

St. Paul Ford Plant Sees Final Truck Off The Line

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — The last Ranger small pickup truck rolled off the line Friday morning, closing out an 86-year history of turning out Fords at the assembly plant along the Mississippi River and putting about 800 people out of work.

A crowd of employees took photos and applauded as the last Ranger, a white sport model bound for the Orkin Pest Control fleet, was driven off the production line.

"I could not understand why they were cheering for the last vehicle," said Mike Montie, 58, who worked at the plant for 28 years. "You cheer for the first one, not the last one. I was like, what the hell? I didn't want it to end, you know?"

Darlene Aspley, 62, who said she did the final quality-control test on the engine and transmission of the last Ranger, recently started looking for a new job. "I'm kind of scared," she said.

Dallas Theis, who worked at the plant for 53 years, drove the last Ranger off the line. Afterward, he was in the plant's lobby posing for photos with other employees while wearing a T-shirt that said, "I built the last Ford Ranger in America."

"I'm really going to miss the people," said Theis, who plans to retire. "I've learned to get along with young guys, old guys, radicals. There were people I didn't like, but I'm going to miss them too."

Sales of the Ranger small pickup peaked in the mid-1990s and have fallen ever since, hurt by neglect as Ford Motor Co. focused its attention on its line of more profitable large pickups. The Ranger slowly lost its edge in fuel economy and price over Ford's full-sized pickups, even as the Ranger's styling grew stale.

The St. Paul plant has produced more than 6 million cars and trucks since 1925. Ford plans to sell a new version of the Ranger outside the U.S., but the trucks will be built in Thailand, South Africa and South America.

The company plans to begin decommissioning the plant soon by moving out any equipment that can be used in other Ford facilities and stepping up environmental testing on the nearly 125-acre site. Demolition is expected to start in a few months. Pollution cleanup is expected to go into 2014.

Marcey Evans, a spokeswoman for Ford, said about two-thirds of the employees will have an opportunity to transfer to another Ford location, most likely assembly plants in Chicago or Louisville, Ky., which are adding thousands of jobs.

Ford announced in 2006 that it planned to close the St. Paul plant and offered the 1,800 employees who worked there at the time several kinds of buyouts, but as the

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

company repeatedly pushed back the closure date it brought back hundreds of workers.

Many who came back returned in job classifications that don't qualify for an automatic transfer to another plant, including most who took a \$100,000 lump sum. "When an employee took a buyout it was expected they were leaving Ford Motor Co.," Evans said.

That includes workers like Greg Audette, who's now looking for work after 20 years at the Ford plant. "We've known about it for the last five years now," he said as walked out of the plant for the last time Friday. "It's just too bad it had to happen."

Employees hired since 2006 have known their jobs were temporary, but some said that didn't make it easier. Travis Smith, 25, said he was told that when he was hired his job would last five months. "Now, 4½ years later and it's my last day on the job," Smith said, showing a photo of himself standing by the last Ranger.

"It's like a second family," Smith said. "You spend more time with these people than you do at home."

Pedro Ballesteros, 42, said it took him eight months to land his job at the Ford plant. Six months later it was over. With two children in college and one in high school, he said he was worried about how long it would take to get his next job.

"The market is pretty tough right now," he said.

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