

Smoke, Steel, & the River: A Tour of Louisville's Manufacturing Heartland March 29, 2008

Vogt Machine Company, Kentucky Wagon, Bradas and Gheens, American Standard, and the Ford Assembly Plants: these were a few of the dozens of historic industrial properties viewed recently on the "Smoke, Steel, and the River" tour sponsored by the American Printing House for the Blind, Louisville Landmarks Commission, and the Louisville Historical League. It was a fascinating and informative four-hour journey through the past 150 years of Louisville manufacturing heritage.



Louisville was a national production center for a wide range of goods: paint, agricultural equipment; cold storage; candy; cars; carriages; bourbon; beer; furniture; plumbing fixtures; and cigarettes. With an integrated transportation network of railroads, the Ohio River, and roads, along with being centrally positioned between north, south, east and west, the city had a tremendous advantage in shipping any product throughout the country.



Along with the diverse immigrant population which included many Irish and German natives, this dedicated labor force provided the skill to produce this variety of goods. From Belknap Hardware and the Lithgow Iron Foundry, to Peaslee Gaulbert and the Schaefer-Meyer Brewery Brewery, Louisville was a dominant manufacturing center from the early 1800's to about the 1970's.

When traveling through Butchertown, former meat packing and leather tanning industries were noted.

Economic and societal transformations during the late 1960's and into the 70's eventually shuttered most of these powerful manufacturing plants. While the workers and products are long gone, many of the buildings still remain, although they are threatened with demolition and deterioration due to neglect. These once proud, massive masonry buildings are a reminder of a vibrant age in Louisville's history.

But, they can also be shining achievements in the city's revitalization. To spotlight this past industrial legacy, as well as consider what potential there might be, this bus tour was conducted on Saturday March 29th, 2008. A full bus of 56 passengers headed out on this bright brisk morning for an adventuresome ride through central and western Louisville.



Fortunately, many of the buildings have been renovated for other purposes. The original Ford Assembly plant at Third and Eastern Parkway is now the Reynolds's Lofts containing residential units. The Frank Menne Chocolate Factory at East Main and Wenzel is home to Plumber's Supply. Kentucky Wagon, on South Third, opposite the Reynolds's Lofts, is still making carriages, only now they are semi-trailers and other vehicle trailers. Lithgow Iron works is the Billy Goat Strut residential complex. Snead Manufacturing at Ninth and West Market houses Glassworks. The numerous Avery farm implement assembly buildings are occupied

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by separate companies. American Standard will soon be reused within an overall housing development for U of L students. The Seagram's Mansion makes for a beautiful headquarters to Dismas Charities. And, the second Ford Assembly Plant, on Southwestern Parkway, is used by a container storage company.



Other properties, like Schaefer-Meyer Brewery (which later became the Fehr Cold Storage complex) at Lampton and Logan, as well as the Vogt Manufacturing facility, still await new functions. And, Brinly Hardy and Mengel buildings have since been demolished.



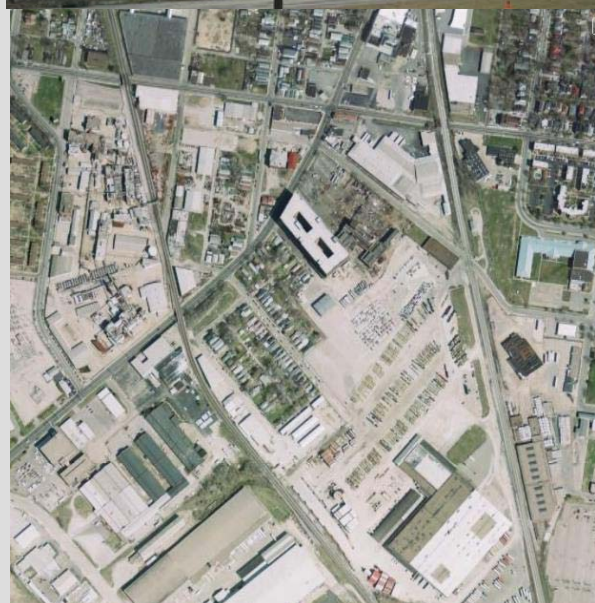
Along the way, more modern industrial properties were observed. It was quickly noted that these structures, built after the 1940's, were of a utilitarian appearance. They did not contain the corbelled brick cornices, saw-tooth clerestory roof lines, arched windows, or ornate detailing of the buildings built prior to World War II.

A particular highlight of the tour was venturing inside the sprawling old Ford Plant on Southwestern Parkway. From the exterior, it did seem as large. But, once inside, the complex extended as far as the eye could see. And, the original blueprints were available for viewing. These drawings contained intricate

details of the façade. A rail spur actually was incorporated into the layout, which allowed for the finished vehicles to be loaded while sheltered, as well as to bring in material shipments without being impacted by the outside climate conditions.

Louisville's manufacturing past is now a faded memory to many, especially the younger generation. But, with prominent attention such as this bus tour, it is hoped that these significant and distinguished buildings can be saved and renovated for new businesses and residential purposes.

Special thanks go to: Mike Hudson, Director of the American Printing House for the Blind; Richard Jett and Dave Marchal of Landmarks Commission; Gary Falk and Carolyn Brooks.



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Left and Above; Several of the Industrial / Manufacturing Buildings which were viewed on the bus tour.



Old Ford Assembly Plant on Southwestern Parkway: the surrounding photos are of the bus tour of the former Ford Assembly Plant on southwestern Parkway. The tour members were invited to walk into this cavernous space. We were also fortunate to view the detailed blueprints of how the building was constructed.

