

**The story of the General Motors metal stamping plant in Wyoming, Michigan, begins in 1935. The West Michigan community and the rest of the country were struggling through the Great Depression. Among the hardest hit areas of the economy was the industrial and manufacturing base.**

**Unable to locate a suitable site within Grand Rapids for a group of individuals interested in building a metal stamping facility, two weeks before Christmas, 1935 Grand Rapids Industrial Commissioner, J.R. Cassleman contacted City of Wyoming Supervisor George P. Tilma in the hope that he can help them find a site close to the central city. At that time most industries preferred to locate near city or established industrial centers for ready access to water, sewer, power, rail roads, highways, and public transportation for workers.**

**With the nation's automotive industry centered in south eastern Michigan and northern Ohio, one might ask; Why build a plant at the intersection of Buchanan and Allen Road in Wyoming township here in West**

**Michigan? One of the Fisher Body brothers, B.F. Fisher, had referred to Grand Rapids as the “City of Homes”. He believed that a man with a home would be more inclined to work harder, more carefully, and be a very dedicated employee.**

**GM Chairman of the Board and President, Alfred P. Sloan, Jr. was quoted as saying:**

**“The corporation should invest in various plants placed in solid communities where the positive introduction of the plant’s payroll would likewise have a positive effect in the community.”**

**And there were other reasons as well. Strikes in the auto industry, both union-authorized and unauthorized, were so common and so potentially disruptive that it was General Motors’ policy to have no less than three sources for every part that went into an automobile. Fisher Body of Grand Rapids was specifically built to duplicate metal stamping at the Cleveland, Ohio plant.**

**People in this community were, in any case, very thankful for the jobs that would come with a major industrial facility. General Motors was going to build a \$7,000,000 stamping plant covering 20 of the 77 acre tract of land that was purchased from Mrs. Benjamin Hatchet at a reported figure of \$25,000. This was about \$325 per acre.**

**The *South Kent County News* reported that the plant would have 437,000 square feet of floor space, capacity of 2,000 sets of stampings daily, two major departments (1) Tool & Die construction for this and other Fisher Body plants, (2) Stamping for a line of body panels and other metal parts. When complete, employment would reach 1,800 to 2,000 workers and have an annual payroll of \$2,500,000. There would be a total of 22 stamping presses. Construction would begin the next month, January 1936.**

**The construction contract was awarded to the J.A. Utley Company on January 21, 1936, just 32 days after the public announcement. The next day, construction**

**layout was started. Ten days later pilings were being driven and foundation work begun.**

**By March 1, 1936 construction was continuing around the clock, twenty-four hours a day. Six days later, City of Grand Rapids water and sewer mains were being brought into the building. The city had previously agreed to provide this service to General Motors for building in this area.**

**By April 7, 1,674 construction workers were on site. Ten days later, the steel erection and roof were nearing completion – just eighty-six days following the award of the construction contract.**

**That same week in April, GM started enrolling employees. Starting pay would be .40 cents per hour or approximately \$16.00 per week. On the morning of April 6, 1936, a line of men, applying for those jobs, extended from the plant at Allen Road (now 36<sup>th</sup> Street) and Buchanan east to Division and a mile north toward 28<sup>th</sup> Street. All of these people weren't necessarily**

**unemployed, many were looking for a steady job even if the wage was no better or even lower than the part-time or intermittent work they may have already had.**

**On May 14, machinery was being installed and one of the long recognized landmarks of this community was being erected, the coal fired power house and smokestack, a symbol that stood for almost 35 years.**

**On June 1, 1936, the first body parts were shipped from the plant, which was Fisher Body Division's first facility designed exclusively as a metal fabricating plant. The layout of press pits, the high-bay steel receiving area with overhead cranes, consolidated metal assembly area and shipping facilities served as the basis of all subsequent new Fisher Body metal fabricating plant layouts.**

**In less than six months a pasture had been turned into a plant shipping automotive body parts to General Motors assembly plants throughout the United States. This performance reflected the strong work ethic that**

**would eventually earn the plant the title “Flagship Stamping Plant.”**

**Dedication of the Grand Rapids stamping plant took place on Saturday, December 5, 1936, less than a year after construction began. The *South Kent County News* reported that “it has taken its place as an important link in the motor industry with prospects of an even greater place in the future.” Employment at this time had already reached over 2,200 and 28 rail car loads of parts were being shipped per day.**

**At the time of the dedication our plant was officially titled Grand Rapids Stamping Division of Fisher Body.**

**After a short but impressive performance, GM announced the first expansion of our plant on June 17, 1937. It was a \$1.5 million, 43,000 square foot addition for more stamping presses.**

**In 1939 Chevrolet announced two new models; the Master Deluxe and the Master 85 Sedan, which at the time had a price of \$766. This also meant that Grand**

**Rapids Stamping Division would receive another expansion which would virtually double our size. This expansion added a Steel Blanking Department, receiving dock, more railroad track, and a new truck well for shipping which allowed a 30% increase in plant production.**

**Organized labor came to our plant when a young union organizer, Leonard Woodcock, was instrumental in a March 21, 1941 Union Recognition Election which voted in the United Automobile Workers Union as sole bargaining agent. Workers in this election had three choices; no union (382 votes), Christian Labor Association (661 votes), and UAW-CIO (1575 votes).**

**Fisher Body Division's first wartime contract came in 1940. With the U.S. Navy planning the build-up of a two ocean fleet with many ships powered by diesel engines, the first order of business was to build the machinery that builds the engines, and other war material. In the spring of 1941 Grand Rapids Fisher Body was assigned construction of 48 inch and 72 inch**

**precision planers and other machine tools, a completely different product than automobile body stampings.**

**Completed boring mills were shipped from the plant two months and eighteen days from the date of the original contract and the job was completed six weeks ahead of schedule.**

**Continued aggressive military expansionist policies by the Axis nations brought the United States into World War II when the Japanese attack on U.S. military forces at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on Dec 7, 1941 and the subsequent declaration of war on the U.S. by Germany and Italy. Within a few months, industry in the United States was converted to support the war effort.**

**In February 1942 the last 'Body by Fisher' went down the assembly line as all production became 'Armament by Fisher' for the duration of World War II. In addition to machine tools built for the war effort our plant built aircraft parts and assemblies for the B-29, B-25, and XP-75 bombers, parts for M-8, M-24, M-4, M-10, and M-26 tanks, and 5-inch Naval gun breech housings.**

**Parts for, and assembly of, 90 mm anti-aircraft guns, these guns had a vertical range of seven miles.**

**The plant was called upon to make 155 mm artillery shells when General Eisenhower made a direct appeal to industry for more of these shells primarily for the war effort in Europe.**

**The 120mm anti-aircraft gun loader and rammer were constructed and the 120mm, 31 ton, 'Stratosphere gun', capable of firing a 50 pound projectile vertically eleven miles, were assembled at Grand Rapids. Interestingly, 550 of these guns were produced with almost none of them leaving the United States during WW II – they were assigned to anti-aircraft defense of important sites in the United States.**

**After victory had been achieved in Europe, Grand Rapids Stamping Division was awarded the Army/Navy "E" for Excellence in war production at an event that was attended by several GM corporate officials. Less**

**than 4% of all industrial plants engaged in war production during WW II earned this award.**

**With the war over, the plant was converted back to car production and over the course of the next five years the economy began to grow once more. Employees in the plant were now earning over \$1.00 per hour.**

**In 1950, another addition added 208,397 square feet for additional stamping press and metal assembly area.**

**In 1954, 261,525 square feet were added for expanded steel receiving and parts shipping areas.**

**In 1964 a small press area, amounting to 32,788 square feet was built on the press department. By this time the plant was employing close to 3500 employees.**

**In 1970 Grand Rapids stamping built a new natural gas-fired powerhouse, which caused the well known landmark to be demolished. After nearly 35 years, the**

**coal fired powerhouse and associated Fisher Body smokestack were gone.**

**In 1978, Grand Rapids was awarded more stamping press capacity with the addition of twenty-seven large new presses which were coming with additional work.**

**In 1979 we were awarded a modernization of the tool & die construction department. This made our die construction activity the most modern in the world and one of only four die construction facilities within General Motors.**

**In 1983 Grand Rapids celebrated the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Fisher Body Division. One year later Fisher Body Division was dissolved and our plant became part of C.P.C., Chevrolet, Pontiac, GM of Canada group.**

**Around the world by this time, automotive construction technology was rapidly changing. The need to lead in this technology was a commitment GM**

**granted to our facility with a \$500 million modernization in 1986. This was Grand Rapids' seventh expansion. It included 15 transfer presses, the latest and most advanced stamping capability that GM could buy. Governor Blanchard was present for the in-plant announcement to employees.**

**In 1992 a GM reorganization placed Grand Rapids in CLCD; Cadillac, Luxury Car Division. In 1997 the plant's name was changed to Grand Rapids Metal Plant as a part of Metal Fabrication Division of GM North American Operations.**

**Also in 1997 Grand Rapids was able to secure another modernization with additional transfer presses to replace aging equipment and additional tool & die equipment for a cost of \$133 million.**

**More modernization took place in 2004 – 05 with two new AA5 axis transfer presses which produce pickup box side panels for the new Chevrolet Silverado and GMC Sierra trucks. Also, a new steel shear, known as a**

**Cut to Length line was installed as well. These investments totaled roughly \$100 million.**

**All of these investments in technology positioned the Grand Rapids Metal Plant to be a world- class producer of large automotive body panels and stamping dies.**

**On October 13, 2008, GM announced that the Grand Rapids Metal Plant would close by the end of 2009. This decision was made because of the industry-wide decrease in demand for vehicles, particularly trucks.**