.

Detroit’s labor movement even organized its own militia, the Detroit Rifles. “If trouble should come,” reported the Detroit Labor Leaf in 1886.
December, 1885, just after the workers’ militia received its first shipment of Winchester rifles, “the capitalists will use the regular army and militia to shoot down those who are not satisfied. It won’t be so if the people are equally ready, like their forefathers of 1776.”

Five months later, on May 1, 1886, the Knights launched a massive, nationwide strike to win the eight-hour workday at no reduction in pay. Over 6,000 workers responded to the strike call in Detroit, including metal workers, painters, lumber-mill workers, sailors, tannery workers, bricklayers, furniture makers, construction laborers, brewery workers, bakers, and foundry workers. Thousands of these strikers won reductions in hours, and thousands more—cigar makers and stove workers among them—won a shorter workday through negotiation.

This unprecedented display of union power was followed in September by a record turnout for the city’s Labor Day parade. The previous year, 3,000 had marched in the annual observance, which had no legal standing and was therefore held at night to avoid conflict with work schedules. Attendance had been limited by the rumored presence of employer-paid Pinkerton agents in the crowd—rumors that were apparently confirmed when a number of marchers were later fired. Labor Day was an entirely different affair in 1886. Buoyed by widespread support for the May strikes, the Knights and the Detroit Trades Council called for a daytime parade. An estimated 10,000 to 12,000 trade-union members downed their tools on September 6, closing most of the city’s major factories in what amounted to a General Strike. Marshalled into 11 divisions by trade and organization, their procession stretched three miles along Jefferson Avenue as they marched to Miller’s Gardens.

Among the prominent signs in the line of march, one banner in particular summarized the mood of the times: “Divided We Can Beg. United We Can Demand.”

Unity, however, was easier to preach than achieve. Within weeks of the enormous Labor Day turnout, Detroit’s labor movement split into bitterly antagonistic camps.

The very success of the movement sparked much of the initial quarreling. Moderate political leaders within the Independent Labor Party, seeing the potential for a greatly expanded labor vote, wanted to strengthen their existing alliances with politicians in the Democratic and Republican Parties. Radical leaders, on the other hand, believed the movement’s sudden growth made coalition politics both unnecessary and unwise, since such alliances would dilute the Labor Party’s impact. When Party leaders rejected the go-it-alone strategy, many radicals quit the organization.

In the meantime, the rapid membership growth of 1886 had brought a new generation of leaders into positions of power within the Knights. By 1887, 8 of the 15 Executive Board members of the Detroit organization were no longer working in the blue-collar occupations they had started out in: six had acquired full-time political appointments from Democratic Party administrations, one was a ship captain, and one was a hardware store clerk. Seeking to establish a respectable image for the Knights—and, critics charged, protect their political credentials as “peacemakers”—these leaders adopted a cautious approach that brought them into conflict with Detroit’s more activist union leaders.

In 1887, iron molders went on strike to counter their employers’ planned use of more half-trained and lower-wage “bucks,” as the molders called them. The Knights’ leadership called off the strike and forced the molders to accept a “peace treaty” favoring the companies. Many craft unionists resented such meddling by men who had no experience in their industry, and resentment grew all the more intense when the Knights’ leadership, in Detroit and nationally, violated the organization’s rules of internal democracy to silence their craft-union opponents.

Radical union leaders were equally displeased with the Knights’ refusal to defend the Haymarket martyrs of 1886. These Chicago trade unionists and radicals were blamed for the fatal bomb attack on Chicago’s police during the May strikes for the eight-hour day. Despite the fact that none of the accused were connected with the bombing (or were even at the scene), four of the men were sentenced to death and hung because their radical ideas allegedly inspired the unknown attacker. Seeking to preserve a respectable image and deflect the torrent of newspaper criticism directed at all unions, the Knights’ top leaders applauded the executions.

Repudiated by both conservative craft-unionists and radical union activists, the Knights went into rapid decline in Michigan after 1886. By 1888, the Independent Labor Party had collapsed, and by 1892, the Knights had disappeared from Detroit.

Working Detroit 12 Labor Pains
As the Knights dwindled in size and prestige, craft unionists and radicals alike switched their allegiance to the newly formed American Federation of Labor (AFL). Organized in December, 1886, by opponents of the Knights of Labor, the AFL vowed it would respect the autonomy of craft unions and avoid political entanglements. Many of Detroit’s leading union activists, hoping the AFL would restore the labor movement’s momentum, jumped on the AFL bandwagon, bringing with them most of the Detroit Trades Council and many of the Knights’ Detroit members. In 1887, Sam Goldwater, head of the Cigar-makers Union and a leader of the Socialist Labor Party, was elected President of the Detroit Trades Council. Two years later, Joseph Labadie, the radical printer and co-founder of the first Knights of Labor Assembly in Detroit, became the founding President of the Michigan AFL.

Nationally, however, the AFL was led by more cautious men. Sam Gompers and Adolf Strasser, the two cigarmakers from New York who founded the national organization, both believed in the need for strong unions and well-organized strike actions to defend workers’ interests. But they rejected the centralized control the Knights had used to unify (or, as the AFL charged, abuse) the various trades. They also tended to ignore blacks, women, and unskilled workers. Neither were they inclined to question the “wage slavery” of industrial capitalism. “We have no ultimate ends,” Strasser once declared. “We are fighting only for immediate objects—objects that can be realized in a few years…. We are practical men.”

Many of the craft unionists who rallied to the AFL’s banner also rejected the ambitious goals and the broader solidarity of the Knights. The tendency of these skilled workers to focus on craft distinctions and to exclude the growing number of less-skilled workers gradually became the dominant trend within the AFL, even as many socialists and radicals continued to hold leadership positions in some AFL unions. The strength of this craft ideology was rooted, in part, in the continuing paradox of the industrial revolution: mechanization led to the destruction of old crafts and may have generated an intense “class consciousness” among some workers, but it also bred a far narrower “job consciousness” among a new generation of craftsmen.

In the printing industry, for example, management was steadily dividing work into specialized functions, replacing the fully-trained printer with a new generation of workers who concentrated on particular tasks. Rather than pine after the “good old days,” these new workers chose to break away from the original Typographical Union and form their own craft unions—the Pressmen in 1873; the Stereotypers (who made the printing plates) in 1885; and the Bookbinders in 1886. A similar process
occurred in other industries where new craft identities were emerging and old ones hardening: the Plumbers and Steamfitters split apart in 1889; skilled shoe cutters broke away from the Shoeworkers Union in 1891; and Detroit's Machine Molders split from the regular Iron Molders during this same period.

These craft unions were capable of a stubborn militancy, particularly in defense of the work rules that preserved their skills against employer manipulation. Detroit's Machinists set standards that fixed the terms of apprenticeship for new workers, prohibited helpers from performing journeymen's work, and banned "piece-work" wages that pegged income to production speed. The city's cigarmakers meanwhile defended the practice that allowed one worker to read to the rest as a way of combating boredom.

Not all of the AFL's unions were narrowly defined craft organizations. Both the Brewery Workers and the United Mine Workers—originally formed as industrial unions within the Knights of Labor—switched to the AFL, but retained their commitment to the industry-wide organization of skilled and unskilled workers. Even craft workers in the AFL frequently went beyond the bounds of "job consciousness" when they joined workers from other trades in boycotts, sympathy strikes, and demon-

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The Great Trolley Riot

However much Detroit's workers were divided on the job, they were united by at least one common enemy in the 1890s: the Detroit City Railway Company. In 1891, their unanimous loathing for this private monopoly sparked one of the most spectacular labor struggles in the city's history—a struggle so intense it moved liberal reformers and many former supporters of the Knights of Labor to launch a new political movement.

The privately-owned trolley-car system that catalyzed this social and political upheaval had managed, by 1891, to alienate both its customers and its employees. At a time when most big cities in America were switching to electric trolleys, the Railway Company continued to rely exclusively on the same plodding, horse-drawn trolleys first used in 1863. With wages averaging only 18¢ an hour for men and 9¢ an hour for women, the streetcars charged a staggering 5¢ for each ride. For this exceedingly high fare, passengers were forced to endure the foul-smelling straw used to insulate the trolley's floor, the odor of horse manure, and the fumes from gas-fired heaters.

Streetcar workers felt especially abused. Paid for a 12-hour day, they were frequently kept at work for up to 18 hours to cover the morning and evening rush hours. When the hard-pressed car drivers formed an Employees Association and began pushing for a 10-hour day in April, 1891, the company fired 12 activists for "agitation and associating with men whom they knew were opposed to all corporations." Following a strike vote, picket lines were quickly organized—and just as quickly dispersed by city police, who escorted strikebreakers into the car barns. "The Backbone of the Strike Appears To Be Broken," the Evening News concluded.

But the real strike was only just beginning, for the popular resentment towards the Railway Company soon flared up in a massive outpouring of support for the car drivers. Thousands of Detroit workers abandoned their jobs in sympathy strikes, and by the second day of the walkout, huge crowds gathered at intersections to block
From the image, we can extract the following text:

But just as frequently, the tremendous diversity of working conditions divided workers and reinforced craft distinctions. As cigar molds replaced hand rolling in the city’s cigar factories, the average wage of hand rollers declined from $1.76 a day in 1883 to less than $1.50 a day in 1889; in these same years, steamfitters’ wages rose 40 percent. The Knights’ slogan, “An Injury to One Is the Concern of All,” had an enduring appeal among union activists, but in practice, steamfitters, electricians, machine molders, and other skilled workers looked upon their industrial environment in far more positive terms than the cigarmakers, shoemakers, and other declining crafts whose skill and pay were being eroded. Many of these skilled workers, in turn, saw little common ground between themselves and the unskilled laborers who did the digging, the hauling, and the carrying in every industry.

The gap between the skilled and the unskilled widened all the more when a new wave of European immigrants began filling the lowest-paid, least-skilled jobs in the city. After the mid-1880s, craftsmen and laborers not only saw the world from different occupational perspectives—more often than not, they also spoke different

strations against anti-union employers.

The Preston National Bank soon after dropped Pingree from its board of directors. Pingree, the bank president explained, was “antagonistic to corporate capital.” The Mayor was unmoved: “This town needs somebody to tell the utilities crowd to kiss something else besides babies!” In 1895, the Pingree-sponsored municipal lighting plant replaced “the utility crowd’s” overpriced street lighting operations, reducing costs from $132 per lamp to $83. The Mayor also forced the private trolley companies to electrify their lines and lower fares to 3¢.

The strike verged on insurrection the following day as demonstrators built barricades across major streets, using lamp posts, trees, overturned streetcars—anything to block the trolleys. Ironworkers ripped up two blocks of track in front of their shop and teamsters deliberately drove their wagons onto the rails to block oncoming trolleys. Pitched battles between police and rock-throwing crowds raged at car platforms and intersections across the city. Toward evening, a cheering crowd of 5,000 men, women, and children rolled a captured streetcar down Woodward Avenue and dumped it in the river.

Panicked company officials pleaded with Mayor Hazen Pingree to “save the city” and call in the state militia. The Mayor refused. He recommended arbitration between the company and the union to end the strike, and warned Mayor Hazen Pingree driving an electric trolley in 1895, marking the opening of a new trolley line.
To the native-born Detroiters and the "old" immigrant groups already established in the city, the Poles, Italians, Hungarians, and Russians arriving in Detroit in the 1880s and 1890s often appeared as alien intruders, "artificially" transplanted to America, some claimed, by profit-hungry steamship lines and Papist conspirators. In fact, the new arrivals shared many of the same motives for migrating as their Irish, German, and British predecessors. The dramatic changes in agriculture and industry that drove these earlier immigrants out of northern Europe had simply spread to the east and south.

Russian, Austrian, and Italian landlords, like their English counterparts, were consolidating huge estates and usurping peasant lands. Like the Irish, the growing peasant populations in these countries were sub-dividing their tiny land holdings into ever smaller plots, and growing debts and rising rents pushed many families off the land. Factory-made goods also undermined village crafts, and religious persecution dogged both the Russian Jew and the Polish Catholic living in Russia's Orthodox Empire.

Many came to America and Detroit seeking work and freedom. They found

 languages.

Patriotic American. "The first step of the next Congress," he declared in 1894, "must be to close and seal our gates against the poverty and ignorance of Europe." Such anti-immigrant sentiment found a sizeable audience among Protestant workers in Detroit, where the APA had become a force in local politics by the early 1890s. In 1892, 80 Protestant members of the Street Railway Employees Association nearly split that union in half when their anti-Catholic caucus, the Patriotic Sons of America, began organizing a separate Protestant slate in union elections.

"Solidarity" between workers was still the byword of Detroit's labor movement, but in the 1890s, many workers defined such solidarity in terms of ethnicity and race, not in terms of class. A strike in Detroit's stonecutters in 1891 collapsed when the workers divided into competing groups of Italian, German, and British, each seeking a separate settlement with employers. That same year, "American" bricklayers refused to merge with a rival union of "foreigners...[who] take work away from us."

Scanning the 1886 help-wanted ads from the Detroit Free Press could leave no doubt in the reader's mind what many of these employers were looking for: a worker who was white, Protestant, and, if not of British descent, then at least "A Good, Honest German."

Inset: Detroit's 1899 Labor Day parade.

much of the former and some of the latter. They also found a smouldering resentment among native-born and earlier immigrants, who feared the low-wage, "block-voting" newcomers would steal their jobs and capture political power.

"We are now simply the waste-house of Europe and the receptacle of its refuse and scum," the Detroit-based Patriotic American editorialized under a headline asking, in 1893, "Who Shall Rule?" As the official newspaper of the anti-immigrant American Protective Association (APA), the Patriotic American expressed the fear, common to many American Protestants, that the "Popish," "Un-Christian," and "semi-barbarous" multitudes "rushing en masse to...the United States" would destroy "the perfectly free, modern country that it is, or used to be, 40 or 50 years ago."

The solution was simple according to William Traynor, "Supreme President" of the APA, "Grand Master" of the Orange Lodge, and publisher of the

B y the close of the nineteenth century, Detroit's workers were divided as never before. Skilled workers generally shunned the less skilled. Workers in rising trades often broke away from older crafts to form their own unions. Protestants sometimes excluded Catholics from their organizations, Christians often excluded Jews, and whites, with rare exceptions, barred blacks altogether. Poles fought the Irish for control of the city's Catholic diocese; the Irish fought the Germans for control of Detroit's Democratic Party; Italians fought Poles for jobs. Native-born Americans, it seemed, fought everyone.

The conditions of industrial growth and the efforts of union activists also produced a labor movement that sometimes transcended these differences, as in the 1886 eight-hour strikes and the 1891 streetcar riots. But more often than not, the labor movement splintered along the same lines of skill, religion, race, sex, and ethnicity that divided wage earners in the workplace and in the neighborhood.

All the while, as Detroit grew in size, as it generated a wide range of metalworking industries, and as it attracted skilled and unskilled workers from around the world, the groundwork was slowly being laid for the start of a new century and the appearance of a new age: the Age of the Automobile.