

DISASSEMBLED

A Native Son on Janesville and General Motors—
a Story of Grit, Race, Gender, and Wishful Thinking
and What it Means for America

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On the cover: A picture of the end. The one-hundred-year-old smokestack from the
GM plant comes down in 2019 to join the rest of the rubble that was the plant.

Photo credit Andrew Sigwell.



All the profits from this book will go to a scholarship foundation started by the author, Tim Cullen. The Janesville Multicultural Teacher Scholarship Foundation provides scholarships of \$5,000 per year for Janesville students of color who want to be teachers and agree to teach in Janesville.

Our community is like so many others that were formerly almost all white but are now much more racially diverse. Our teachers are almost all white. The goal of this scholarship is to have more diverse teachers—like the students they teach. Janesville teachers are among the strongest supporters of this foundation.

MORE PRAISE FOR DISASSEMBLED...

“A good, comprehensive read of Janesville and the General Motors years.”

—John Scott III, son of John Scott and retired Rock County Deputy Sheriff

“I think you will find Tim’s insight on the UAW’s progressive platform to not create a bigger piece of the pie for its blue collar workers, but rather create a bigger pie for all American families was the key to success for our small town for many years... and how it can all suddenly change.”

—Bruce Penny, past UAW Local 95 President and retired UAW International Representative

“Through recounting the history of the Janesville General Motors plant, Tim Cullen also shares unique stories of individuals whose vision, leadership, and persistence left indelible legacies in our community and beyond. The Rock County community did not allow the closing of the GM plant define the future; indeed, it became a catalyst for new growth and hope.”

—Sue Conley, Janesville City Councilwoman

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Cullen was born and raised in Janesville, Wisconsin. Cullen graduated from UW-Whitewater with a Major in



Political Science with a minor in History. He is the third generation of his family to work at General Motors. He worked there for four summers in the 1960s to pay his way through college. He also was involved in helping GM and the UAW as a state senator representing Janesville. Governor Jim Doyle appointed him to

co-chair a task force in 2008 to try to save the plant. He has had a lifetime of connections with the “plant.” The first election he won was to the Janesville City Council in 1970. Four years later Cullen was elected to the State Senate at the age of 30. He went on to become Senate Majority Leader and in 1987 he became Secretary of the Department of Health and Social Services under Governor Tommy Thompson. In 1988 Cullen took a job with Blue Cross and worked with them for the next 20 years. In 2010 he decided to run for his old Senate seat. He was elected and served until 2015. Today Cullen still lives in Janesville and spends his time working with the three foundations he started. He is also the chair of the board of Common Cause-Wisconsin.

Cullen will donate all profits from this book to the Janesville Multicultural Teachers Opportunity Fund he started in 2008. The sole purpose of the Fund is to raise money for college scholarships for Janesville students of color. The goal is to support those students who wish to become teachers and are willing to return to Janesville to teach for at least three years. ■■

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Writing a book is an adventure. To begin with it is a toy and an amusement. Then it becomes a mistress, then it becomes a master, then it becomes a tyrant. The last phase is that just as you are about to be reconciled to your servitude, you kill the monster and fling him out to the public. —Winston Churchill

Like so many of Churchill's quotes, I love this one. I agree that writing a book is an adventure, especially in the sense that research and conversation along with people knowledgeable about the topic can inform and change the views you started with, even regarding a subject you believed you knew well.

I don't use terms like *mistress*, *master*, or *tyrant*, but the act of researching this book did instill in me a respect for facts and accuracy as opposed to theories and assumptions, no matter how widely held.

I promise the reader one thing. This is my best effort to write the most truthful, accurate book that I could write within a reasonable time frame. Given five or ten additional years to research, I might have unearthed more, and some of my conclusions may have been different. I hope that 10 or 20 years from now, someone might take up that challenge. Certainly more will be known about post-GM Janesville. Some of the players—politicians, union leaders, management—may be more forthcoming than they were willing to be in 2019. There is no shelf life on the truth and what it means.

Toward that end, I hope readers will take some time with the bibliography and appendix at the back of this book. The thoughts expressed and the books that helped me in my research are worth exploring in more depth.

Three times at the Janesville plant something was disassembled. The biggest was the great tragedy in the closing of the plant in 2008 and tearing it down in 2019. With the closing came the loss of 4,500 jobs, which therefore affected 4,500 families and the whole economy of Rock County.

There were two other disassemblings at the plant that were good things. One was the racism-inspired refusal to hire African-Americans from the plant's opening in 1923 until the late 1960's. The other was when in the 1960's the women working in the plant were finally paid the same as men and could work on the main assembly line.

Finally, let me acknowledge that if you are reading this book and worked at GM, I am certain you have stories about your time as an employee that are not included here. At some point I needed to end my research and start writing. I'm sure those missing stories could make another entire book. ■■

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The Reckoning

On a day in or around 2005, I walked into the General Motors Janesville Assembly Plant with some high school students from an internship program I'd started to help them get real-world experience. The core of the program had them working as interns in offices in the Wisconsin State Legislature in Madison, where I served for many years, but I also set up private sector meetings for them in Janesville.

That day, at the sprawling, nearly five million-square-foot GM facility, we were scheduled to see the plant manager, as well as the president of the United Auto Workers Local Union. What we really saw that day was the future.

I suspect it had such a big impact on me because it had been 40 years since I last set foot inside the plant. I was born and raised in Janesville and attended Whitewater State University (now UW-Whitewater), the first in my family to go to college. I came home to Janesville and worked in the GM plant during the summers.

It was the best-paying summer job in southern Wisconsin, and why not? When I worked there, from 1962 to 1965, the Janesville GM plant was booming. By the early 1970s, employment at the plant would swell to over 7,000. My summer job was part of a GM program for college-enrolled sons of employees—sons, it should be noted, not daughters.

The men in the Cullen family had a long history with GM, and this did not make us unique in Janesville. It was just the opposite. Thousands of Janesville families have a multigenerational story to tell about working for GM.

My great-grandfather, Thomas Cullen, worked at the Janesville Machine Company during the last half of the 1800s. Janesville Machine made farm implements. GM purchased it, along with the Samson Tractor Company, and in 1919 began making tractors under the Samson name at a new Janesville plant.

My grandfather—also Thomas Cullen—worked for Samson Tractor. In 1923, GM got out of the tractor business, which had not been a success, and began making cars in Janesville. That same year my grandfather quit the company and took a job as a janitor with the Janesville School District. Maybe he saw more job security with the school district than with a new company in town that had struggled to sell tractors. My grandfather was still the custodian at Roosevelt Elementary School when I attended kindergarten in 1949. I got a kick out of seeing him at school. He retired in 1951 at age 76.

My father, William Cullen, continued our family's relationship with GM. He was 40 when GM hired him in 1948, having earlier worked for Parker Pen, another significant Janesville employer. My dad was a great believer in unions in general and the United Auto Workers (UAW) in Janesville in particular. He was a proud UAW member until his death in 1971.

If by 2005 it had been 40 years since I'd physically been in the Janesville GM plant, it hadn't been out of mind. During my years in the state Senate, and later when I worked for Blue Cross Blue Shield, I kept attuned to the GM-Janesville relationship. The 1980s was a turbulent decade. We worked hard in the Legislature to accommodate GM and continue the viability of the Janesville plant, though by the turn of the new century it was clear the glory days of the 1950s–1970s were gone. Still, GM was producing sport utility vehicles (SUVs) at the Janesville plant into the 2000s, and the city remained cautiously optimistic.

Yet when I walked into the plant with the high school interns that day in 2005, I was shocked. It was the sheer reduction in the number of human beings. I recognized the difference in seconds. Where I once saw people, I now saw robots and somebody at a computer overseeing them. The automated assembly line was making people obsolete. Surely it happened gradually, over time, and if one had observed it that way it might not have been so shocking. I dropped in after 40 years, and let me tell you, my eyes were opened. The world had changed. The plant's total number of employees had dropped from around 7,100 in the 1970s to under 4,000 by 2005.

I did not feel unduly worried for Janesville, for I knew technology was causing upheaval at manufacturing plants across the country. And in 2005 I may have still overestimated both GM's financial vigor and its commitment to the longstanding Janesville plant. I was not alone.

When the reckoning came, it happened quickly, though on my next visit to the plant, hope was still in the air. That was February 13, 2008, less than one week before the Democratic presidential primary election in Wisconsin. Candidate Barack Obama spoke at the Janesville plant. I supported Obama, and some of my UAW friends invited me to the plant to hear the

speech. Governor Jim Doyle was there and introduced me to Obama, who exhibited the kind of effortless charisma for which he's now famous.

Obama spoke from the plant's second floor, which may have been symbolic of something. The more modern GM plants have only one level for ease of logistics. And while the speech was inspiring—he said he could see a 100-year future for the plant—Obama stopped short of promising the Janesville plant would remain open.

On June 2, 2008, less than three months after Obama visited Janesville, GM announced it would close the plant by 2010. The timeline tempered that unwelcome news. We had 18 months to change their minds.

We tried. Governor Doyle appointed me co-chair of a task force charged with retaining General Motors in Janesville. My co-chair was Brad Dutcher, who that year had been elected Local 95 Union president. I thought the task force worked hard and presented GM a genuinely attractive retention package. Governor Doyle and I met with GM executives in Detroit—U.S. Representative Paul Ryan also attended—and we felt the meeting went well. We got them to say that a final decision had not yet been made.

In October 2008, four months after the first announcement, GM declared that the end was near. The last day of producing SUVs at the Janesville plant was just weeks away. The final day would be December 23.

I made a point of being there that morning. My family and I had a great deal invested in that plant, as did so many others in Janesville. It was a terribly sad day, with profound economic consequences for the city and the region, but as I stood and watched the last vehicle—a black Tahoe LTZ—being assembled,

I saw pride on the faces of the past and present GM employees who had gathered. It had been quite an 85-year ride.

Not everyone believed it was truly over. In spring 2009, Janesville received word that GM was putting the plant on standby status, a lifeline that my research revealed was never anchored in reality. In May 2018, while I was writing, demolition of the plant began.

In Amy Goldstein's excellent 2017 book, *Janesville: An American Story*, she traces what happened after the devastating plant closing, focusing on the displaced GM workers and their families.

This book, instead, seeks to take the economic and social measure of Janesville as a whole, a decade removed from the huge body blow of GM leaving. What does the future hold? What does the Janesville plant closure potentially mean for cities across the United States?

But even more than that, this book came out of my desire to better understand the how and why of what happened with the GM plant in Janesville. With the plant now being demolished, it's time to tell that story, how the city and state tried to keep the plant, who helped, who didn't, and what was really happening with GM as opposed to what people thought was happening.

That was my goal, and I hope I've done that story justice. But as sometimes happens when you're researching and writing, I also began looking at issues like race and gender equity, and found myself drawn to the stories of some individuals who didn't play a direct role in the plant closing and the 1984–2008 time period that's central to the book, but were important to GM and Janesville, nonetheless. In short, I found some heroes. So along with a nod to my family in the early pages, you'll find accounts of Doris Thom, who in 1965 became the first woman

to work on the GM assembly line in Janesville; John Scott, Jr., the third black person hired at Janesville GM in 1961 after many years of unsuccessfully applying; and, finally, Walter Reuther, UAW International president from 1946 until his death in a plane crash in 1970, and to my mind the greatest American labor leader of the 20th century. The UAW Local 95 hall is named for Reuther, and the road that connected the Janesville GM plant to the interstate highway was named Reuther Way. The light from these three individuals still shines. ■■