

Detroit

by Gertrude Van Duyn Southworth and Stephen Elliott Kramer

In population, Detroit is the ninth city of the United States.

In the value of its manufactured products, it is fifth.

In the value of its exports, it is the leading port on the Canadian border.

With these facts in mind it will be interesting to learn something of the history of Detroit; something of the goods it manufactures and the reasons for its growth and prosperity.

During the years when the French governed Canada, manufacturing and agriculture played a very small part in their affairs. Their business men were chiefly interested in the fur trade; their governors were interested mainly in extending the territory over which floated the banner of their king; and the teaching of Christianity to the hordes of Indians who inhabited the country seemed of the greatest importance to their priests and missionaries.

So, because it served the purpose of each, all three classes—the fur traders, the crown officers, and the missionaries—worked hand in hand in exploring and in penetrating the wilderness in every direction. They suffered every hardship, endured every privation, and very often fell victims to the cruelty of the savages.

In those days of French rule, railroads were unheard of, and wagon roads were almost as scarce. Travel was sometimes through the woods, along the trails made by the Indians; but usually it was by the water courses, over which the Indian canoes carried furs to be traded for the goods of the French.

Now if you will look at a map which shows the Canadian border of the United States and follow the course of the Great Lakes, you will see that at four places their broad waters narrow into rivers or straits. These places are first, the Niagara River; second, where the waters of Lake Huron pass into Lake Erie; third, at the Sault Ste. Marie; and fourth, at the Straits of Mackinac.

Between the East and the West, the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River formed the main artery of travel. To control the narrow rivers and straits that connect the Great Lakes was to control the travel over them, and as the French extended their rule from Quebec to the West, they fortified these narrow places one by one.

Fort Niagara was built at the mouth of the Niagara River. Then on July 24, 1701, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac landed on the banks of the Detroit River and began the work of building a palisade fort, almost where the river widens into Lake Saint Clair.

Cadillac thought that at Fort Detroit he had found one of the garden spots of the country. In the pine forests of the Michigan peninsula game of every sort abounded, and their skins enriched alike the Indians and the French. The waters of Lake Saint Clair swarmed with wild fowl. In the woods wild grapes grew in profusion, and the rich lands bordering both sides of the river assured plentiful crops, depending only upon the industry of those who tilled the soil. However, in spite of his enthusiasm over the beauty of the site, Cadillac proceeded to lay out a very ugly little town with rude dwellings huddled

along narrow muddy streets.

Such as it was, Detroit remained under French rule for fifty-nine years, becoming one of the most prosperous of the French outposts. The Indians were, for the most part, friendly with the French, and in 1760 the place had a population of 2500, which made it of great importance in the sparsely settled West.

Then came the years of the French and Indian wars, and finally the French, having lost Quebec, were obliged to surrender to the English. So in November, 1760, Detroit was given up to Major Robert Rogers in command of a detachment of British regulars and American militia.

The English were not allowed to remain long in undisturbed possession of their new outpost. Pontiac, chief of the Ottawas and one of the craftiest of all Indian warriors, was friendly to the French. In 1763, through his immense influence with all the Western tribes, he organized a conspiracy to drive the English from the territory which they had won with such difficulty. Detroit was one of the first places to be attacked. The siege lasted several months, but in spite of the cruelty and cunning of the attack, the garrison held out until at last relief came. Thus by their bravery they did much to prevent the success of Pontiac's Conspiracy, as the uprising is called.

Then came the Revolution. At its close, the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1783. By the terms of this treaty, Detroit, together with the other British outposts in the West, became the property of the United States. However, it was not until 1796 that the place was actually occupied by American troops.

Sixteen years later Detroit again passed into the possession of the British. This was during the war of 1812 and followed the defeat of General William Hull's ill-fated expedition into Canada. Falling back to Detroit, Hull was attacked, and surrendered to the British after a half-hearted resistance.

A little more than a year later, however, in October, 1813, Oliver Hazard Perry won the famous battle of Lake Erie. This gave the Americans control of the lake, and the British soon abandoned Detroit, which has since remained in the possession of the United States.

Detroit had prospered but little since 1760. Its inhabitants were for the most part easy-going Frenchmen. They were not suited to the strenuous work of city building. Detroit, instead of growing larger, was becoming smaller; and when, in 1820, the United States took a census of the place, it had but 1442 inhabitants as against the 2500 that Major Rogers found in 1760.

But from 1820 the growth of Detroit has been continuous. In 1825 the Erie Canal was opened, furnishing an easy means of communication from the East to the West. Then came a great tide of immigration to all the states bordering on the Great Lakes. Michigan was one of the first to profit, and Detroit was the gateway to Michigan.

Most of the pioneers who sought homes in the West were farmers. The life of cities and villages offered few attractions to them. The number that stayed in Detroit was small as compared to the number that passed through into the back country to clear the woodlands and take up the work of agriculture.

But as the back country filled up, there came a demand for the things in which cities deal, while at the same time there came the need of places where the products of the farm could be gathered together ready for transportation to the Eastern market.

In this way Detroit began its great growth. It bought the wool and wheat which the Michigan farmers raised, and shipped them East. It bought from the East the dry goods, hardware, and various other things which the Michigan farmers needed, and distributed them. It grew prosperous as the country back of it became more populated, and as this population became richer and able to buy larger amounts and more expensive goods, Detroit reaped the advantage.

Then too the traffic on the lakes became more important, requiring larger and better vessels. Detroit has one of the best harbors on all the Great Lakes, making it splendidly suited for the building and launching of vessels. Always engaged more or less in shipbuilding, Detroit improved its shipyards and kept pace with the demand. To-day it builds all types of vessels, from magnificent passenger steamers to the great steel ore ships which carry the iron ore of the Lake Superior districts.

It was in 1860 that Detroit began to take its place among the industrial cities of the country. Now it is fifth among the cities of the United States in the value of its manufactured products. Let us see what its chief industries are.

First of all comes the manufacture of automobiles and the parts of which they are made. It is estimated that more than half of all the automobiles made in the United States are built in Detroit factories. Until 1899 there was not a single automobile factory in the city. To-day there are over thirty, many of them covering acres of ground.

As few of the automobile factories make all the parts of their machines, there are in Detroit many shops for the manufacture of steel, aluminium, and brass castings, and of gears, wheels, and various other automobile parts.

Another of Detroit's important industries is the manufacture and repair of steam- and electric-railroad cars. These are largely freight cars, although many passenger cars are also made.

Other lines of business include foundry and machine-shop products, the making of druggists' preparations, the manufacture of flour, the packing of beef and pork, and the preparation of other food stuffs.

Then Detroit makes great quantities of soda ash and alkalis. This industry Detroit owes to the fact that here are found both limestone and salt, which is obtained from wells driven along the river bank. Both of these materials are required in the manufacture of soda ash.

The printing-and-publishing business gives employment to thousands; so does the manufacture of paints and varnishes. In stoves, ranges, and furnaces, Detroit leads every other city in the country. It is interesting to know that Detroit makes great numbers of adding machines, that it is the largest producer of overalls in the country, that it is a center of the brass industry, that it turns out more than 300,000,000 cigars each year, and that it is one of the largest producers of wrought- and malleable-iron castings.

The entire business of a city is, of course, never wholly manufacturing. Part of its business is always the distribution of things to supply the needs of its inhabitants and of the people who live in the surrounding country.

When these goods are sold in large quantities to merchants who in turn sell them to the person

using them, the business is known as a wholesale business. When they are sold by the merchant directly to the user, he does what is called a retail business.

The wholesale business of Detroit is very large. Its merchants do the larger part of the wholesale business through the entire state of Michigan and in parts of northern Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. They even furnish certain supplies to some parts of Canada. Dry goods, drugs, hardware, and groceries are the principal things in which Detroit wholesalers deal.

Detroit has also many large retail stores, which supply not only the people who live in the city of Detroit but those in the surrounding country as well. Thanks to the many suburban electric railroads and the many steam roads, the people who live in the smaller places are able to come to Detroit to purchase things they want.

Now let us take our map again and notice the location of Detroit in relation to the rest of the country, for location, as you know, has very much to do with the growth of cities.

We find in the first place that it is separated from Canada by only the width of a river. So we are not surprised to hear that Detroit is one of the principal points for the exchange of goods between the two countries. The two most important Canadian railroads have terminals at Windsor, on the Canadian side of the water, and also at Detroit. A very large part of the United States finds Detroit the most convenient point from which to send its products into Canada, since goods can so easily be brought to Detroit by water or rail.

Statistics issued by the United States government show that of the eighteen customhouses on the Canadian border the one at Detroit does the largest volume of business.

Then too, by the lakes, Detroit can reach all of the American lake ports, and from Buffalo, through the Erie Canal, it can even reach New York.

The many railroads which serve Detroit give it excellent communication with all parts of the United States. The Michigan Central Railroad dives under the river, from Detroit to Windsor, through one of the most remarkable tunnels in the world. For years the cars of the Michigan Central Railroad, both passenger and freight, were carried across the river on ferryboats. This, of course, was a very slow way of crossing, but a bridge was impractical for various reasons, so at last it was decided to build a tunnel.

When the engineers studied the river bottom, they found that it was covered with mud so deep that it was impossible to build a tunnel under it. Instead they built the tunnel of steel on the river bank, and when it was completed they sank it in sections and then fastened it together.

Two belt-line railroads, extending from the river bank, circle through Detroit. One is some two miles from the center, the other, six. Along these railroads are many factories which have switches directly into their plants. This makes shipping a simple matter for the Detroit manufacturers.

Now, having learned something of the history of Detroit, something of the manufacturing which it does and the commerce it carries on, let us take a look at the city itself.

The older parts of most great cities are badly laid out. In very few cases do men realize that their little settlements are to grow into large cities. And so they pay little attention to laying out streets, but in

building their houses follow the farm lanes and often the paths made by the cows as they are driven to and from the pastures.

This is not always the case however. Washington was laid out long before it ever became a city, and, in consequence, it has magnificent broad streets and many parks.

Detroit was one of the badly laid-out settlements, but in 1805 a fire burned every house in Detroit with one exception. Now at that time Judge Augustus B. Woodward was a prominent figure in the city government. When the fire wiped out the old town, the judge thought that a plan should be made for Detroit just as had been done for Washington. His idea was to have a great circle, called the Grand Circus, in the center of the town. Two streets, 120 feet wide, were to cross this circle, dividing it into quarters, and from the circle other broad avenues were to radiate in all directions. As the city grew, other circles were to be built with streets radiating from them.

Unfortunately the citizens of Detroit did not have the belief in the growth of their city that Judge Woodward had, and so his scheme was only carried out in part. That part, however, gave to Detroit its Grand Circus, its broad avenues, and its down-town parks, and did much to earn for it the title of the City Beautiful.

Detroit to-day has many splendid and costly residences. It has also street after street filled with comfortable medium-priced houses where the workmen live, and its people are fond of boasting that it is a city of homes.

Woodward Avenue, which is 120 feet wide, is named after Judge Woodward. This avenue runs from the river bank right through the entire city. At its lower end it is the principal retail street of the city, while further out are many fine residences.

As the town grew, a boulevard was built, which, starting at the river, runs completely around the city at a distance of some two and a half miles from the center. This boulevard is known as the Grand Boulevard and is more than 12 miles long and from 150 to 200 feet in width. In the center is a narrow strip upon which are grown flowers, trees, and grass, while upon either side run macadam roads.

The most popular of Detroit's parks is Belle Isle. This is on an island of about 700 acres, directly opposite the city. Originally the island was for the most part a swamp infested with snakes. In order to get rid of the snakes a drove of hogs was turned loose on the island, and for a long time it was known as Hog Island. Then the city bought it and turned it into a park. The swamps were drained, and lakes and canals were built, which in the summer time are covered with canoes and boats. In the winter they make excellent places for skating. Playgrounds, baseball fields, and picnic grounds were laid out and a zoo was built, as well as one of the best aquariums in the country. And here, too, is a horticultural building, where many rare plants and flowers are grown. A large part of the island was covered with woods, and this was left in its native state, with winding roads built through it. The island is connected with the mainland by a broad bridge.

The health conditions of Detroit are excellent. Its water supply is taken at a depth of 40 feet from the Detroit River, just where it leaves Lake Saint Clair. The city has an ample sewerage system. It has many fine public schools, and here also are the University of Detroit and the Detroit colleges of law and medicine. In short, from every point of view Detroit is a good place in which to live.

A short time ago prizes were offered to the public-school pupils in the fifth, sixth, seventh, and

eighth grades for the five best essays on “Why I am Glad I live in Detroit.” Here is what one sixth-grade boy wrote about his home city:

“What a beautiful city is Detroit,” says the world-wide traveler, as he passes along its broad avenues, in the shade of its magnificent trees. “Detroit has a fine commercial center,” says the enterprising manufacturer as he surveys its busy wharves. “What an excellent situation this city has,” says the farmer, as he comes trudging to town with his load of produce. “In Detroit life is worth living,” says the happy pleasure seeker, as he whiles away his time, either on the lake or in its many parks and boulevards. “You can have loads of fun at Belle Isle,” whispers the small boy, as he thinks of the many pastimes which so appeal to every child. “What an interesting history has Detroit,” says the historian, as he recalls its many struggles, first with the Indians, then with the French, and last of all the English.

Many strangers will come to our city during the next few months, and I know that after they have seen it and go to their homes again, they will tell their neighbors and friends of our beautiful city, and I, who live here, will be very proud of it.

Source:

Southworth, Gertrude Van Duyn, and Stephen Elliott Kramer. “Detroit.” *Great Cities in the United States*. Syracuse: Iroquios Publishing Company, Inc., 1916. 189 – 206. Electronic.