

Willow Run

80+ Years of Contributions

BY BARRY LEVINE

By Ypsilanti's sesquicentennial in 1973, Willow Run had made an enormous impact on local communities, Michigan, and the United States. Tens of thousands of people had worked at the many aviation and automotive enterprises that comprise Willow Run (the name comes from a small area stream).

The Origins of Willow Run

To fully understand Willow Run's post-1973 contributions, some background on its origins is needed. Beginning in 1941, Ford Motor Company built and operated "The Bomber Plant": a 3.5-million-square-foot facility that produced 8,685 Consolidated B-24 Liberator bombers. These aircraft, serving in a wide range of roles, were essential to the Allied war effort against the Axis in World War II.

After hostilities concluded, the plant was taken over by Kaiser-Frazer Automotive, a consolidation of companies operated by auto manufacturer Joseph Frazer and ship builder Henry Kaiser. Kaiser-Frazer produced over 700,000 automobiles as well as 71 Fairchild C-119 "Flying Boxcar" aircraft (some of which saw service in Vietnam) before running into financial difficulties.

General Motors (GM) leased and then purchased the plant from Kaiser-Frazer after its Livonia transmission plant was destroyed in an August 1953 fire. GM completed an industrial miracle by converting the plant from automobile to transmission production in twelve weeks. GM's facility became known by names such as "Hydra-matic" (the transmission's marketing name) and was running full tilt in 1973. Over the years, it expanded to about five million square feet.

GM had another manufacturing plant on site: Willow Run Assembly (WRA). Initially a Ford storage facility, GM used the space to produce 1.4 million Chevrolet Corvairs. When the Corvair was discontinued in 1969, GM turned to producing other



Willow Run Assembly produced seven million cars, including the Chevrolet Corvair.

[Photo courtesy of the author]

vehicles at WRA.

For the first thirty years, Willow Run had a tremendous history. Over the next fifty years, many changes were to come.

Auto Manufacturing

At WRA, car production continued after the Corvair era. Vehicles produced included the Chevrolet Nova, Buick Skylark, and Pontiac GTO.

Working conditions on the line in both plants were challenging: neither was air conditioned. The production line was unrelenting, with 6,000 WRA workers producing 1,000 cars a day in 1973. There was a long list of hazards for the men and women on the line such as working with power equipment, deafening noise, and exposure to toxic fumes from paints and solvents.

Labor relations could be challenging. In September 1970, a sixty-seven-day national GM strike began that halted production at both of GM's Willow Run facilities. At one point, salaried workers and supervisors were barricaded in their offices by strikers. Issues involved included pensions, health care costs for retirees, and wages. Strike pay was modest at about \$30-\$40 per week.

The 1973 United Auto Workers (UAW) contract was the first such contract designed to protect the health and safety of UAW members. For the first time, professional staff members were designated to sit on the union-company national health

and safety committees.

WRA closed in 1993, with production shifting to Arlington, Texas. The last model produced was Chevrolet's Caprice with total production from the early truck days going forward to 1993 of about seven million vehicles.

Both plants made enormous contributions to the local economy in terms of jobs, property taxes, and charitable work by employees. Recriminations and litigation followed between GM and Ypsilanti officials once the closure was announced as Ypsilanti provided significant tax benefits to GM for jobs that no longer existed. The courts ultimately ruled in favor of GM and the plant was closed.

At all automotive manufacturing plants, a combination of factors such as overseas competition and the mechanization of manual processes led to shrinking employment. Although GM continued making sizeable investment in the transmission plant (which operated under names such as GM Powertrain and Ypsilanti Transmission Operations), the recession and then GM's 2009 bankruptcy led to the plant's closure in 2010, ending some 1,400 jobs.

Altogether, GM's Willow produced over 82 million transmissions. The last one off the line was signed by employees on hand that day.

Willow Run Airport

Aviation continued to loom large at Willow Run after B-24 manufacturing stopped in 1945. In the late 1950s, Willow Run became the Detroit area's primary commercial airport, succeeding City Airport. However, the airlines began moving passenger service to Metropolitan Airport, and June 1966 saw the last Willow Run commercial flight, a United Airlines departure for Chicago.

Aviation education was part of the landscape at Willow Run. The Detroit Institute of Aeronautics (DIA) was founded at Willow Run by Lee Koepke and Norm Ellickson in 1968. The school was designed to teach students various aspects of aviation maintenance, leading to qualifying for an Airframe & Powerplant license. DIA was bought by MIAT College in 1990 and is now headquartered in nearby Canton.

Aviation always poses risks. While there have been several fatal airplane crashes at Willow Run, a tragedy was avoided when a charter flight with 110 passengers (including the University of Michigan basketball team) and six crew aboard crashed on takeoff at Willow Run in March 2017. The plane experienced mechanical issues while taking off in high winds; no one was seriously injured; the crew (who were commended for their actions) aborted the takeoff and skidded across a local road.

Willow Run has had a long line of distinguished visitors. President Franklin Roosevelt visited Willow Run in 1942 to inspect the Bomber Plant. Many more have since followed. Then-Senator John Kennedy in October 1960 arrived at Willow Run on his way to the University of Michigan, where the remarks he made in front of the Michi-

gan Union set the stage for creating the Peace Corps. More recently, Presidents Barack Obama (in 2014) and Donald Trump (in 2017) landed at Willow Run on their way to events here in Michigan.

Air Freight

After passenger flights ended, Willow Run continued to be used by many air freight operators. Brothers Lloyd, Duane, Howard, and Elroy Zantop from Jackson formed Zantop Flying Service and began to haul freight for GM, and then Ford and Chrysler. Remade into Zantop International

Airlines (ZIA) in 1972, the company used Willow Run as the hub in a “hub-and-spoke” system for routing cargo.

ZIA was once one of the world’s largest cargo airlines, carrying at times a million pounds of freight a night. A company tag line was “Zantop: The Name That Carries a Lot of Weight.” ZIA, however, found the competitive environment increasingly difficult to navigate and ceased operations in 2005.

Numerous other freight haulers at Willow Run, such as Rosenbalm Aviation, Transcontinental Airlines, and Karon Gillespie, no longer exist. The primary freight haulers now operating at Willow Run are USA Jet (part of the Active Aero Group) and Kalitta Air.

USA Jet’s founding goes back to Robert Phelps, who was a Metro Airport mechanic early in his career, earning \$2 per hour. Phelps opened Active Aero in 1979 at Willow

Run, and he operated USA Jet until the 1990s when he sold his holdings.



Zantop International would often fly a million pounds of freight a night. [Torsten Maiwald, Wikimedia Commons]

at twenty-five minutes of notice. Some pilots slept at Willow Run and used shower facilities at the fire house.

Kalitta Air was founded by Conrad Kalitta who grew up in Mt. Clemens and began his air freight career flying parts for Ford in a twin-engine Cessna. From this modest

Employees from the 1980s recall that USA Jet personnel did just about everything on a typical night: taking customer calls, fueling planes, pulling flight manifests and weather reports for pilots, and loading cargo. Hours were irregular; night and weekend work were routine. Flights might be scheduled with little notice, and pilots were expected to be ready to fly

beginning, Kalitta grew into American International Airways (AIA), and was once one of the world's twenty-five largest airlines. After a merger with another freight operator, Kalitta resigned from AIA to run an airline leasing business. AIA went out of business with operations resuming as Kalitta Air in 2000.

In 2003, Kalitta Air was awarded a Certificate of Appreciation for supporting U.S. military efforts in Iraq. In 2020, Kalitta Air flew evacuating US citizens home from Wuhan, China, in a specially converted aircraft designed to limit further spread of the coronavirus.

While the number of air freight companies has decreased, Willow Run remains a major air freight airport and an integral part of the international supply chain. About 200 million pounds of freight pass through it annually. Over the last few years, numerous infrastructure improvements have been and will continue to be made at the complex.

Maintaining the Heritage

Also on the complex is the Yankee Air Museum, which was founded in 1981. The original museum, housed in a WWII hangar, was destroyed in a 2004 fire. The museum now has a fleet of five flyable aircraft, numerous displays of static aircraft, and has completed or is working on numerous aircraft restoration and preservation projects.

The Yankee Air Museum purchased 144,000 square feet of the Bomber Plant/Hydra-Matic in 2014 and envisioned that structure as the museum's future home (the remainder of the plant was razed). Fundraising proved to be extraordinarily challenging; the facility is now used for aircraft preservation and storage.

The museum has built a new hangar (opened in 2022), known as the Roush Aeronautics Center which houses its flyable aircraft. The Roush Center has a nearby display of a Boeing B-52D Stratofortress, one of the museum's aircraft preservation projects. Two members of the preservation team serviced this aircraft 50+ years ago when they were stationed at U-Tapao Royal Thai Navy Airfield during the Vietnam war. This aircraft is estimated to have flown 600 missions during the Vietnam war.

The museum has completed several aircraft restoration projects, including a nine-year effort on a Boeing B-17G Flying Fortress nicknamed *Yankee Lady*. The late Norm Ellickson led this effort; Ellickson had been one of the leading B-17 experts anywhere with a storehouse of knowledge and expertise.

Also, the Yankee Air Museum, along with the support of the Wayne County Airport Authority, produces an annual air show, *Thunder Over Michigan*, a summertime staple in Michigan, at Willow Run. Museum staff manages the event and supplies about 500 volunteers annually to support *Thunder*.

American Center for Mobility

The American Center for Mobility (ACM) is a collaboration of government, academic, and industry partners that was founded in 2017 to support research and development



Blue Angels at Thunder Over Michigan, July 2022. [Courtesy of Lance Kuhn]

work on new automotive technologies such as self-driving and self-parking vehicles. Specially designed roads and tunnels were built for vehicle testing. Much of ACM's grounds is on the site of what had been the Ford Bomber Plant. In this way, the spirit of innovation continues with ACM.

Conclusion

Willow Run has been a center of Michigan's aviation and automotive history and innovation from the early days of World War II, through to the present, and will be into the future. The hard work and dedication of the men and women who have come to work here is without question. While individual organizations come and go, Willow Run continues to reflect larger societal issues, incorporate new technologies, and will remain an integral part of the Ypsilanti community for years to come.

A Note on Sources

Information for this article comes from the archives of Yankee Air Museum, the Ypsilanti Historical Society, the Benson Ford Research Center, and the University of Michigan's Bentley Library. Interviews were also conducted with Jim Redick Jr, Duane Zantop, Eva McGuire, Carol Anderson, Randy Hotton, and Kevin Walsh. Other sources include the obituaries of Lee Koepke and Norm Ellickson, UAW safety reports (held at Wayne

State University), and Wayne County Airport Authority Master Plan. Published sources include *Arsenal of Democracy: FDR, Detroit, and an Epic Quest to Arm an America at War* by A. J. Baime (Houghton Mifflin, 2014), *Framed!: Labor and the Corporate Media* by Christopher R. Martin (Cornell UP, 2003), *The Reckoning* by David Halberstam (Morrow, 1986), and *Zantop: The Name That Carries a Lot of Weight* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHKgEaz9_sg&t=6s). Various newspapers were consulted including *Hillsdale Daily News* and *The New York Times*.

About the Author

Barry Levine volunteers at the Yankee Air Museum, has published two aviation-themed books, and has written for Michigan History, Aviation History, and other publications.