

Frederick turned his attention to producing school bus bodies for which there was a great demand.

In 1939, the company finally closed its big wooden doors. Most believe that Charles "Rich" Patterson would have been saddened, but very proud to know that his name on a product still meant the highest standard of quality possible.

Later, when grandson Postell Patterson was asked what happened to his grandfather's company, he simply said, "Well, I guess Detroit got to be just too much for us."

(Note:.) Reports that a Patterson-Greenfield car is on display in the Pioneer

Auto Museum in Murdo, SD are not correct. The car on display is a "Peterson" which was made in Michigan. If you check the body, you will see the difference. The P-G has a rounded hood and smaller headlights, etc.

(Special thanks to Katherine Wilson Patterson, the late Postell Patterson and the many towns people of Greenfield and Gallipolis, OH).

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*Workers on the assembly line in the Patterson-Greenfield plant.*



## The Gildons:

### Three generations in the auto industry

*By Sonja Stokes Gildon*

Between 1916 and 1918, as World War I raged across Europe, thousands of U.S. blacks were making a trek of their own.

More than 400,000 African Americans left the South for the cities of the North during that period. They went in search of opportunity and jobs, many newly available because of labor shortages caused by the war, as well as restrictions on European immigration.

They headed for Chicago, New York, Cincinnati, and Detroit, then experiencing the speedy rise of the automobile industry.

Just a few years earlier, Henry Ford had announced his plan to pay a \$5-a-day wage to satisfy Ford's need for workers. The effect was startling. In a 20-year period, between 1910 and 1930, Detroit's black population rose from 5,741 to over 120,000, according to Census records.

A leader in its field, Ford Motor Company produced and sold over 9,000 cars in 1907. By 1913, the number had grown to 195,954. Between those years, the company's employees also grew from 700 to 14,366. By 1926, over half the cars sold in the U.S. were made by Ford.

But the company was hampered by a high turnover rate, some 400 percent a year -- almost twice that of other plants -- and finally turned to blacks to supplement its workforce. From that point on, African Americans would play a major role in automobile history, including the unionization of the industry.

In those early days, however, black auto



*The Gildons (clockwise): Minnie Fisher; Bernard and Edna Gildon; Ola Hart, Bernard's sister-in-law; and Finley, the Gildon's son.*

workers were usually given the least desirable jobs and at Ford most were concentrated in the foundries at the Rouge Plant in Dearborn, MI. As far as employment opportunities were concerned, however, Ford was far ahead of General Motors, which in 1937, employed only 2,500 blacks, again mostly in its foundries.

In the late 1930's and early '40's, black workers also played pivotal roles in union organizing. It was the participation of African-American auto workers in the well known "Battle of the Overpass" in 1937 and the strike against Ford Motor Company in 1941 that finally forced Henry Ford to sign a contract with the United Auto Workers in that year.

Until the 1970's, most young Detroiters could be assured of a job in the auto industry after high school, but downsizing and the relocations of plants outside of Detroit have significantly reduced opportunities for

African Americans.

For decades the industry helped move blacks from poverty to prosperity. No one knows that better than the Gildons, a Detroit family who left the South in the 1930's looking for a better life. They found one in the state of Michigan.

Edna and Bernard Gildon left Henning, TN, the boyhood home of writer Alex Haley, along with their four sons, in 1936 in search of work. In the beginning, unable to find a job in any Detroit auto plant, Bernard set up a small tailoring shop. When his business later failed, however, he turned again to the automobile industry, securing a position at Ford, after World War II, which would last until he retired in the mid-60's.

His job at Ford not only provided a middle-class lifestyle for his family, but guaranteed benefits for them after his death in 1966.

Later two of his sons, Weylin and Hildred, carried on his legacy. Hildred worked for Chrysler and recently retired, while Weylin worked briefly for Ford before changing careers.

Now a third generation has joined the industry. One grandson Duane currently works for Chrysler, while another Derek Gildon, was the first in the family to be hired for a management program. He is employed at Primus Automotive, a subsidiary of Ford Motor Credit Company.

The automobile industry, specifically Ford and Chrysler, has allowed the Gildon family to be successful for nearly 50 years, but its story is not unique. The industry, more than any other, has provided a special lifestyle and opportunity for African Americans and they, in turn, have shown their gratitude by buying the cars it produces.

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