

## **Ford's Boulevard Building: Branch Office and So Much More**

by Mike Imirie, Wordsmith LLC [www.wordsmithLLC.org](http://www.wordsmithLLC.org)

The unexpected reference in the Business Section of the *'Detroit Free Press'* surprised me. A story profiling a booming international construction firm called Lakeshore Engineering advised that the enterprise now made its headquarters in a former Ford factory at Woodward Avenue and West Grand Boulevard.

A former *Ford* property? At Woodward and West Grand? *Hmmmm....*

A call to *'Free Press'* writer Peter Gallagher disclosed the name of his contact at Lakeshore. The next call- this one to Charlene Mitchell at Lakeshore - elicited approval to make a visit. The April 30 tour opened my eyes to another level of the founding Ford's pervasive influence on Detroit history.

The building was another of the hundreds designed and built for Mr. Ford by Albert Kahn. Its location on West Grand - a mere stone's throw from what used to be the General Motors Building! - caused Mr. Kahn to name it the Boulevard Building. Built in 1910 with three levels, it was intended as a large, capable sales and service center: a regional support for the many independent Ford agencies in Michigan. Such branch centers served two purposes: 1) new car showrooms and 2) service centers. Branches made good sense for the young Ford Motor Company, for they provided customers with standardized, qualified service. In addition, they served as central storage areas from which replacement parts shipments could be made. Finally, as factory stores, they also spared the company from paying the large vehicle discounts ("territory agreements") which were typically granted to independent Ford franchisees.

The building's street level contained a showroom and a garage/service area. The service area was well developed for its day; in addition to many service stalls, it also offered a so called 'carriage wash' with a 4-car capacity. The showroom had its own business office, with spaces for a private manager's area, a stenographer pool, and bookkeepers. The upper stories were given over to parts storage. The building was coal-fueled; Albert Kahn's basement plans called for a coal room, complete with a coal chute and hydraulic hoist for removing ash!

One of the surprising service innovations offered by larger urban branch locations was mobile repair for Ford customers with light repair needs. Upon receiving a call from a motorist in distress (phones were widespread in the city of Detroit by 1914), individual road service crews - motorcycle "flying squadrons", according to the 7/1914 issue of *'The Ford Times'* - could be dispatched to the problem site. Many repairs could be made on the road; cars requiring more in-depth attention would be towed back to the branch. While repairs were chargeable, the actual road service was free!

At the Benson Ford Research Center, I found an old repair bill describing services performed in those early days. The prices may have represented big money back in the teens and twenties, but certainly sound like bargains today!

- *Overhaul motor and Trans* 18.00
- *Overhaul front axle* 5.00
- *Vulcanize inner wheel tube* .50
- *Stop gas leak at tank* no charge

The strategy which drove the vitality of the Detroit branch – and those which had been built elsewhere in America - flourished. Branches served as key parts of the distribution system which linked Detroit with its 7000 local Ford dealers. By 1914, sales handled by the 29 branches equaled 80% of Ford's total sales volume<sup>1</sup>.

Business was so good that 5 more stories were added to the Boulevard Building in 1913. Demand for the Model 'T' grew exponentially in the 'teens and the new space allowed assembly of knocked down versions of the 'T' shipped over from Highland Park. As part of this expansion, a paint shop was added, too. Despite obvious prosperity, Mr. Ford of course remained true to his thrifty roots. The plans for the new elevation called for a new and taller 40' rooftop flagpole, but prescribed ...*"reuse old bracing and change to suit new pole."*

The fledgling Detroit Auto Dealers Association hosted the city's 13<sup>th</sup> annual Auto Show at the Boulevard Building in January of 1914. Admission was 50 cents and those who attended browsed "...73 exhibitors of vehicles and accessories, 37 of whom showed 41 different brands of gasoline pleasure cars..." To make matters more festive, orchestras played on all three floors!

The pace of work at the Detroit branch was nonstop. A 1915 letter of complaint from R. R. Robertson, owner of the nearby RRCo Cut Stone Company, described serious congestion problems: *"The great quantities of bodies, axles, tires and so on being received daily is something extraordinary. Owing to the inability of the plant to receive them as fast as they come in, the trucks and teams are strung along John R all the way from Milwaukee to Horton, 2 full blocks long, where they wait their turn to unload for hours at a time."*

The original Albert Kahn drawings were created on linen and dated April 16, 1910. They were substantial in their heft, clear in what they rendered, and highly detailed. As I unrolled those 18 venerable, oversized linen documents at U-M Ann Arbor's Bentley Historical Library, it gave me a start - and then a thrill - to speculate that the founding Ford and Mr. Kahn had very probably pored over those same prints together some 98 years ago!

While the detail in the architect's prints told the story of a fine commercial structure, the *extent* of that story unfolded upon my visit. Even though the building had had four other post-Ford owners and seen the passage of over 90 years before Lakeshore bought it in 2005, there was still ample evidence of the opulence of the age and of the Ford Motor Company of old. Such turn-of-the-century opulence was nowhere more obvious than in the lobby.

That lobby was *spectacular*. Coved plaster ceilings were crowned with carved artwork. Floors made of 30" x 30" diagonal marble squares gleamed. Elegant old octagonal glass chandeliers hung from the ceiling. Utility closets had doors of brass! Glassed-in directories with brass enclosures were stationed on both sides of the center lobby. An oversized, wall mounted mailbox ("Cutler mailing system") was rendered in brass, too. An ornate, 3' x 3' clock was centered above the center bank of passenger elevators. Two bas-relief sculptures abutted that clock. They had been carved to include themes of agrarianism and transportation, dear to the heart of the founding Ford. The lobby's center area was domed; its plaster center was painted a deep mulberry color and was heavily gilded.

Elsewhere, the circa-1910 freight elevator was still in operation. (*I estimated it could have fit 4 Model Ts...*) Appropriately, given Henry Ford's firm belief in function over form, it was far bigger than any of the six passenger elevators! (With the founding Ford's belief in physical fitness, he commissioned *zero* passenger elevators in the Boulevard Building's 1910 iteration. Instead, he

insisted that any employees having business on the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> floors use stairs to promote their health!)

Importantly, current owner Lakeshore Engineering gives every impression of being a responsible, caring stakeholder. The firm has embraced an obvious and generous strategy of upkeep, repair, and renovation.

What a magnificent architectural effect was the building at 1550 Woodward! That rich architectural legacy is still obvious despite the building's original glazed terra cotta exterior having been sheathed in anonymous white concrete at some point in the '80s. Such opulence remains a true reflection of the turn-of-the-century auto industry in our country, of the high regard that America gave it, and of Henry Ford's success in understanding and responding so well.

<sup>1</sup> *Roadside America, Jan Jennings, 1990 (pp.42)*