



## The New York Times Magazine

Magazine

# End of the Line

AUSTIN UNN JAN. 6, 2012

*In 2008, General Motors announced the closing of its metal-stamping plant in Wyoming, Mich., and 1,500 workers lost their jobs. Austin Bunn, a playwright and professor, chronicled the experience and what came after in a nonfiction play. Bunn, in collaboration with the Working Group Theater, spent two years trying to understand exactly what happened to the people and the town that relied on the factory. He recorded hundreds of hours of conversations with dozens of workers, managers, historians, bartenders, city consultants and others. Their words (edited and condensed for dramatic purposes) became the documentary play “Rust,” adapted here. (Some characters have had their names changed; one is a composite.) “Rust” had its premiere in Grand Rapids, Mich., in September.*

### WHAT NOW?

*Heather, tool-and-die maker. A 30-something mother of two boys; sits on her porch with a lemonade.*

**Heather:** “Why would they want to talk to you, Mom? You haven’t done anything interesting.” That’s what my son said when he heard you were coming to talk to me.

I’ve never had another job. I started at the plant right out of college. I was a communications major — don’t know what I thought I’d do with that. I grew up there. I worked in skilled trades, building the dies. You make more an hour, so it’s worth it. I was very lucky — we weren’t working in the press, the oil and noise and muck. And it wasn’t the repetitive manual work like production.

In January they said, “Take your tools and leave.” Grown men, bawling.

Now I have to take whatever transfer they give me or it’s a voluntary quit and I lose everything. Or I could take a buyout, and we’d get money, but we’d lose our insurance and retirement. And I’ve got two teenage boys, and my husband’s not working because of health problems. So I signed up for paralegal school. To quit, retrain. Start a new life. But then G.M. called me to transfer to Lansing.

Except not skilled trades. To production. And I’m taking it. This . . . should be interesting.

*Rob, electrician. A Hispanic man in his 50s; sits in his dining room, a bottle of tequila on the table.*

**Rob:** My wife doesn’t want me talking to you. She doesn’t see it like I see it. I wasn’t surprised this place closed; I’m just surprised it took this long. There was a guy that worked there, they’d keep promoting him even though he sucked. Everyone hated him so much they had to move him, so they made him the supervisor of the supervisors! But no one liked him even then, so they promoted him again. That guy was an idiot! I can’t tell you his name. . . . His name was Dave!

This plant close — it’s not a tragedy. It was a clique, and it should close. My wife and I, we’ve lost two kids. That’s a tragedy. And this little boy running around here. . . . I’m transferring ’cause it’s all about that little boy. I’m just a migrant worker.

## HISTORY LESSON

*A movie projects onto a screen at rear of stage: “From Dawn to Sunset,” 1937 G.M. film, part propaganda, part newsreel. ACADEMIC enters — rolling across the stage in an office chair with a cup of coffee. She observes the film enthusiastically. AUSTIN enters with a notepad and a tape recorder.*

**Academic:** G.M. made this film in 1937, a year after your plant in Wyoming opened.

**Austin:** (*into recorder*) First interview for “Rust” project. Labor historian.

**Academic:** And 1937 is a very interesting year for General Motors. See,

G.M. policy was to decentralize. Push plants out of Detroit and into smaller cities. It's one of their legacies. Sloan played it like an "investment" in the community, spread the wealth —

**Austin:** I'm sorry: Sloan?

**Academic:** Alfred P. Sloan, G.M. president and chairman. . . . (*reacts to Austin's look*) Did you do any research before you came and talked to me?

**Austin:** Yes.

**Academic:** On the Internet.

**Austin:** Yes.

**Academic:** This morning.

**Austin:** Maybe?

**Academic:** (*with a sigh*) I see this in terms of people. The car industry creates the middle class in America. In 1914, Henry Ford institutes the \$5 workday. Of course, workers could only get the \$5 if they complied with a home investigation by the company to make sure they were sober, thrifty, etc., but that's neither here nor there. Ford's decision ushers in a new era. Countless numbers of people move to a higher living standard. By the '20s, every family that wants a car, has a car. And the car changes everything.

**Austin:** Just to break that down a little bit. . . .

**Academic:** The car opens up American culture — like the evolution of courtship rituals. Women become independent, they go from producers of food and clothing to consumers of food and clothing. By the '50s, you have the Interstate System. And people, just, go. Think about everything that comes with roads: jobs making the roads, remaking the roads, gas stations. . . .

**Austin:** I get it. Cars create opportunity, growth.

**Academic:** But even more than that: the car industry, and here I mean General Motors specifically, creates dissatisfaction.

**Austin:** Let me make sure I get this right: the automobile creates unhappiness.

**Academic:** No, *dissatisfaction*. Ford says consumers could get any color car they wanted as long as it was black. But General Motors is different — G.M. is a bunch of car companies bundled together. As Alfred Sloan says, "A car for

every purse and purpose.” Splinter the market.

**Sloan:** *Enters wearing high-collar shirt, hat in hand.*

**Sloan:** Many wonder why the automobile industry brings out a new model every year.

**Academic:** (*aside*) From “Adventures of a White-Collar Man,” by Alfred P. Sloan Jr.

**Sloan:** The reason is simple. We want to make you dissatisfied.

**Academic:** G.M. becomes the biggest company in the most important industry in the world because of this: planned obsolescence. Once everybody has a car, the trick is to get people to want another one. Sloan knew this. And we’ve been living in his world since.

By the way, I worked for G.M. for a summer. Worst job of my life. Write that down.

Sloan *harrumphs*.

**Austin:** So what I wanted to understand was how the G.M. plant got here. To Wyoming, Michigan.

**Academic:** Right, so as the car industry grows on the east side of the state, so do worker complaints.

**Sloan:** There is no one so hopeless as a worker exiled from his family, surrounded by factory after factory.

**Academic:** Slowdowns, shutdowns had become so common — hell, in Flint, they took over the plant in 1936, started the United Auto Workers. This film comes the year after.

**Sloan:** (*with bravado*) We must take the work out of the industrial centers and into America!

**Academic:** So Sloan pushes G.M. west to Wyoming to avoid the unions.

**Sloan:** I call it another epic American migration.

**Academic:** He played it like a “gift.” That’s what they called the plant. A gift.

**Sloan:** Toward homeowners and small towns, where people have a stake in our nation’s welfare. That is what I mean by decentralization.

**Academic:** But it was strategic: scatter production. They didn’t want the

west to unionize. That's why G.M. made this film. Convince people their futures are inextricably linked to G.M. But —

**Sloan:** (*wagging his finger*) There is one mistake we must not make: overreach, losing the center.

**Academic:** They got their union. Local 730.

**Sloan:** Lest this migration get away from us. . . .

**Academic:** You should talk to them. They'll be your way in.

**Sloan:** *exits. Gives Austin the hairy eyeball.*

**Academic:** So what is this project about?

**Austin:** I'm trying to understand what happens after a plant closes. Who closes it, why. What happens to the people who worked there. I'm from the East Coast, and I feel like Michigan is this place where people know how to work with their hands, you know, guys with calluses and beat-up jeans, oil underneath their eyes like war paint. . . .

**Academic:** War paint. You realize the person you're describing is an advertisement.

**Austin:** I'm a teacher now, and I've been thinking a lot about work. Real work. I want to explore and celebrate that.

**Academic:** Look, if you're going to interview these union guys . . . you might want to think about how you dress.

**Austin:** What do you mean?

**Academic:** It's just . . . a lot of corduroy. What kind of car do you drive?

**Austin:** A Honda Accord.

**Academic:** These interviews should be really eye-opening.

## **WHAT NEXT?**

*Jon, editor of Plant Closing News. Stands center stage in a cowboy hat; speaks with a Texas accent.*

**Jon:** When we started Plant Closing News almost a decade ago, I thought we'd report on a few hundred closures a year, across all industries. That first year, it was almost a thousand. The people that read my newsletter are riggers, demo guys, auction folks. Guys who want to make a buck. Because you can. We've covered about 1,000 plant closings a year. Now it's down actually. It's

counterintuitive. The worse the time, the fewer plants close. The better, the more plants close. Because you have to have money to close them.

*Dan, tool-and-die maker. A retiree in sandals and a Hawaiian shirt in his garage. Behind him is a billboard that says, “Thank You, G.M. for 73 Years”; he and his grandfather are on the billboard.*

**Dan:** When they announced the close, I had the idea. See, my grandfather started when the place opened, in 1936. Then my dad worked there — he was one of the rebels — we don’t have a picture of him up there, because they never caught him working.

I called CBS Outdoor and set it up. They were supposed to have the billboard up for two weeks — right there across from the plant — but it’s just exploded. London newspapers, TV. Guys from Detroit came and took me out to lunch, and I did not punch out. But nobody in the union even acknowledged it. “What are you thanking G.M. for? You should thank the union.” No, I shouldn’t. G.M. provided the jobs.

I was never going to be in a factory, but after 30 years, I have no regrets. See, I went to school for landscaping. Unbeknownst to me, landscapers get laid off in the winter. It takes a special person to stick it out at a factory. When my dad hired in, back in the ’50s, they hired 100 people a week, and 97 walked out because they didn’t want nothing to do with it. Bang, bang, bang, all day long. Those people now who complain about the good life we had? We’ve made decent money, but I challenge somebody else to put in 84 hours a week in a factory.

**Heather:** I transferred to Lansing, and I ended up at one of the worst jobs. We use these big wrenches to torque in seat belts. You grab a torque wrench above you, and it snaps your arms so you gotta wrestle it down. Ten hours of continually doing that. My son cried when he saw the bruises.

He was like: “Mom, you tell us that we need to be productive members of society, and look at you — you’re such a smart lady, and all you did today was go to work and bolt on stuff on a car. You’re better than that. And there’s more out there than that.” It broke my heart.

I’m trying to get through to my kids: Don’t end up like this. Some days —

actually like two or three times a day — I feel like taking that wrench and just throwing it and leaving. But it's attached to the ceiling. What am I going to do, swing it around?

*Erin, tool-and-die maker. She is in her early 40s, wearing a tank top in a bicycle store.*

**Erin:** I've got 35 people in my family that worked for G.M. My great-grandfather sold the family farm in Pontiac to G.M. — there's a parking lot there now. I quit General Motors. It was kinda scary, because we were putting all our eggs in one basket, but I did that all along with G.M. anyway. My husband had been building bikes for our kids for years. Then when they announced the close, I looked at my husband and said, "Do we try to ride out another transfer?" — see, I started in Kalamazoo, which closed — "If G.M. even survives?"

Life is 10 percent what comes at you and 90 percent how you react. So I said to my husband: "Let's do this. Let's find a storefront." Two years later, we're in the black. In the words of Helen Keller, "Life is an adventure or nothing at all."

### RATIONALIZATION

*McCurran, stage left, is a G.M. executive, comptroller of Grand Rapids Metal Center; drinks a Scotch and smokes a cigarette. Gena, a G.M. executive, is stage right, wearing a blazer and skirt. Lighting alternates between the two as they speak.*

**McCurran:** That was my job, closing plants. I drove the final nail. I was at G.M. headquarters, otherwise known as my time in hell.

**Gena:** I started at Grand Rapids, then I went on to headquarters and on to Germany, where I was in charge of 10 plants. I have fired more people in my career than ever worked at the Wyoming plant in its heyday.

**McCurran:** Closing a plant starts with a white paper for the executives. You'd ask: Are there other G.M. facilities in the same town? You did the basic public research: What businesses were hiring? Could G.M. people be absorbed without being displaced? I'd call a plant and ask some loaded questions. You never wanted to tip your hand, especially to the work force.

At the end, you'd have all of the plants lined up: keep, close it, mothball it. We called it a "rationalization."

**Gena:** When you fire someone, they give you a script, and they make you go to class, but you can't write that many scripts. The first time, it was an opportunity to cut the deadwood, and I took it. But then the next year, I was told to cut another 20 percent, and this time, it wasn't the deadwood. Now it's "I've known you and your kids, and I know your hopes and dreams."

**McCurnan:** I became comptroller at the Grand Rapids plant, C.F.O. basically. I wanted to run my own ship. When we started to hear grumblings about closures, I called my buddies at headquarters, but they wouldn't talk about it.

**Gena:** At G.M., there were Levels 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 of upper management, then unclassified m-band, then n-band . . . then officers, then V.P.'s, then the chairman. The company was just too big. I never knew where the percentages came from. They pulled them out of their rear.

**McCurnan:** I never thought a close would happen to me.

**Gena:** I'm embarrassed now. I don't like to talk about it. I had this ivory-tower idea about General Motors. Something to be proud of, and you could make a job for your kids and your kids' kids. But business . . . is business, right? (*choking up*) Excuse me. (*exits*)

**McCurnan:** On my last day, I just snuck away. After 40 years, I didn't want a party. My wife had out a Scotch and a bowl of popcorn for me when I got home. But then Thanksgiving came. All the kids and the grandkids were there, and I brought out this box. Plaques of recognition, an award from the Chamber of Commerce, certificates from the city for the work I'd done. The kids had never seen any of it. I said: "This is my retirement party. You guys are the ones I worked for. You are the ones who got me through."

### **WRONG CAR**

*Jack, tool-and-die maker. A slim, weathered man in his 50s wearing a cumbersome back brace. He sits in a lawn chair on the deck of his trailer, far out in the woods.*

**Jack:** I love it out here. I've been sick, so it's a nice place to recuperate.

I've got prostate cancer, been battling it for a couple of years. It's moved up into my spine. I just had an operation, that's why I'm in the brace. But I go back to work on Monday. I want to work. I love my job.

Can I ask you a question? I see your Honda parked out on my lawn. What's an individual driving a foreign car for? I think we're both trying to understand each other.

**Austin:** I bought it when I was in graduate school, in Iowa. I always understood that American cars were unreliable.

**Jack:** Who'd you hear that from?

**Austin:** I heard it growing up.

**Jack:** Where?

**Austin:** New Jersey.

**Jack:** The coasts give us our biggest negativity.

**Austin:** Why would that be?

**Jack:** Who knows? Heard people bragging about what they made, how little they did. . . . See someone like Wagoner running G.M. Making, what, \$17 million?

**Austin:** That must bother you.

**Jack:** Wagoner worked hard. I worked hard. We're a capitalist country. I don't get mad at G.M. I don't file worker's comp; lots of people get sick working there, stuff you deal with, but you know that going in.

**Austin:** Do you ever think that the cancer may have been a result of working in the plant?

**Jack:** Without a doubt. They've tied prostate cancer to metalworking fluids. And there's no prostate cancer in my family.

**Austin:** And you're not bitter?

**Jack:** I had a great career there. G.M. gave me the opportunity and a couple of risks. Losing a job is a risk. Getting sick is a risk.

**Austin:** A big risk.

**Jack:** From where you sit. In your reliable car. Don't bring that car back on my property.

Austin Bunn, a playwright, author and journalist, is an assistant professor of

writing at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Mich.

**Editor: Wm. Ferguson**

A version of this article appeared in print on January 8, 2012, on page MM32 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: End of the Line.

---

© 2015 The New York Times Company