



Robert Dewar documented auto industry's collapse

By Gregory Korte · gkorte@enquirer.com · January 23, 2010

If Robert J. Dewar could speak at his own funeral Monday, he might express surprise that the Ford Motor Co. managed to outlive him.

Dewar, a former supervisor at Ford's Sharonville Transmission Plant, had spent the last three decades watching and waiting for the automaker - in fact, the entire American auto industry - to collapse of its own weight.

"There could be no greater indictment of the incompetent, even criminal management in the U.S. auto industry than closed Ford, GM and Chrysler plants and thriving, non-union Japanese auto plants" like Toyota's Georgetown, Ky., plant.

That's what Dewar wrote in his 2009 book, "A Savage Factory: An Eyewitness Account of the Auto Industry's Self-Destruction."

Dewar, 66, died Wednesday of a heart attack, his fourth.

On the first page of the book, Dewar describes showing up on his first day at the Sharon Road plant, which he said "looked more like a prison than a factory." After 39 minutes of training, he was thrown onto the floor in Department 258, supervising the manufacturing of torque converters - a critical part made only in Sharonville, upon which the entire Ford assembly operation relied.

By lunch, union workers sabotaged production and shut down Sharonville's sister plant in Fairfax because of a lack of parts, he wrote.

From there, Dewar describes the "never-ending war" between labor and management, the "thick

jungle of sexual harassment" as Ford started hiring more women, and his own quest to "break free of corporate tyranny" by racking up obscenely lucrative overtime.

Dewar's family said he had a publishing house interested in selling the book years ago, when Ford seemed on the ropes. But it pulled out. So last year, true to his do-it-yourself attitude, he published the book himself. It's available on Amazon.com.

When he died, Dewar had been working on a second book about growing up in McKeesport, Pa., where he worked in coal mines at age 11. He served in the Navy, got a full scholarship to Penn State and earned a master's degree from the University of Southern California.

He came to Cincinnati to work for Procter & Gamble, which he didn't spare from his anti-corporate commentary. Leaving P&G as manager of its Duncan Hines brand to work at Ford was, he wrote, "a step down in status, a big step up in salary."

Dewar started squirreling away notes and memos for his book, like the one from Ford managers that said safety training shouldn't interfere with production. So supervisors were to talk to employees about safety one-on-one, while they operated heavy equipment.

Advertisement

USA TODAY
AutoPilot 
 The new travel app for iPhone® and iPod touch®
 Presented by: 
SEE HOW IT WORKS >>



He got laid off from Ford and eventually started his own business, The Box Place in Colerain Township, where he worked until he died. He lived in Finneytown.

"A big part of his life is being his own boss. That spirit of his comes out in 'A Savage Factory,'" said daughter Sharon M. Dewar of Chicago, who edited the book. "That was his mantra, and that's something he instilled in himself and my brothers, to never buy into the corporate lifestyle, to be your own person."

Jerry Spohr, a 38-year employee of Ford's Sharonville plant, worked with Dewar as a supervisor and now holds a union job as a plumber-pipe fitter.

"He wrote it the way it was," Spohr said. "It brought back some painful memories. That was the times then. I can't say I'm proud of it."

Many at Ford - management and union alike - were upset at the timing of the book, coming out as the American auto industry reached a new crisis last year.

"Their reaction was, 'Why do this now? We're not like that. We're working together, we're not fighting anymore,'" Spohr said. He helped arrange for Detroit to approve a tour of Sharonville so Dewar could see how things had changed.

Dewar is survived by his wife, Barbara, who co-owned the packing and shipping business. In addition to their daughter, a public relations manager for Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, he had two sons, Richard, an engineer from Florence, Ky., David, a social studies teacher in Atlanta, and a grandson, Ethan.

Visitation and services will be at Frederick Funeral Home, 2553 Banning Road, Colerain Township. Visitation is 2 to 5 p.m. Sunday. Service is Monday at 10 a.m. Memorials may be made to McKeesport Heritage Center, 1832 Arboretum Drive, McKeesport, Pa. 15132.

For consideration in Lives Remembered, send information and contact number to livesremembered@enquirer.com.

Advertisement

LIMITED TIME ONLY
AS LOW AS
25¢
PER DAY

SUBSCRIBE NOW

USA TODAY e-EDITION