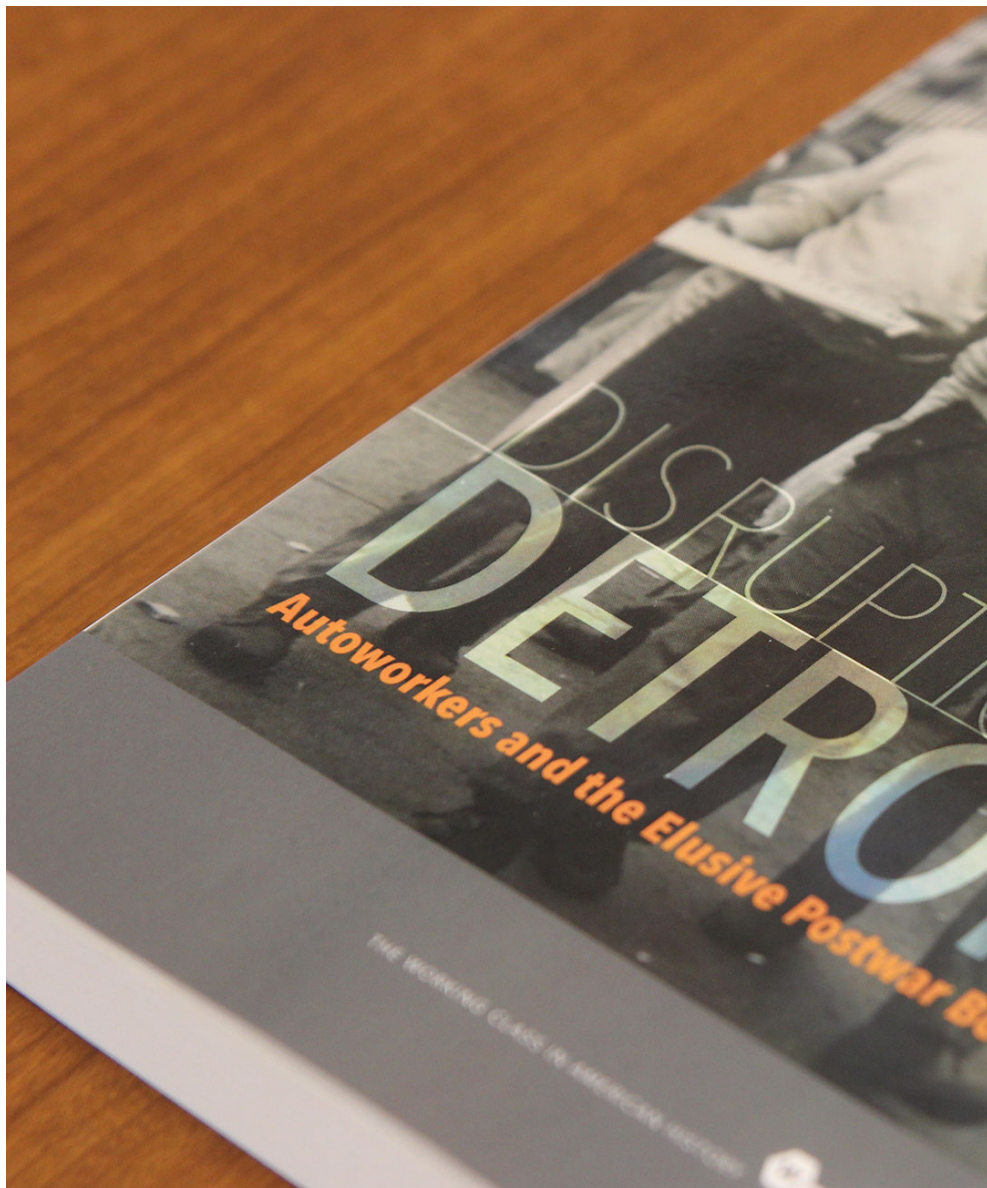


HISTORY

New book dispels myth of auto industry golden age

Drawing on oral interviews and news archives, Professor Daniel Clark presents a new perspective on the lives of Detroit autoworkers during the storied postwar boom of the 1940s and '50s.

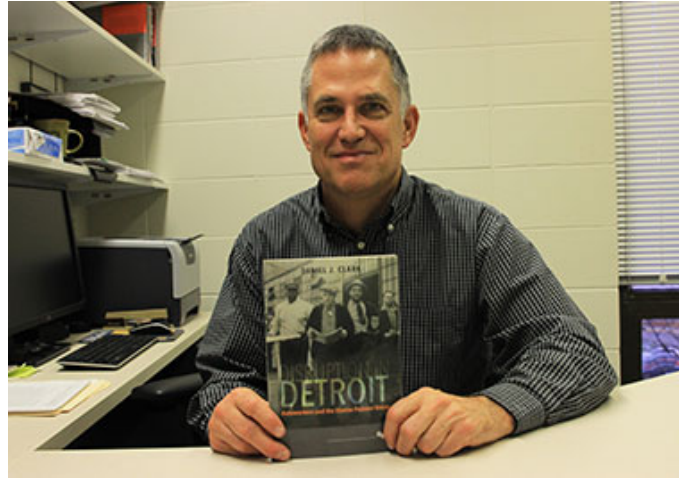


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When Oakland University history professor Daniel Clark started conducting oral history interviews with retired autoworkers in the early 2000s, he expected to hear stories of a widely mythologized golden age – an era of prosperity in the 1940s and '50s that propelled tens of thousands of unionized auto workers into a secure, blue collar middle class lifestyle.

If one looked only at the union contracts, with their increasingly generous wages and benefits, it's easy to understand how such a mythology could take root in the popular imagination of metro Detroit and beyond.

In his new book, *Disruption in Detroit: Autoworkers and the Elusive Postwar Boom*, Clark draws on oral interviews with retired UAW members and archives of regional newspapers to show that the mythology surrounding autoworkers during the postwar years was far removed from the lives these men and women actually lived.



Professor Daniel Clark is shown with a copy of his newly published book, "Disruption in Detroit: Autoworkers and the Elusive Postwar Boom."

The following is an oral interview with Professor Clark. It has been edited for length and clarity.

How does the mythology compare to the reality of the Detroit auto industry in the 1940s and '50s?

If you look at the employment data for the region, the number of autoworkers who were there, and the earnings and profitability of the auto companies, everything points to prosperity. All of the macroeconomic indicators suggested that these autoworkers had indeed entered the middle class. What I was discovering is that the macroeconomic indicators didn't at all reflect the way that workers lived in real time.

There was a host of reasons why work was unstable. In the early postwar years, the biggest obstacles to stable employment were shortages of materials. Lack of steel, lack of coal to make steel, lack of copper for various parts of cars. Some of these shortages were caused by strikes in various sectors of the economy. If those workers went on strike, it could shut down the auto industry pretty quickly and for significant periods of time. There were so many parts and so many parts suppliers and all of these companies had to have ample supplies of raw materials. If there was a shortage in any of the supply chains, it could cause the disruption of hundreds of thousands of auto jobs.

"This whole process just confirmed my sense of history, which is that when you get down to the human level, so much of what we know to be true is actually not the truth – or at least not the full truth."

There were strikes at the auto companies as well. Strikes that were authorized by the union and also (unauthorized) wildcat strikes, where small groups of workers would walk off the job, and that would cause enough of a disruption that before you knew it, thousands of people could be out of work.

In the book, you mention issues with defining the term “autoworker.” Why was it particularly hard to determine who was an autoworker during this period?

From my interviews, I found that a lot of people who I would have characterized as autoworkers, and who characterized themselves as autoworkers, were actually autoworkers only about half the decade in the 1950s. Layoffs were so chronic that people spent huge chunks of the 1950s aspiring to be autoworkers, rather than actually working in the industry.

The people I interviewed had second and sometimes third jobs – fence installer, waitress, berry picker, golf caddy, cafeteria worker. There were all kinds of jobs that people did to make ends meet during a layoff. There were also huge waves of immigration into Detroit from people who thought the auto industry would be booming. This sparked a big debate in Detroit. Are these autoworkers? Are they even Detroiters? Should they go back to where they came from? I was finding that most of these people who came to Detroit wanted to stay in Detroit, wanted to be autoworkers, but some were laid off for as long as a year

shortly after they arrived. Authorities in Detroit kept telling these people to leave because the employment outlook was so unstable.

How did this book project get started?

I had just finished a book on cotton mill workers and unionization in North Carolina. I was thinking about new projects and realized there hadn't really been any book-length treatment of autoworkers themselves. I thought oral history would be very helpful in trying to uncover the experience of rank and file workers.

I knew there were potentially tens of thousands of people who had worked in the auto industry in the '40s and '50s, who were probably still alive in the early 2000s and living in the metro Detroit area. The challenge was to find them. My running partner, Ed Lyghtel, was an engineer at the Ford Ypsilanti plant, and there's a UAW retiree chapter at the plant. Ed connected me with the chapter president, Bob Bowen. Bob allowed me to come to a retiree meeting and give a pitch. I dedicated the book to him and another retiree chapter president, Bonnie Melton. They were so supportive and understood that there was value in talking to their members about their work lives.

Why was oral history such a vital component of the project?

I'm a believer in history from the bottom up. I learned with my first book on the cotton mill workers that there was no way to understand what was happening in the mill without hearing the stories of ordinary workers, and I had this gut sense that that had to be true in the auto industry as well. It turned out to be true, because if I hadn't interviewed those auto workers, I never would have uncovered this chronic instability in the industry. There's no way that this book could have been conceptualized if it hadn't been for the insights gleaned from talking to those workers.

This isn't to say that oral history doesn't have its limitations. Oral history allows you to get a sense of how people interpret their lives at the moment you're interviewing them. But you're not getting a perfect, unfiltered view of the past. Some would view that as a weakness, but it can be a strength if you look at other sources to corroborate or contrast these accounts.

How did you go about finding sources to compare and contrast with the oral interviews?

I did research on microfilm at the University of Michigan Hatcher Graduate library. I started out with the Detroit News and Detroit Free Press, and I found that they had a lot of reporters covering the auto industry. There were all kinds of feature writers who covered aspects of the industry, especially if there was a strike. They were out there doing a lot of human interest stories about what was going on.

The Michigan Chronicle (a Detroit-based weekly newspaper focused on the African American community) helped me understand more about African American perspective on these layoffs. I interviewed some African American workers as well, and they experienced these years as even more insecure and unstable than other workers.

Overall, there was an amazing amount of material on the auto industry, auto production boom times and layoffs. I found that the interviewees really understated the severity of instability. If anything, it was far worse than imagined because I could see almost on a day-to-day basis how many people were affected because of shortages, strikes, lack of buyers for cars, plant accidents, extreme weather, all kinds of things. As I read through the newspapers, there was nobody in Detroit who was arguing that auto work was stable and secure – not automakers, not business leaders, not union leaders and certainly not rank and file workers.

Were there any other revelations from the project that surprised you?

What struck me most were the circuitous routes by which autoworkers became autoworkers. It wasn't the case that people just followed their dad into the factory. They didn't really aspire to be autoworkers, but that was the best-paying possibility out there on the spectrum of available jobs. Also, the way that family issues played a huge role in the decisions they made. So many families had a disabled child or a death in the family or something else that really altered the trajectory of experiences and aspirations for everybody. These are things that you just don't hear about if you only focus on statistics.

This whole process just confirmed my sense of history, which is that when you get down to the human level, so much of what we know to be true is actually not the truth – or at least not the full truth. In our quest to make generalizations to derive meaning from the past, it's a lot easier if we don't actually talk to people because they will confound our ideological expectations. I think that's the value of looking at history from the ground up; we gain a more three-dimensional view of people and events.

Clark donated the oral interview transcripts and recordings to the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University. His book is available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).