

Introducing Reo Joe in Lansing, Michigan

Between 1904 and 1975, on a now-polluted site on the south side of Lansing, Michigan, one could find a complex of offices and factories committed to the manufacture of motor vehicles. Over the years the names and faces of the workers, managers, and owners changed many times, but one symbol provided continuity for the events that occurred at this place: the name Reo, an acronym for the founder of the company. Ransom E. Olds, the famous automobile pioneer and inventor, began the Reo Motor Car Company after he lost his first corporate venture, Oldsmobile. If you lived in Lansing during these years and someone told you she worked at the “Reo,” not only would you know exactly what this meant, you would associate the name with a place of pride.

During its first two decades of operation as a producer of automobiles and trucks, Reo and its community prospered; consumers would have found it hard to predict which of the two prosperous Lansing-based companies, Reo or Oldsmobile, would last 100 years. (Nineteen-ninety-eight saw the 100th anniversary of Oldsmobile, although the Oldsmobile line was discontinued in 2001, even as GM builds new assembly plants in Lansing.) On the eve of the Great Depression, Reo produced very popular cars and trucks, employed more than five thousand workers, and was an important and—in its technological

innovations, production techniques, and labor-management relations—a progressive local employer. The events of the 1930s seriously affected the company. Reo introduced expensive luxury models just as it became impossible for the vast majority of Americans to afford them. The UAW-CIO staged a successful month-long sit-down strike in the spring of 1937. The company almost failed because of poor management. A major corporate reorganization that limited production to trucks only, an infusion of capital from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, and the first of many government military and ordnance contracts kept the company afloat.

World War II and the Korean conflict breathed new life into the company. Reo Motors successfully competed for military contracts and tentatively began to diversify its product base to consumer goods such as lawnmowers, children's toys, civilian trucks, and buses. As a leaner, smaller, locally owned corporation making products with a good reputation, Reo was vulnerable to buyouts and corporate raiding. From the mid-1950s until the company's demise, Reo was taken over several times, first by Detroit-based Bohn Aluminum, then by White Motors of Ohio; then it was combined with Diamond T of Chicago for its last incarnation as Diamond Reo, which was bought by a private entrepreneur in 1971. In 1975, the year Vietnam "fell," so did Reo, only two years after its last owner had begun selling off and gutting the plant and its inventory, depriving loyal employees of their pensions. The fire that destroyed the shell of the plant ended a representative story of twentieth-century industry.

In hindsight, the story of Reo follows a familiar script, a story of small, local entrepreneurial capitalism unable to keep up with national and international political and economic forces. In automotive history, this is the story of one of thousands of failures that brought about the oligarchic structures and global corporations of the late twentieth century. Reo's demise can also be interpreted as the failure of the union movement to pose a meaningful challenge to globalization and domestic pro-business policies. The closing of the plant in the mid-1970s foreshadowed the de-industrialization and the creation of the midwestern rust belt characteristic of the last two decades of the twentieth century. The padlocking of the plant caused unemployment, dislocation, and depression.

During the company's lowest point, in the late 1930s, J. R. Connor, writing in the AFL's *Lansing Industrial News*, described a Capra-esque

everyman called Reo Joe. Connor described a scene in which “a rather spare figure . . . drifted into the grocery store, appraised the stock, picked out needed provisions, paid cash and went away—silently. He carried his modest purchase a little proudly down the street to his South Lansing home. Never had he asked for credit, never had he asked for charity, never had he spent a nickel that wasn’t honestly earned.”¹

The grocer reflected,

I remember when Joe started with Reo about 13 years ago. He was a big, strong, husky chap who took pride in his work and displayed the Reo spirit. Used to take part in the Reo entertainments. He lived for his family and the Reo. . . . I remember when the union started up. . . . Said he was getting pretty good pay but thought he ought to go along with the boys. When the sit-down came he stayed right with them loyal to the union but still proud of the Reo products. He was mighty happy when the sit-down ended and the boys went back to work.²

But the bad times had taken their toll on old Joe.

Joe started to cut down on his buying, even on cigarettes. He would order cheaper grades of meat, but often I would slip over a pretty good cut on his order. He’s awful proud, that Joe, but shucks, he’s been a good, steady customer that I like to do him a favor. For months past there has been a blank look in his face—that terrible dread you see in men’s faces when they are out of regular employment. Joe finds odd jobs here and there, but his heart is still with the Reo.³

The grocer hoped that the new reorganization plan would not only help old Joe but would also provide him with some return on the few shares of Reo stock he kept for sentimental reasons. He concluded with his belief that “it’s people like Joe who have made America what it is today—folks who like to build cars and other things.”⁴

This book is about Reo Joe and his world: a city, an industry, and ideas about work, manhood, race, and family. Reo Joe was not Joe Hill or Walter Reuther or Sidney Hillman or Eugene V. Debs or George Meany, although he may have heard of all of these men. Reo Joe was a union man, but he may also have belonged to the Masons, the Ku Klux Klan, the Republican or Democratic Party, a sportsman’s club, baseball team, or a church. Much of labor history, as it has been done in the United States in the past thirty years, has represented Reo Joe as a “regular Joe,” the universal white male worker. In the mid-1940s Ely Chinoy came to Lansing, which he called Autotown, to investigate “what opportunity looks and

feels like to a group of automobile workers in a middle-sized midwestern city.” He chose Lansing because it was a key site in the development of the automobile industry, and because “its size, location, and population composition [made] it a less complex setting for research into the problems of opportunity and aspirations than any of the other automobile cities.” Locally owned manufacturing plants like Reo contributed to “greater stability and promise” for Lansing’s workers.⁵ Today Reo, with its overwhelmingly white, native-born, male workforce presents the perfect opportunity to reexamine working-class formation, unionization, corporate welfare, working-class leisure and consumption, and de-industrialization, with the race and gender of the overwhelmingly white male workers as self-consciously employed categories of analysis.

This book was conceived in frustration over the continued reluctance of many U.S. labor historians to acknowledge and employ gender as a category of analysis for labor history.⁶ The proliferation of excellent works on women workers seemed only to reinforce the ghettoization of female workers’ lives and experience within the larger labor history narrative. According to one influential labor historian, scholars whose central organizing concept is class believe that “what defines people as workers is their economic activity,” while historians of women are interested in “the construction of gender ideology, the ways that ideology limits the opportunities of women, and the efforts of women to overcome the restrictions of gender role.” Thus, because of their different categories of analysis, women’s historians and labor historians belonged to different “tribes.”⁷ This unfortunate bracketing of experience misses male gender identity. Recent scholarship on working-class masculinity as a part of masculinity or men’s studies has prompted a rethinking and a decentering of the male worker experience.⁸

Gender, therefore, was foremost in my mind as I began this book, but before long it became clear that race was also an important element in working-class life in Lansing. That workers in Lansing and Reo were overwhelmingly white and native-born was no accident. Racial minorities found few opportunities in Lansing. Malcolm Little (later known as Malcolm X) recalled his family’s painful experiences in Lansing during the late 1920s and 1930s and the small community of African Americans in the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*:

Those Negroes were in bad shape then. . . . I don't know a town with a higher percentage of complacent and misguided so-called "middle-class" Negroes. . . . Back when I was growing up, the "successful" Lansing Negroes were such as waiters and bootblacks. To be a janitor at some downtown store was to be highly respected. The real "elite," the "big shots," the "voices of the race," were the waiters at the Lansing Country Club and the shoeshine boys at the state capitol. . . . No Negroes were hired then by Lansing's big Oldsmobile plant, or the Reo plant. (Do you remember Reo? It was manufactured in Lansing and R. E. Olds, the man after whom it was named, also lived in Lansing. When the war came along, they hired some Negro janitors.) The bulk of the Negroes were either on Welfare, or W.P.A., or they starved.⁹

Malcolm X's family experienced brutal treatment in Lansing: his father was killed, his mother was institutionalized, and the Little children were separated and put into various foster homes. To another interviewer Malcolm X articulated the other important lesson of these stories of segregation, brutality, and racism. "They didn't have too many Negro doctors or lawyers, especially where I grew up. They didn't even have any Negro firemen when I was a youth. When I was a youth, the only thing you could dream about becoming was a good waiter or a good busboy or a good shoeshine man. Back when I was a youth, that's the way it was and I didn't grow up in Mississippi either—I grew up in Michigan."¹⁰ Malcolm X knew what historians have only recently started to assert: even if it took different forms, racism in the twentieth century could be as virulent in the North as it was in the South.¹¹

Historians' recent explorations of the way whiteness operates in U.S. labor history have revealed the importance of race in working-class formation, working-class politics, and class consciousness and identity. "White racial identity," writes one historian, "serves as a token of privilege and entitlement, though sometimes unacknowledged, in American society."¹² The Reo factory and Lansing were overwhelmingly white, and Malcolm X's experience underscores the power of white hegemony in Lansing for much of the twentieth century. "Whiteness" alone, however, neither fully explains the ways Lansing's working class and the larger community understood itself nor accounts for its activities.

As I delved into the life of this company and its workers and their community, I found that religion and local identity were also extremely important. Even though they lived through significant national and international

events, Reo's employees regarded politics through the lens of localism. Because of their background and orientation, some Reo workers could side with employers during the wet/dry controversy of the 1910s and the Americanization efforts of the 1920s. When they began to assert their rights and independence on the basis of class and to form their union in the 1930s, workers did not evoke a "culture of unity"¹³ embracing all skill levels, ethnic and racial groups, and sexes; rather, Reo Joes made a union of their own, a union of white, Protestant, tax-paying, home-owning, respectable, male worker-citizens.

Reo's worker-citizens maintained a strong local orientation in their working-class activism and politics throughout the twentieth century.¹⁴ Their desire for local, grassroots control of their community, company, and workplace allows us to understand seemingly disparate and inconsistent sympathies. The mainstream politics of the second Ku Klux Klan enjoyed some local support in Lansing during the gubernatorial election of 1924. During the sit-down strike of 1937, workers justified their resistance by demonstrating their restraint and respectability as tax-paying male heads of households. During the period of labor unrest during and after World War II, workers resorted to a "pure and simple syndicalism," demanding workplace justice and equity from the company, the national labor authorities, and the sometimes indifferent or resistant international union.¹⁵ Their antipathy to outside interference from the nation-state, international unions, or radical organizations could sometimes lead them into alliances with the business class.

The local orientation of Reo's workers was rooted, in part, in their rural origins. Many Reo workers came from farm families and grew up on farms close to Lansing. Many lived on farms and commuted to Lansing. Workers returned to farms during hard times, aspired to farming as a means of independence, or worked at Reo to keep a marginal farm operating. Many more Reo workers retained their ties to the land by participating in the most popular leisure activity and the third-most important industry in Michigan: hunting. Increasingly, throughout the twentieth century, the white male automotive working class demanded access to public lands, the right to fire arms, and the right to hunt game.

Reo's employees saw themselves as part of a factory family and described the atmosphere in the plant as having a family feeling. First devised by

management during the 1910s and 1920s, rhetorical and institutional expressions of the factory family tied white male auto workers to their employers through the shared values of masculinity. This paternalistic bargain, based on job security, a family wage, and fair treatment in exchange for workers' quiescence and cooperation, formed the basis for what recurred in different versions throughout the twentieth century. As it organized in the 1930s, the union appropriated this family rhetoric by casting its members as dependent sons seeking freedom from an infantilizing paternalistic bond. Evocations of the factory family waned during the disruptive World War II period but experienced a revival during the 1950s and persisted until Reo's demise. The post-World War II factory family ethic evoked the past while reflecting the new realities of women workers, geographically remote owners, and the presence of the union. As workers experienced the uncertainty and turmoil of Reo's last two decades, the memory of the factory family bound employees to each other and to Reo's past. In the era after the plant's demise, this family feeling took on a nostalgic cast, as retirees continued to recreate the factory family as a way to reconnect with a world they had lost. A 1991 article in the *Lansing State Journal* that reported on the sixth annual Reo reunion was entitled "The Family Spirit Never Leaves."¹⁶

These evocations of family suggest that we need to refine our understanding of how gender operates as "a primary way of signifying relationships of power."¹⁷ For those who worked at Reo during the twentieth century, gender identity was understood through family roles. Scholars who examine paternalistic relationships between groups with unequal power, whether within the institution of slavery, an oppressive factory, or a village community, almost invariably report that understandings of family roles inform hierarchical power relationships.¹⁸ The authors of *Like A Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*, for example, found that "people chose a family metaphor to describe mill life." This was not simply a way to "express their dependence on a fatherly employer" but a way to explain their relationships to one another. Mill workers evoked "family, as an image and as an institution," in complicated and overlapping ways.¹⁹

At Reo, rhetorical and institutional expressions of family remained a powerful way not only to structure relationships of power and hierarchy but also to organize and enforce privilege. Describing and treating individuals

within the community, the company, and working-class organizations as family involved the creation of clear, and sometimes cruel, distinctions between those within the family and those excluded from it. This rhetoric, therefore, was not always a benign device allowing for human connection; sometimes it created and enforced a kinship that excluded others.

The Story of Reo Joe is an experiment in perspective; it is labor history that is rooted in the life of a company, and it is local history that explores the impact of national and international events on a moderate-size midwestern town. Reo's workers experienced and participated in many of the important trends and events of the century, but when viewed through their eyes, these trends and events often take on a different meaning.

A great deal has been made of the sea change in party politics ushered in during the New Deal era in industrial centers. Workers "made a new deal," became Americans, and turned their gaze from their employers to the federal government to supply services and safety nets. They sacrificed local control and shop floor militancy for the legitimacy and authority of their national unions, a seat at the table as a respectable, disciplined "American" interest group, and the opportunity to participate in the fruits of the "successful restoration of the mass consumer economy"²⁰ during the Cold War era. Certainly the Great Depression and the New Deal had a profound effect on working-class people, labor organizations, and labor relations. Reo Joe probably voted for Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 and 1936, but he may well have voted for Republican candidates both before and after these two elections.²¹ During World War II and Korea, the bureaucratic requirements of the warfare state presented new opportunities and challenges to workers and their employers. In the 1950s it was to the company, not the national government, that Reo Joe and his union turned to get fringe benefits: pensions, cost-of-living adjustments, and health insurance.

Exploring Reo's history over the course of the twentieth century also challenges labor history's conventional chronology, altering our understanding of change and continuity. The factory family was not simply a product of the nonunion era at Reo, extinguished forever by the rise of the union and the turmoil of the 1940s. A new version of the factory family took shape in the 1950s, attesting to the endurance of this company culture. When examined during the period between 1904 and 1975, Reo's workers do not fit neatly into political categories of radical, syndicalist, conservative, social democratic, or liberal. The Klan had a strong base in

Lansing during the 1920s; during the 1930s Reo's rebels were not communists or socialists but virulently anticommunist and antisocialist Lovestonite sympathizers in the UAW; members of the Industrial Workers of the World made an unlikely appearance during the 1946 strike. And after 1951, the union's importance in the world of the worker diminished. Most labor histories provide little help to someone trying to understand the shifting political profile of militancy and apathy.²²

The Story of Reo Joe, therefore, is an attempt to broaden our understanding of the twentieth-century working-class experience. If it could be proved that the vast majority of American workers in the twentieth century looked like Reo Joe, lived in communities like Lansing, Michigan, and worked at companies like Reo, labor historians might be tempted to fashion a new synthesis around the experiences and perspective of Reo Joe. This would be a mistake. The goal of labor historians should not be to designate any particular group as the "authentic" working class, or to depict any particular working-class experience as more politically authentic or intellectually valuable than another. Reo's Joe's story is important because it is a fresh and compelling story of working-class life that has never been told, and because it explains many recent developments in working-class politics, both locally and nationally.

If Nelson Lichtenstein is right that "from the early 1960s onward, the most legitimate . . . defense of American job rights would be found not through collective initiative as codified in the Wagner Act and advanced by the trade unions, but through an individual's claim to his or her civil rights based on race, gender, age, or other attribute," then Reo Joes were forgotten workers.²³ Labor historians need to stop treating George Wallace's popularity in the North in 1968, the Reagan Democrats of the 1980s, the Ross Perot phenomenon of 1992, the so-called "angry-white-man" congressional elections of 1994, and the importance of working-class members of the National Rifle Association during the 2000 presidential election as aberrations, false consciousness, or "co-optation." The need to understand the relationship between a rural/working-class constituency in Michigan and right-wing extremism has taken on a heightened importance in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing, when the Michigan Militia took center stage in the national media.

If we fail to understand Reo Joe and his world, we will have a hard time understanding the words and actions of Mike Green, vice chairman of

United Auto Workers Local 652, recently quoted in the *Lansing State Journal* on the occasion of the opening of new GM plants in the city. Green helped negotiate working conditions at the new Cadillac plant. “We feel it’s a family operation. If it’s not your brother or sister or mom or dad that’s working here, it’s your neighbor. You can’t throw a stone without hitting somebody that you know.” All of the workers interviewed for the article talked about the family atmosphere.²⁴ Reo and many of those who worked there no longer exist, but the desire to create family ties, even between community members unrelated by blood, continues in the workplaces of Lansing and elsewhere. If we want to understand a significant segment of the twentieth-century working class (and why GM is building new auto plants in Lansing at the start of the twenty-first century), we need to tell the story of Reo Joe.

Reo Joes and Their Families

Workers at Reo understood their primary roles as sons, husbands, fathers, wives, mothers, and daughters in families. Generations of families had a relationship with Reo, and I would like to use the stories of four of these families to introduce the themes of this book. (See Table 1 in the Appendix.)

The Leyrer family immigrated from Germany to the Thumb area of Michigan in the 1880s and moved to Lansing at the turn of the century so that the family could find work. Before long, most of the Leyrer family was at Reo. Rudolph, Charlie, Julius, Otto, Frederick, Eugene, Robert, William, and Gustav all worked at the company. My informant for this family was Norma Grimwood, the daughter of the youngest son, Gustav Leyrer, who started at Reo in 1918 and retired in 1961. Gustav’s work life was like his siblings’; he went from the assembly line to the experimental department working on navy contracts. He was in the union, even a steward at one point, but became a superintendent and a member of the steering gear club for company managers. The entire close-knit family lived in or near the original family home on the south side of Lansing. As Norma reported, “all of my uncles and aunts lived in the south end of town, which was near the plant. They walked to work. For years I remember my father [Gustav] coming home for lunch and he had an hour for lunch and my mother would have his lunch ready when he walked in . . . my uncles did the same thing.”²⁵

As Norma Grimwood described it, her family, the company, and the community were all intertwined. As she put it, “this was a family affair.” In her memories of childhood, everyone she knew worked at the Reo, and every truck was a Reo truck. “They paid well and they had all kinds of family activities.” She and her classmates left school on Fridays and walked the railroad tracks to see the free movies at the Reo clubhouse.²⁶ Her father was in the sit-down and active in the union during the war but dropped his membership when he joined supervision in the 1950s. She remembers Christmas parties at the clubhouse and hearing the Reo Band play. Her dad and her husband, Don Grimwood (who worked at Reo during the war but quit after the wildcat strike of 1946), both played on the baseball team. Her father and several of her uncles lived long enough to experience the company’s demise and the loss of their pensions, and they were profoundly depressed by the destruction of the place where their families had spent their working lives.

Three generations of the Aves family worked at Reo, from the time the firm started until the end. The history and heritage of this close-knit family of English stock, mid-Michigan natives for several generations and proud descendants of Union veterans of the Civil War, are typical of many workers at Reo and of the region in general in representing an ongoing relationship between farm and factory. Grandfather Aves, a blacksmith in the small town of Sunfield, thirty miles west of Lansing, was brought to work at Reo by his son, who maintained a farm throughout his working life; the grandfather worked in the heat treat department and the son as a mechanic in the engineering department. Father Aves participated in the sit-down of 1937 and was at some point a union committeeman. Mother Aves began working at Reo during World War II in the bomb fuse department and after the war was transferred to the newly acquired lawnmower division, where she stayed until retirement.

The Aves sons I interviewed, Layton and Otto (called ‘Ted’) maintained ties to the land while they worked at Reo. They were as familiar with breaking up ground with a team of horses and hauling 120-pound sacks of grain as with working on the final assembly line. Both Ted and Layton began working at Reo in the 1940s and continued until the 1970s. Ted worked a variety of jobs in the plant, including constructing buses and test-driving military vehicles, until he finally left in 1972, when American Motors purchased the military engineering division. His brother, Layton,

worked as a material handler in the receiving room and in export boxing, where entire trucks were torn apart, boxed, and sent overseas. In the 1960s he began working as a timekeeper and eventually became a “boss.”²⁷ The men of the Aves family had land “up north” near Atlanta, Michigan. Ted recalled, “back in those days, we used to go with tents . . . then shortly after that we got the house trailer and put that up there and now we got a cabin and it sleeps fourteen . . . all the way through all my employment, is hunting first.”²⁸ Both men identified hunting as their most important leisure activity.

Like the Leyrers and the Aves, Glen Green came from a Reo family. His father, Howard, began working at Reo right at the start, first on the auto and truck assembly lines and then, during World War I, as a foreman. With some interrupted service during the 1930s, Howard Green stayed at Reo until 1955, retiring from the tool processing room. He worked only part-time in the beginning, spending the remaining time on his farm in Pottersville.²⁹

In 1929 Howard Green, his wife, four sons, and one daughter came to Lansing. Howard found work at Reo and was joined by his son, Glen, after Glen finished the ninth grade in 1937. Glen recalled, “when I first went to work there, the first thing they did, does your dad work here? . . . I said yeah. What’s his name? Howard Green. Oh, I know him and I was a member of his family, you know.”³⁰ Glen experienced Reo’s month-long sit-down strike, the Lansing Labor Holiday, during June 1937, and also recalled how he and his brother and a few other strong young workers were tapped to guard the ballot boxes during the contested union election involving Lester Washburn, the founder and president of Local 182 and the leader responsible for the general strike. Glen was laid off as the company foundered but resumed work in 1941, with a hiatus between 1942 and 1946, when he was in the air force, and retired from Reo in 1974.

Glen was a member of the union but was also a foreman and supervisor at various points before retiring. He did not see loyalty to company and loyalty to union as mutually exclusive; relations between labor and management did not have to mean class conflict. The company and its workers were dependent on each other, so the goal was figuring out a way they could work together. His was perhaps the best articulation of the values that formed the core of the paternalistic bargain at Reo. “When you got a

job at Reo, you felt that you could go right through the years and you had a job. As long as you kept your nose clean, you did your job and a little bit more, you were going to be right there and they'd find a way to keep you there. . . . Reo seemed to be predicated on the fact that if you are loyal to us, we are loyal to you. And they showed their loyalty from the very beginning . . . you got a job at Reo, raise your family, you knew."³¹

Adolph Janetzka (later this became Janetzke) immigrated from a German community in Poland (then Russia) in 1896 to join his brother on a farm in Northville, outside Detroit. Before long he made for Lansing, where he drove beer wagons. He made a delivery to a hotel where Caroline, an immigrant from a similar background, was working as a housekeeper to repay her travel debts. The two married and began their family, and Adolph took a job as a laborer at Reo, where he continued to work until he was laid off at the start of the Depression in 1930.³² Harold Janetzke, born in 1916, one of Adolph and Caroline's seven children, began working at Reo in 1936 and moved up quickly to the timekeeping department. Because he was in a managerial department, Janetzke stayed home during the sit-down strike. Intermittently laid off throughout the late 1930s, he resumed work in timekeeping in 1941, was drafted in 1944, and then returned to Reo in 1946. He was employed in the product-design drafting room and then moved on to engineering. When the plant closed in 1975, he retired. In the early 1940s Harold met Eileen Carstensen, who was working as the secretary to Reo's secretary, Frank McKim. ("He was a wonderful person to work for," said Eileen.)³³

As Harold and Eileen raised their family, they participated in the various activities offered by the company during the revival of the factory family after World War II. The children particularly enjoyed the Christmas parties at the clubhouse.³⁴ Eileen joined the Reo girls' club and Harold joined the steering gear club and was an active participant in the Reo golf club. He was also a member of TOP (technical, office, and professional workers), a union organized in 1968. Eileen remembered fondly a visit by Edgar Guest, a "humorous poet from Detroit," as she described him. He had come to Reo as a guest speaker of the steering gear club's annual ladies night banquet on March 25, 1948. Guest, a lifelong friend of Reo president Henry Hund, brought copies of his books of poems and distributed autographed copies to all those who attended the festivities.³⁵

The Poet of the People: Reo Joe's Philosopher

Edgar Guest is an appropriate chorus for *The Story of Reo Joe*. The son of a working-class English immigrant, Guest arrived in Detroit at age ten. He worked as a soda jerk and then as an office boy, and finally got a break at the *Detroit Free Press*, where he became a cub reporter before the start of the new century and stayed for the rest of his life. He began writing short verses for the paper and before long these became his stock-in-trade. He inhabited a social scene that made him intimate with automotive pioneers Charles F. Kettering, Henry Ford, and others who belonged to the Detroit Golf Club, the Masons, and other upper-class social organizations. Guest's enormous popularity was nonetheless based on his appeal to the "common man" and on certain values that recommended him as Reo Joe's philosopher.³⁶

At the height of his popularity, Guest's poems and weekly column were syndicated in 300 newspapers throughout the country. While academic literary critics scorned or discounted his work—more than 10,000 poems—he was known as "the poet of the people." His most popular book of poetry, *Heap O' Livin'* (1916) went through thirty editions. Guest's work won the admiration of "millions of readers who believed that Mr. Guest spoke to them about the joys and sorrows of plain, everyday living."

Although Guest's topics were far ranging, he returned to certain themes again and again. In simple, accessible language, Guest articulated values about work, home, gender, and faith that resonated as the "apotheosis of old-fashioned Americanism."³⁷ One collection, *The Passing Throng* (1923), contained poems entitled "Horse and Cutter Days," "The Old-Time Lilac Bush," "Old-Fashioned Remedies," and "Old-Fashioned Dinners." In a series of gift books, beautifully illustrated small collections organized by topic (*Mother, Father, Friends, Home, Faith, You*), Guest affirmed "traditional" values in what many undoubtedly experienced as troubling and changing times.³⁸ He reflected on his own personal experiences as a son, husband, father, breadwinner, and Christian to explore manhood during the first half of the twentieth century. Protestant Christianity, the work ethic, loyalty to bosses, devotion to and support of family, love of wife and children, moral and upright values were Edgar Guest's themes. With the high value Guest put on manhood, family, country, and work in mind, let us now turn our focus to Lansing, Michigan, during the years when the automobile changed life forever.

Making Reo and Reo Joe in Lansing, 1880-1929

**We were settin' there an' smokin' of our pipes, discussin' things,
Like lickin' votes for wimmin, an' the totterin' thrones o' kings,
When he ups an' strokes his whiskers with his hand an' says t' me:
"Changin' laws an' legislatures ain't, as fur as I can see,
Goin' to make this world much better, unless somehow we can
Find a way to make a better an' a finer sort o' man."**

—Edgar Guest, excerpt from "The Need" (1922)

In December 3, 1924, faced with unemployment, a worker named Charles M. Killam of 711 Tisdale Street, Lansing, Michigan, wrote to the Lansing Chamber of Commerce. He was anxious about the personnel policies of many of the largest employers in the city and he determined, quite rightly, that the Chamber of Commerce might be able to exert some influence with these employers. His concern was not over the speed-up of the line or industry slowdowns, or runaway shops or inefficient management causing the economic troubles he saw about him; rather, it was the employment of farmers. Killam explained to Charles Davis, the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, that while Olds and Fisher Body Co. hired all local men, "other factories here in the City hire a lot of out of town men. The Prudden Auto Body and especially the Reo Motor Car Company hire farmers and men living at Grand Ledge, Mason, Webberville." "By all means," he urged, "all the factories of Lansing should hire Lansing men only unless they cannot get what skilled

mechanic they need, otherwise they would have to be hired outside but cut out hiring these farmers. Let them remain on their farms instead of neglecting them to run down.”¹ Killam’s letter reveals much about the distinctive nature of the genesis of industrial Lansing. Narratives of the rise of the automobile industry in the Midwest do not typically begin with workers writing to the Chamber of Commerce about farmers working in factories. Lansing’s story, and Reo’s part of that story, offer an alternative vision of midwestern industrialization and automotive history.

Turn-of-the-century Lansing defies easy categorization. Neither a large, bustling metropolis nor a provincial rural district, Lansing was (and continues to be) a midsize city of the Midwest. Within walking distance of the state capitol were factories, residences, a vice district, churches, retail and service establishments, and farms. Farmers could send their sons, known as “buckwheats,” for education and work in the city. Daughters went to town to attend school and to work as domestics, office workers, and shopgirls. If a farmer tired of the toil and uncertainty of life on the land, he might come himself and try his luck at the new opportunities for work in mills, machine shops, and stores, and perhaps own his own business one day. Or, if the smoke, noise, and crowded streets held no charm for him, or if a slow economy made jobs scarce, he might stay on or return to the farm. He would have to venture only a few miles to be back in the country again.²

The story of how Lansing became a premiere producer of cars, how a labor force was formed to do the work, and how the lives of workers changed there differs from the tales of places like Detroit, Chicago, and even Flint. At first glance, Lansing seemed an unlikely site for the automobile industry. It lacked the history of industrial activity and the concentration of capital that characterized Detroit.³ It did not have the economic connections to the rich natural resources available elsewhere in the state, such as the ore mines of the upper peninsula or the lumber in the northern half of the lower peninsula. For much of the nineteenth century Lansing was a backwater, literally and figuratively. Because of the dense forests, swampy terrain, and clay soil, native people, explorers, and settlers avoided Lansing. During the warmer months, bugs and disease plagued inhabitants who decided to settle this marginal land. Southwest and southeast Michigan, by contrast, with their fertile land and waterways

and some of the earliest railroads, were settled by the middle of the nineteenth century.⁴

It was by chance that Lansing, originally called the Town of Michigan, became the capital city, while the newly formed state legislature decided to use land grant funds to create an agricultural and technical college to the east, in Collegeville, later known as East Lansing. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ingham County, the county in which Lansing is located, was overwhelmingly rural. As late as 1910, 90 to 95 percent of the county was considered rural by the standards of the Census Bureau. Plank roads and eventually some basic rail connections were established by 1860. The vast majority of European-descended settlers to the region, however, initially came for farming. Clearing the land created the first industry in Lansing, saw mills, which sprang up on the whitewater sections of the Grand River.⁵ Small towns and cities like Lansing and the county seat, Mason, ten miles to the south, provided the market links to the outside world as well as needed services for the hinterland communities.

The first homegrown manufacturing activities—the production and distribution of farming implements, tools, and ultimately machines—reflected both the natural resources available nearby as well as the regional market. The Bement Company, founded by Ohio-born Edwin Bement in the late 1860s, was the largest and most prosperous manufacturing establishment of its day.⁶ Building on the foundry work he had done in Ohio, Bement used iron brought in on the new railroad connection, along with the plentiful local wood supply, to make plows, barrows, road scrapers, cauldron kettles, cultivators, seeders, bobsleds, and the company's most important product, stoves. By 1885 the Bement Company employed more than 700 men, and its products were reaching a national market, traveling west with the settlers of European descent. Bement and Company's success by 1890 assured Lansing a place as a leading manufacturer of agricultural implements. According to local historian Justin Kestenbaum, "An amazing number of the plows used in this extraordinary expansion of agriculture were made in Lansing, which by 1890 emerged as a world center for manufacturing plows and other agricultural implements." Until the mid-1890s, much of the city's industrial activity was concentrated around manufacturing wagon spokes, wheels, carriages, carts, and sleds from local timber.

The products of the forests and farms were processed in mills, forges, harness and blacksmith shops, and other manufacturing establishments and sold back to the hinterland.⁷

From the start, Lansing's boosters and businessmen promoted the city. "The Lansing Improvement Company, founded in 1873 by such prominent city leaders as Edward Sparrow, J. J. Bush, J. S. Tooker, and A. E. Cowles aggressively promoted Lansing as a business mecca."⁸ These men continued to have a hand in Lansing's future through the next century. Promotional materials boasted of the healthy environment (a complete lie), the wonderful railroad connections (improving but certainly lacking in comparison to other Michigan cities), and ample downtown organizations and services (improving, at best.) Indeed, early pictures of Lansing depicted a spacious city with a downtown reminiscent of frontier towns surrounded by park-like residential areas.⁹

Migrants to Michigan came to Lansing with the wave of New Englanders and upstate New Yorkers who began the pilgrimage westward in search of better farmland after passage of the Northwest Ordinance.¹⁰ Others, like the parents of Ransom E. Olds and many who would become players in Lansing's history, ventured northward from Ohio. By 1910 the city of Lansing still had only 31,229 inhabitants, barely qualifying as a city of 25,000 inhabitants or more. The population's background reflected its geographical origins. Fully 98.8 percent of Lansing's inhabitants were white, and 62.4 percent were native-born whites of native-born parents. The largest nonwhite population was listed as Negro (1.1 percent), with a handful of Chinese and Japanese. (By 1910 no Indians were listed as living in Lansing, although there had been an Indian population throughout the nineteenth century.)

The industries that emerged in Lansing during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries drew on a distinctively homogenous labor force, overwhelming white, rural, and native born. First-generation immigrants (foreign-born white) made up 12.7 percent of Lansing's population; second-generation immigrants, 23.7 percent. These immigrants came primarily from Canada (Ontario most certainly since they were listed as not French Canadian) and Germany (1,087 and 1,363 respectively) with a smattering from England (377), Ireland (127), Russia (200), and Turkey (153). Lansing was overwhelmingly native born in comparison to Detroit,

where in 1910 only 24.7 percent of the 465,766 citizens were native whites of native parentage. Just over 40 percent of Detroit's citizens listed at least one parent as an immigrant, and a third of the city was foreign born, the largest numbers coming from Germany (44,674), Canada (again not French, 37,779), Russia (18,644), and Austria (14,160). As late as 1930, fewer than 10 percent of Lansing's 78,397 inhabitants were foreign born, with only 1.8 percent listed as Negro.

That many entering the first auto plants in Lansing came primarily from native-born, rural backgrounds affected management and working-class culture in the early factories. Michigan's upper peninsular mines attracted Finns, French Canadians, and Italians in large numbers, while to the southern lower peninsula's prosperous and diversified farmlands came primarily Yankees from New York, New England, and the Ohio Valley, as well as immigrants from Ontario (English-speaking), Germany, and Holland. Family, church, and community provided the important organizing institutions to those settled on the land. German immigrants in particular, many of them Catholics, formed close-knit insular communities, with names like Westphalia and Frankenmuth, throughout the southern tier of counties. The farmers of this region were much less involved in the cooperative or political or radical farmers' activities of the late nineteenth century than were farmers in the midwestern corn belt or the southern United States. The National Alliance and Populist Parties did not find significant strongholds in southern Michigan. The farmers' conservative and capitalistic values, the prosperity and diversification of farming in this region, and the ability of farmers to avail themselves of Michigan State Agricultural College's (later MSU's) useful extension services account for the relative tranquility of this hinterland. Only the Patrons of Industry and the Grange flourished for short periods of time, and these groups were dedicated primarily to fostering farmers' mutual aid. Both the prosperity on the land and the personnel from the land created the conditions for the start of the automobile industry in Lansing.¹¹

In 1880 Pliny and Sarah Olds moved to Lansing. Having been a blacksmith, machinist, and farmer in Ohio, Pliny Olds came to Lansing after exchanging his farm for a small machine shop on River Street. He established his business with his eldest son, Wallace, while his younger boy,

Ransom, went to high school and then to a local business college to learn bookkeeping to help the family business. Olds and Son produced small steam engines primarily for farm use. Like many other automotive pioneers, Ransom Olds was schooled in the machine shop and nurtured by the promise of technology to solve the problems of the world and make him money at the same time.

Ransom Olds's story departs somewhat from the scripted narrative of the plucky young inventor who makes good.¹² Even though he became and remained a rich man, Olds did not stay with the two automobile companies he began. Olds never achieved the financial heights or national notoriety of Henry Ford, but he did make important contributions that changed the course of the industry itself. And throughout his life, a relatively quiet and uneventful one compared to Ford's, Olds continued to invent and patent new devices and processes as well as own, operate, and speculate in land and business ventures. One source of his ongoing popularity in the Lansing area was that even though he summered in the northern Michigan resort of Charlevoix, wintered in Florida, and divided the rest of his time between his more modest Lansing home and his opulent estate on Grosse Isle, down river from Detroit, Olds always called Lansing his home. The citizens of Lansing tolerated their peripatetic native son as long as he continued to return often enough to maintain the flimsiest ties. Olds's loyalty to his hometown was certainly inscribed upon many of the city's structures. In addition to the two major automotive works that bore his name, there was also the Hotel Olds, the Olds bank and office building (often called the Olds Tower) and R. E. Olds Hall, on the campus of MSU. Olds's economic connections to the city of Lansing extended beyond enterprises that bore his name, either as owner or shareholder in many smaller, auto-related companies based in Lansing.

According to most accounts, Ransom Olds first imagined powering a carriage with steam. The idea apparently came from his encounters with the railroad and steam-powered boats as well as from his dislike of horses and their effect on the urban environment. Sometime in the mid-1890s, however, Olds made the important decision to use a gasoline engine in his horseless carriages. No isolated tinkerer and dreamer, Olds had knowledge of and contact with the larger scientific and engineering world and had enough business background to know that he would need financial assis-