

**CHAPTER SIX:    EPILOGUE: RE-CONVERSION and CLOSURE****A.    Re-Conversion Planning**

When production at the Richmond Tank Depot began to decline in the summer of 1944, after the production peaks of May and June, the Ford Motor Company managers at the Richmond branch began turning their attention again to assembling automobiles for the civilian market. In his third quarter 1944 report, Maj. Delbert Ball, commanding officer of the depot, reported observing that Ford employees had begun rearranging conveyor lines and stock, evidence to Ball that they were beginning to prepare for reconversion to civilian production. He reported that Ford officials had assured him that they were committed to the war effort as long as the other automobile manufacturers were, but Ford hoped to be the first to return to commercial production when the government lifted its restriction on making cars for the civilian market. Based on his assessment of the situation, he believed that the Richmond plant would be able to resume commercial production within 60 days. Ford did little more to prepare for reconversion until May 1945, when the level of Ordnance production again began to decline as the war drew to an end. Company officials met with officials of the San Francisco Ordnance District to propose that the Richmond Tank Depot be relocated to one of Kaiser's Richmond shipyards. Ford suggested that it could continue to serve as the contractor for the depot functions, but physically removing the depot operations from Ford premises would allow the company to resume civilian production. The main drawback to the proposal, from Ford's perspective, was that a shipyard would not be available until September. The idea was not acted upon.<sup>1</sup>

Ford records show that by May 1945 Abbott was "anxious to get rid of the Jeep job" and reconvert the Richmond plant to civilian production. Max Wiesmyer, who was in charge of Ford's department of branch operations in Dearborn, sent a memo to G.A. Moss in the planning & scheduling department saying that Abbott reported an inventory of considerable jeep stock in Richmond and asking Moss to balance Richmond's supply of stock so that the jeep contract could be terminated soon.<sup>2</sup>

Positive steps toward reconversion began to take place in June, when Ford developed plans to move all Ordnance activities from the second floor of the Richmond branch, clearing the way for the area to serve again as the body department for the production of civilian autos. Part of the plan involved moving Signal Corps facilities elsewhere. Ford also planned to move stock parts that were not in high demand to the Salt Lake City branch. It quickly became obvious, however, that the war against Japan would soon end, so moving the Signal Corps for such a short period seemed inefficient, and its equipment remained on the second floor for the duration of

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<sup>1</sup>"Richmond Tank Depot, Vol. II, part 1, 1 October to 31 December 1944," 3-4; "Richmond Tank Depot, Vol. IV, 1 April to 30 June 1945," 81; Arthur S. Hatch to J.R. Davis, letter dated 15 May 1945, HFM Acc. No. 371, box 17, folder 4.

<sup>2</sup>M.L. Wiesmyer to G.A. Moss, memorandum dated 10 May 1945, HFM Acc. No. 371, box 17, folder 4.

hostilities. In mid-September, Ford superintendent Abbott sent Capt. Spiker a letter requesting that removal of the Signal Corps equipment from the second floor be expedited so that the company could proceed with reconversion. Abbott said Ford intended to resume assembling civilian autos on November 1st.<sup>3</sup>

Ford received authorization on July 20th from the War Production Board to resume truck production at its Richmond, Chester, Chicago, and Somerville branch plants and began assembling civilian trucks at Richmond in August 1945, shortly after the last jeep rolled off the assembly line. It cost Ford about \$11,000 in labor and materials to rearrange conveyors and other equipment in such a configuration that the Richmond plant could assembly Ford light trucks instead of jeeps. The first civilian truck rolled off the Richmond assembly line on August 29th. The company had hoped to begin assembling civilian autos by November 1st, but strikes by workers at some parts suppliers delayed automobile production at Richmond. Instead, Ford shipped some fully assembled new cars from Detroit, which began arriving at Richmond on October 26th. Richmond did not complete its first civilian automobile until December 6th.<sup>4</sup>

## **B. Production during the 1940s & 1950s**

Once Ford got its civilian production system operating again after the war, the Richmond plant was one of the Ford division's 15 branch assembly plants in the U.S. Counting Lincoln, Mercury, and Ford truck divisions, the Ford Motor Company had 17 assembly plants total in the U.S. In 1950, the Richmond plant was assembling about 325 cars and trucks each day. The previous year, it had produced about 60,000 vehicles. In 1950, the Richmond plant had about 1,600 production workers and salaried employees on the payroll. The company no longer used ships to transport parts from Dearborn to Richmond, relying entirely on railroad cars. One change in the company's parts policy was that plants like Richmond acquired some of their parts from local suppliers. Richmond bought about 25% of the parts it needed from manufacturers in northern California. Each day, the plant received about 30 carloads of parts from Dearborn and other suppliers. Outgoing shipments totaled about 40 carloads daily (because cars could not be loaded as densely as parts). Each year, the Richmond used about \$50,000,000 in materials to

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<sup>3</sup>"Richmond Tank Depot, Vol. IV, 1 April to 30 June 1945," 168; "Richmond Tank Depot, Vol. V, 1 July to 30 September 1945," 140-141, 160; W.A. Abbott to Capt. G.A. Spiker, letter dated 13 September 1945, exhibit Bb, p 160 of Vol. V; W.A. Abbott to M.L. Wiesmyer, memorandum dated 5 June 1945, HFM Acc. No. 371, box 17, folder 4.

<sup>4</sup>"Richmond Tank Depot, Vol. V, 1 July to 30 September 1945," 3, 27; "Richmond Tank Depot, Vol. VI, October 1945," 1; budget attached to W.A. Abbott to M.L. Wiesmyer, memorandum dated 8 June 1945, and L.V. Brown to Wiesmyer, memorandum dated 20 July 1945, both in HFM Acc. No. 371, box 17, folder 4; Richmond Assemble Plant, "History - Report May 1, 1952," included in M. Wiesmyer, "Branch Operations - Richmond," preliminary draft report dated 26 April 1956, HFM Acc. No. 106, microfiche.

assembly its slate of cars, and it accrued almost \$7,000,000 in transportation charges.<sup>5</sup>

### C. Closure

In the early 1950s, speculation arose that Ford would move its plant out of Richmond. This was due, in part, to the huge increase in population on the West Coast because of all the people who had moved there during the war years to work in industries supplying the war effort. The increased population meant an expanded market for cars and trucks, and Ford wanted to correspondingly expand its West Coast capacity to assembly vehicles. Ford management in Dearborn wanted to double its assembly capacity in the San Francisco Bay Area to meet demand, and the property in Richmond did not have the space needed to accommodate expansion of the plant. The Richmond community, of course, wanted to persuade Ford to stay. Dearborn sent W.A. Abbott a memorandum in February 1953 describing how he should explain to local people why additional land near the existing Richmond plant would not induce Ford to stay. He was instructed to tell people, "You can't 'splice on' to an assembly line. To increase capacity, each department within a plant must be expanded, and the building of an addition is not the simple solution."<sup>6</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Ford Motor Company sent its Richmond employees a letter stating that the company would build a new plant elsewhere within a 50-mile radius of San Francisco and assuring the employees that they would be offered transfers to the new plant when it opened. At the same time, the company issued a general press release announcing that it had sent the letter to its employees and indicating that the company welcomed inquiries from parties who might be interested in acquiring the Richmond plant.<sup>7</sup>

Two weeks later, Ford issued another press release stating that the company had acquired 160 acres of ground in Milpitas, north of San Jose. The new assembly plant to be built there would be one story, enclosing 1,000,000 of industrial space (about twice that in the Richmond plant). There would also be a two-story office building attached to the plant. Interestingly, the press release described how the building would be designed. Just as in the early part of the twentieth century, the company would first develop a complete layout for the operation, and then it would design an appropriate building to envelope the layout.<sup>8</sup>

Ford closed its Richmond plant in February 1955. Most of the Ford employees moved with the operation to Milpitas. Members of the faculty at the University of California at Berkeley conducted a study, headed by John T. Wheeler of the School of Business Administration, to explore the social and economic consequences of the move on the workers.

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<sup>5</sup>"Ford: Richmond Plant Facts," brochure dated ca. 1950, HFM Acc. No. 951, box 18.

<sup>6</sup>Memorandum dated 3 February 1953, HFM Acc. No. 429, box 2, Richmond - San Jose Statements folder.

<sup>7</sup>Ford Motor Company press release dated 4 February 1953, HFM Acc. No. 429, box 2, Richmond - San Jose Statements folder.

<sup>8</sup>Ford Motor Company press release dated 16 February 1953, HFM Acc. No. 429, box 2, Richmond - San Jose Statements folder.

One of the academics, Bennett M. Berger, published his findings as a book: *Working-Class Suburb: A Study of Auto Workers in Suburbia*. In his preface, Bennett mentions that about 25,000 people lived in Richmond in 1941, and that the population quadrupled in two years because of the surge in employment at Richmond's Kaiser shipyards. In an effort to provide housing for those new workers and their families, the federal government built "row upon row of barracks-like emergency housing." Many of Ford's employees at the time of the Richmond closure had moved to Richmond because of the wartime employment. People from Arkansas and Oklahoma were especially numerous among Ford's post-war workers in Richmond. Many of those new arrivals to Richmond had lived in emergency housing during the war, and Bennett reported that 38% of the Ford employees he interviewed in Milpitas had still been living in emergency housing when Ford's Richmond branch plant closed in February 1955. According to Bennett, more than half of the Ford workers who moved to Milpitas told him that they were immediately happy to learn the news that the Ford operation would be moving out of Richmond, in part because of the substandard housing.<sup>9</sup>

That preference on the part of Ford's Richmond workers to leave for what they considered a more desirable living environment does not subtract from the historical significance of the built environment in which they lived and worked during World War II.

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<sup>9</sup>Bennett M. Berger, *Working-Class Suburb: A Study of Auto Workers in Suburbia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), iii-ix, 21-22.