

# The Liberator



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**PART 3**

## History of the Willow Run Plant

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The Willow Run Bomber Plant had been built for the war effort. Like all new endeavors, the plant went through growing pains in the beginning. At war's end, it had produced 8,685 of the 18,482 B-24 heavy bombers manufactured. The war created the greatest technological leap man had ever seen in science, engineering and medicine. The introduction of the jet engine would make propeller-driven warplanes obsolete.

From its peak production in 1944, when Willow Run employed over 42,000 workers and was producing 18 bombers a day, things went downhill quickly and on June 28, 1945, the last Liberator rolled off the assembly line.

In September of 1945, the plant was sold to the Kaiser-Frazer Corporation, a budding car manufacturer who had aspirations of taking a slice of the Detroit 3's car-producing pie. Most of the car plants were still producing weapons and vehicles for the war effort and Kaiser-Frazer saw this as an opportunity to get its foot in the door of the car manufacturing sector. Pent up consumer demand for new goods and products was incredible, as men and women who served as soldiers, sailors and airmen returned to their civilian lives from the military.

Shipping magnate and industrialist Henry J. Kaiser had met Joseph W.



Workers sign the last B-24 Liberator to roll off the line at Willow Run.

Frazer, who had worked for the Packard Company in 1942. In 1945, they teamed up when they saw the opportunity to buy a plant that was no longer crucial to the war effort to get a jump on post-war automobile production.

In 1946, the Kaiser-Frazer Corporation sold about 11,000 cars. The gamble to start a new car company was expensive and the company lost \$19 million the first year, much more than the ambitious partners had anticipated. Investors were very leery of continued support for the fledgling company, but

Kaiser and Frazer worked tirelessly toward the company's success.

Miraculously, Kaiser-Frazer not only survived, but produced and sold 100,000 vehicles and showed a \$19 million profit in 1947.

1948 showed a profit of \$10 million, but the reduced profit spooked investors and the company stock fell. Without money flowing into the company to invest in new products, buyers went elsewhere and in 1949 Kaiser-Frazer lost a then-staggering \$30 million.

The bad times and volatile nature of

the business caused differences between the partnership and ultimately Joseph Frazer left the company in 1949. Henry Kaiser continued on his own at Willow Run until 1953, when financial hardships spawned the merger between Kaiser Corporation and Willys-Overland to form the Willys Motor Corp. that eventually produced the Jeep brand that today is a part of Chrysler LLC. Plans were in the works for the new company to transfer operations to Toledo and also to Argentina.

On August 12, 1953, the newly built, state-of-the-art GM transmission plant in Livonia, Michigan caught fire. A welder's torch ignited a conveyor drip pan and within minutes the fire spread out of control. By the time the fire was extinguished, the plant had burned to the ground. GM desperately needed a transmission plant. GM made Kaiser

an offer to lease the Willow Run plant for \$26 million and the deal was made. The Willow Run Plant conversion to a transmission plant would become a legendary story of American manufacturing ability.

At Willow Run, Hydramatic was born from the ashes of Livonia. The time between the Livonia plant's destruction, the purchase of the Willow Run facility by GM and the first transmission produced there was approximately 9 weeks, an astounding feat.

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