

## Feature

Archives

### Ford City Complex Has A Past Most Don't Remember

It was to be the grandest event on the newly developing southwest side of Chicago, the opening of a new industrial/retail center. On August 12, 1965 with over 200,000 people in attendance, then Mayor Richard J. Daley and a host of dignitaries cut the ribbon and marked the beginning of the largest retail mall in Chicago.



But what makes this story interesting is not only a new beginning but the colorful past of this great center.

An aerial photo of Ford City shows the plant when it was built to manufacture airplane engines in 1943. Notice how undeveloped the surrounding areas are. At the time, Ford City was located on the furthest southwest side of the city.



The year was 1942 and war seemed imminent. Knowing the key strategy to winning this war would be control of the air, the government arranged for the construction of a new defense plant, what would be the largest plant in the world. With the purchase of 432 acres of marshland bounded by Cicero Avenue on the west, Pulaski Road on the east, the Belt Railway Tracks on the north and a yet-to-be-constructed 77th Street on the south, thousands of construction workers began their race against time.

Approximately 17,000 people were employed in the construction of the complex. Working nine-hour shifts, sometimes six days a week, and with the rationing of gas, workers began to look for ways to cut down on traveling time and expense. The southwest side of Chicago began to expand as people bought homes and moved their families closer to work.

By October of that year, Building No. 1 was finished and the space had been leased to the Dodge division of the Chrysler Corporation. Production, assembly and testing of aircraft engines to be used for the B29 bomber began. Known as the Dodge Chicago Plant, the war effort was underway.

But construction didn't stop there.

Throughout the brutal Chicago winter, construction continued. By the following spring, they had finished. In total, the area consisted of 10 separate buildings, covering approximately six million square feet, and constructed of steel, concrete and wood. The largest, Building No. 4, covered 62 acres and was built entirely of reinforced concrete, with the whole project using nearly 450,000 cubic yards of concrete. The plant consisted of 7,000 miles of underground piping and 15 miles of cable distributed underground for power and water. The builder, George A. Fuller Company of New York, had delivered as promised.

December, 1945, saw the end of the war and left this once illustrious plant standing vacant and deserted. The government tried many times to sell the parcel of land to no avail. That is until February of 1947, when at least two of the buildings were brought back to life.



A pictorial reference of the "Tucker Torpedo" hangs in the management offices of Ford City.

Car dealers from the world over gathered at the plant to get the first glimpse of the Tucker Torpedo. Hailed as the "truly modern automobile", the Tucker Torpedo was going to revolutionize the automobile. Or so the public thought. Had they known the truth, things might have been different. Just over one short year later and with \$26 million gone, Tucker had managed to assemble 46 cars. Billed as a big financial catastrophe.



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many questions were left unanswered.

[The infamous Tucker Torpedo, billed to revolutionize the automobile world, saw only 46 cars assembled before the building stood vacant again.](#)



One thing remained clear. The plant once again stood vacant. But not for long.

War was on the horizon – this time the Korean War. And once again the government went to work producing airplane engines. In October of 1950 Ford Motor Company signed with the government to produce these engines. And what better place than the exact plant that had done almost the same work years earlier.

Ford worked incessantly modernizing the plant and getting machinery ready for the production of piston-type engines. Thousands of workers were employed until the spring of 1953 when technological advancements forced the retirement of the piston engine. Undaunted by this development, Ford continued to make the newer version of the engine, the jet engine. Production continued, employing as many as 12,000 people until 1959 when Ford Motor Company discontinued production and one more time, the plant stood vacant.

The land stood silent until October of 1961 when the government again offered it for sale. Harry F. Chaddick, along with a select group of Chicagoans, believed in the future of Chicago. They envisioned one of the greatest commerce centers in Chicago to be located here. But much work needed to be done. Buildings were torn down to make room for parking lots. Those left standing were remodeled to make them attractive to potential tenants.



[Ford City celebrates its 40th anniversary with an updated, modern courtyard and plenty of plant and floral arrangements.](#)

Chaddick's dream saw the development of an industrial park along with a shopping center. His first official declaration was to announce the name of his new venture. It would now be known as the Ford City Complex. With the industrial park the first to develop, the United States South Suburban Postal Facility became the first to move in, November, 1961. So pleased were they with their new home that they immediately expanded their space until it totaled well over a half-million square feet. Other companies followed and soon the industrial park was a living, breathing, viable part of Chicago's history.

Not to be outdone by the industrial park, Chaddick developed the retail portion of his complex not as a hodge-podge of stores tossed together, but rather the largest, fully enclosed mall in Chicago. With anchor tenants Wieboldt's (now defunct) on the west end and J.C. Penny on the east, shoppers could take a leisurely walk from one store to the other along the elegant Grand Mall connection and browse through another 80 or so lesser stores along the way. The main mall was connected to the north mall by a retail area known as Peacock Alley, located underneath the parking lot. And that brings us to date.

[Chief Engineer Frank Werner has been with Ford City for the past 33 years. Frank graciously showed us around that day and shared with us his vast knowledge on the history of the mall.](#)



The Chief Engineer Magazine received the phone call from Frank Werner, Chief Engineer, at the Ford City Complex. I jumped at the chance to write the story of the shopping center I remember from my younger years.

Ford City Complex had undergone many changes since 1942. Those changes would not stop. Expansion seemed to be the word at the forefront of Chaddick's mind. Stores came and went. Restaurants were added with a wide variety of menus; banking facilities, a bowling alley and a Holiday Inn Hotel all graced the Ford City Complex. The Industrial Park grew as well, adding the Tootsie Roll Company, Consolidated Freightways and a host of other companies

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The year 1987 saw the development change hands when Equity Properties and Development LLC became the new owners. They began renovations in 1989 to bring the mall into the future. A 12-unit food court and 14-screen AMC Cinema Complex provided food and entertainment opportunities to visitors of the mall. Interior improvements included new floors, new lights, new ceilings and skylights. Exterior changes included a newly paved parking lot, upgrades to the parking lot lighting, new entrances, new signage and a new exterior building façade. Ford City Shopping Center had entered a new age.



Ford City relies upon rooftop units for each vendor in the mall. Frank and his staff are responsible for the maintenance of each of these units.

We talked with Frank that day about his job here. We were surprised to learn that Frank has been employed with the complex for the past 33 years.

Frank was raised in Mt. Greenwood and attended Bogan High School. " I started working here part time during school. In the winter I would come over and load the hoppers with coal. What started out as a summer job, has just never ended," he told us. "It has been good to me." With that said we weren't surprised to learn that the majority of the nine engineers on staff with Frank are also long-timers. With an average employment of 22 years, Frank told us "once here, they usually retire from here."

Frank's staff is kept busy with calls of every kind. From fixing ceiling tiles to maintaining the heating and cooling equipment, each day brings a different job that needs to be accomplished.

Four Kewanee fire tube boilers were installed in 1976. They supply steam for heating and hot water to the entire mall. Until they were installed, Ford City used the original coal burning equipment installed in 1943.



Two HVAC plants supply the mall and the outparcel buildings with chilled water for cooling and hot water for heating, with the exception of one anchor tenant that runs their own chillers. Four Kewanee 500HP fire tube boilers operate during the winter months, supplying 15psi steam to heat exchangers. Frank told us that there is still original equipment from 1943 still in operation in the mall. The boilers were installed in 1976 and until that time the original power plant was in use and still burning coal.

An Andover Control System is used for control of the boilers and chillers, ensuring that each system is operating at peak efficiency. Each store has their own control system for heating and cooling and maintains their own air handlers. All the piping for these systems is run through the underground tunnels.



A 12 kV transformer, equipment installed in the original structure in 1943, works with ComEd feed lines coming into the building.

Ten electrical vaults handle feeds from ComEd. A 12,000 kV transformer, an original piece of equipment from 1943, still stands in use, a site not seen in too many buildings anymore. The North Mall and food vendors run rooftop units that are maintained and kept in top condition by Frank and his staff.

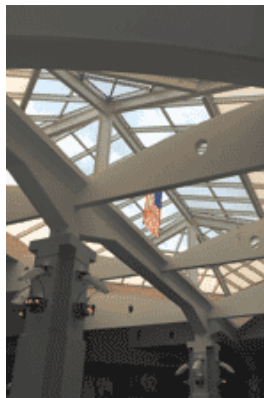
Not long ago Ford City Center made the headlines when an explosion occurred in the parking lot. While still under investigation today, we asked Frank what impact that had upon him and his staff.

"We worked almost 60 hours straight to get the mall open again. You couldn't ask for a better group of guys to have around," he said. Frank went on to tell us that the explosion caused a water main break that

went on to tell us that the explosion caused a water main break that flooded the ComEd vaults. They managed to pump approximately one million gallons of water out of 90,000 square feet of space in two days. "There was a lot of work to do," he told us, "but we managed to have the mall open and operational in four days. That was quite an accomplishment."

[Equity Properties and Development, LLC](#), owners of Ford City, has gone to extraordinary lengths to modernize every aspect of the mall. Holes were cut in the concrete ceiling to install skylights in the main court area.

Ford City Center is also very community oriented. In addition to providing a pleasant shopping experience, the mall operates many programs for the surrounding communities. One of the most popular is the Mall Walkers program. Each day of the year the mall opens at 7 a.m. for those who are interested in walking around the inside. Frank told us this provides the opportunity for many people to exercise in a controlled environment, not having to worry about fighting the outside temperatures. On any given day between 75 and 100 patrons, mostly senior citizens, can be seen walking briskly through the corridors. "You would be hard pressed to keep up with some of them," Frank said with a laugh. These past few months when the city of Chicago has issued heat advisories, the mall stayed open later in the evening and served as a cooling center for those looking to escape the heat. Ford City also offers a complete child care and family service center in conjunction with the city.



As we walked through this 1.6 million square foot mall, we asked Frank what he liked to do in his spare time. He told us he is married with four children who are very active in sports. "That's what occupies most of my time." But he added that he has not missed a Bears home football game in 15 years.

In August of this year Ford City Shopping Center celebrated their 40th anniversary. After visiting the center, it was clear they had a lot to celebrate. Not only an illustrious past but a future filled with nothing but room for growth and expansion. At the very least, Ford City Shopping Center is a place for families of the future to get to know as I had known when I was younger.