

70 Years Ago, FDR Visited Chrysler Tank Plant

by Gerald Scott

One of the Detroit auto industry's proudest moments from World War II gets to be replayed, so to speak, across the Motor City this month.

That's because Sept. 18 marks 70 years to the day that then-President Franklin Delano Roosevelt visited the Chrysler tank plant in Warren, among other defense plants in the region.

That's right, 70 years ago this month, FDR and his wife Eleanor took a whirlwind tour of defense plants that included both the Chrysler tank plant and Ford Willow Run bomber plant.

TACOM/Detroit Arsenal base historian Randy Talbot observed that Roosevelt's visit to Warren and Ypsilanti was as much to advance the morale of defense workers as it was for FDR to kick the tires, figuratively speaking, on tanks and bombers.

After all, on Sept. 18, 1942, the war was going poorly for the Allies and it was less than one year following Pearl Harbor. Most historians credit Detroit and the Arsenal of Democracy, a phrase coined and solidified by FDR, for helping to turn the tide.

Writing in his new book, "Freedom's Forge," a history of the Arsenal of Democracy, Dr. Arthur Herman wrote, "Before 1942 was out, the United States was producing more war materiel than all three Axis powers - Germany, Italy and Japan - combined.

"His first stop was on Sept. 18, at the Chrysler Tank Arsenal - K.T. Keller's and Eddie Hunt's experiment in making tanks the Detroit way (assembly line) had grown into a full-blown operation.

"It was already producing more than 3,000 of the M-3 Grants, when in March, 1942, Chrysler got the go-ahead to make 1,000 new M-4 tanks, dubbed Shermans, per month," he wrote.

"(Chrysler president) Keller also took Roosevelt to watch the graveyard shift engaged in gear cutting, and to watch an engine and transmission being installed in a Sherman.

"He also saw 50 of Chrysler's tanks running the test-track course - all business as usual at 11 o'clock at night."

Author Herman added that from Michigan, FDR also went on to visit war plants in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Texas, California and Washington, primarily visiting shipyards and aircraft factories in the process.

Said TACOM historian Talbot, "There's film of a tank screeching right up to FDR's car and stopping abruptly, which caused the Secret Service to panic a little and interview the tank driver."

That, of course, was in Warren, where his wife, the First Lady, Eleanor, accompanied him on a rare public trip.

Because FDR's battle with polio was something of a state secret in the pre-CNN days of the 1940s, Talbot said that Chrysler built a series of overhead walk-



FDR toured the Chrysler tank plant in a 1939 Imperial.

ways just for FDR to traverse the plant in his wheelchair, but in the end FDR and Eleanor simply drove into the plant in a touring car after arriving by train. The Roosevelts arrived at the plant on the same railroad line that is now run by Conrail.

Meanwhile, Eleanor Roosevelt is considered the first of the modern, well-traveled and well-spoken First Ladies such that she traveled across the country much more than the less-mobile FDR ever did, so having both visit the Chrysler tank plant together was something of a triumph for the Detroit auto industry, historians say.

Further, Detroit historian Michael W. R. Davis observes, "The Chrysler convertible sedan in which the Roosevelts are pictured riding in is a 1939 Imperial, and only three were made, according to the 'Standard Catalogue of Cars,' my bible.

"All three were custom-built by Derham, a coachmaker in suburban Philadelphia. One, probably

this one, was said to have been donated to a 'Detroit American Legion Post.'

"If it still exists, it would be extremely rare and valuable." No word on whatever happened to that car.

But there is a final word on the phrase, "Arsenal of Democracy," which seems to have been solidified by FDR's 1942 visit to the Motor City after all.

Note that TARDEC Army lab spokesman John Wray said his research shows that the phrase, "Arsenal of Democracy," originally came from a French poet and was later co-opted by Roosevelt in a 1940 "fireside chat" radio broadcast to the nation.

Speaking on Dec. 29, 1940, FDR observed, "As planes and ships and guns and shells are produced, your government, with its defense experts, can then determine how best to use them to defend this hemisphere.

"The decision as to how much shall be sent abroad and how



FDR, seated left, and Eleanor, brim hat, next to him, in Warren.

much shall remain at home must be made on the basis of our overall military necessities.

"We must be the great Arsenal of Democracy.

"For us, this is an emergency as serious as war itself. We must apply ourselves to our task with the same resolution, the same sense of urgency, the same spirit of patriotism and sacrifice as we would show were we at war.

"We have furnished the British great material support and we will

furnish far more in the future."

FDR's visit to the Motor City about two years later forever solidified Detroit's and Warren's titles as the proverbial Arsenal of Democracy.

And so, FDR's only other visits to Detroit were a campaign stop at the Brodhead Armory on Jefferson Avenue in 1932 as well as a visit to Hamtramck's new football stadium in 1936, due in part because the stadium was a WPA-built athletic facility for kids.

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