

The Battle of the Running Bulls

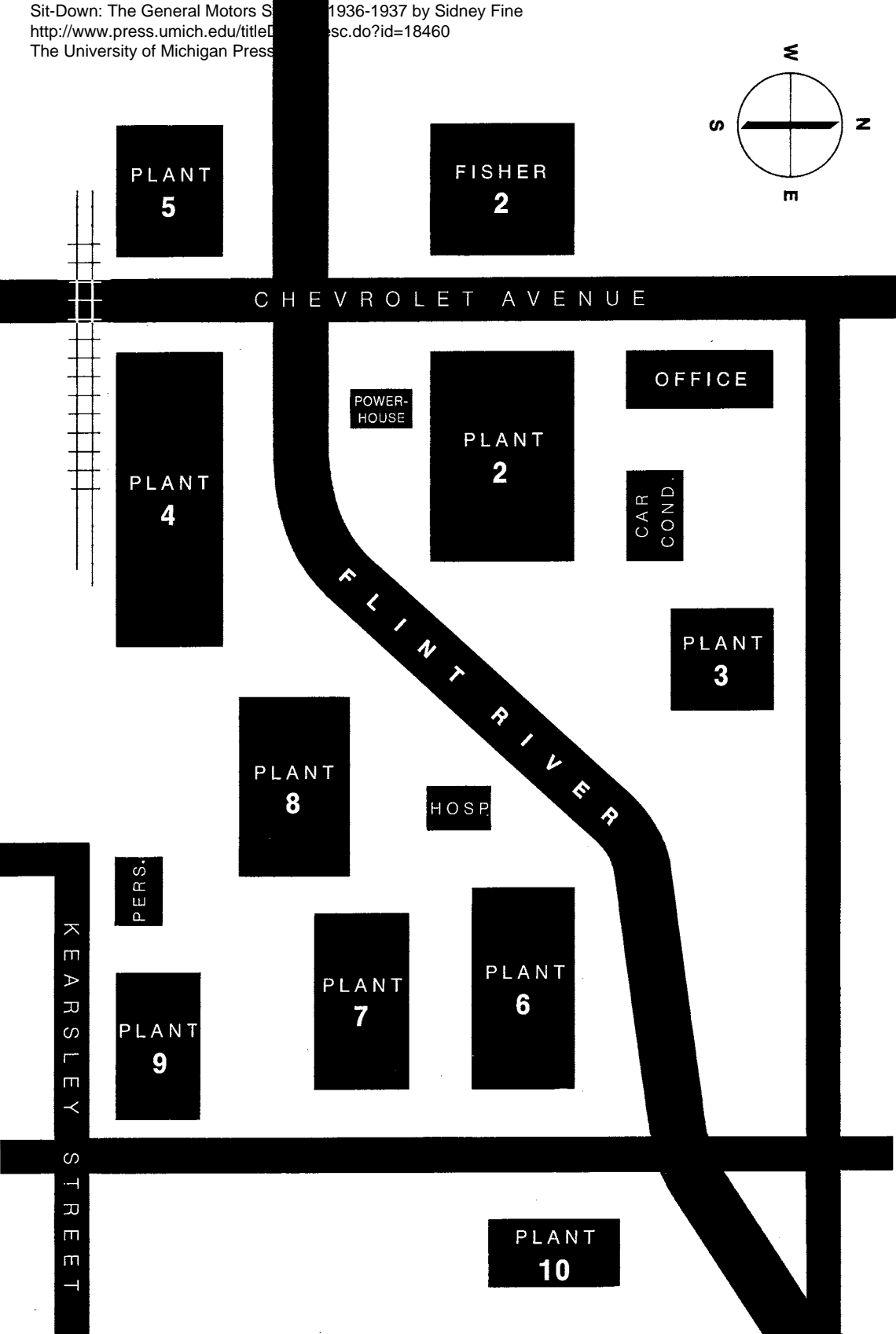
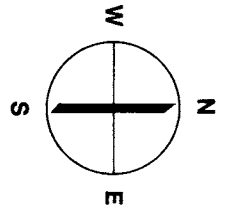
The temperature in Flint, Michigan, fell to 16 degrees above zero on January 11, 1937. Strikers had been sitting in the massive Fisher Body Plant No. 1 and the smaller Fisher Body Plant No. 2 since December 30 of the old year. No effort had been made to dislodge them by the General Motors Corporation (GM), the police of the city of Flint, the sheriff of Genesee County, or the governor of the state of Michigan.

The more weakly held of the two plants was the Fisher Body No. 2 factory. Located in a valley about fifty yards north of the Flint River, the small No. 2 plant looked across Chevrolet Avenue to the sprawling Chevrolet complex on the western side of the street.* The plant employed about one thousand workers and had a daily capacity of 450 bodies, which were delivered to the Chevrolet No. 2 plant on the other side of the street across an overpass that connected the two plants.¹

The strikers occupied only the second floor of the No. 2 factory while company police controlled the main gate. The food for the men inside the plant was prepared at a nearby restaurant and then delivered to the main gate, where it was inspected by the plant police—presumably to check against the presence of liquor—and then taken to the sit-downers.² Not more than one hundred strikers occupied the plant on January 11, and their morale was not high. Robert C. Travis, the director of organization for the United Automobile Workers of America (UAW) in Flint, wondered if the union could continue to hold the factory.³

Shortly after noon on January 11⁴ the heat in Fisher Body No. 2, which the company, at the request of state authorities, had kept on since the beginning of the strike, was turned off without warning. During the course of the afternoon twenty-two plant policemen, armed with clubs and headed by Edgar T. Adams, the chief of the Fisher Body plant police in Flint, came through the main gate of the factory and joined the force of eight company guards already in the plant. The purpose of the visit was to remove the twenty-four foot ladder outside the plant that reached to the second floor and gave the

*See the sketch of the layout of the Flint Chevrolet plants and Fisher Body No. 2 on p. 2. This is a copy of the sketch included with Louis G. Seaton to Harry W. Anderson, Feb. 2, 1937, General Motors Labor Relations Diary, Appendix Documents to Accompany Section 1, Doc. 71-A, GM Building, Detroit, Mich.



strikers access to the street. Their mission accomplished, the company police departed, leaving two or three of their number behind to supplement the regular force of company guards inside the plant.

Alarmed at the course of events, the sit-downers sent couriers to union headquarters in the Pengelly Building to request the dispatch of additional pickets to augment the union picket force outside the plant. At least two of the unionists who came to the plant that afternoon reported that they had observed city police about two blocks from the plant, diverting traffic from Chevrolet Avenue. The exact time when the Flint police arrived in the vicinity of Fisher Body No. 2 on January 11 remains a matter of uncertainty to this day, but it was the judgment of an investigator for the United States Senate's La Follette Civil Liberties Committee, and this was corroborated by an Associated Press reporter, that there was a police presence in the area in advance of the dramatic events that were soon to occur.⁵

About 6:00 P.M., as was customary, the union sought to take the evening meal for the strikers through the main gate, but entry to the plant was barred for the first time by the company police. The men inside then sought to hoist the food containers into the plant by rope, but it is not clear how successful they were, and there are conflicting accounts as to whether the company police attempted to interfere with this operation.⁶

At about 8:15 or 8:30 P.M. union organizer Victor Reuther, entering Chevrolet Avenue from a small side street, arrived in front of the plant in the union sound car, which was convoyed to the scene by a five-car escort. The strikers by this time, denied heat and their regular evening meal, were "in no pleasant mood."⁷ Outside the plant Reuther found a group of about 150 pickets—not all of them strikers, not all of them Flint residents—and also a number of spectators. Seeking to cheer up the strikers, Reuther told them that the union would provide for them and asked if they wished to hear some music. No, replied the men. It was heat and food that they wanted, not music. Reuther then advised them to elect a committee to descend to the main gate and to request the company guards, of whom two shifts of eighteen to twenty men were by then present, to open the gate and to turn on the heat.

Roscoe Rich thereupon assembled a force of about thirty men, went down to the gate, and asked Captain Peterson, in charge of the No. 2 guards, for the key. When Peterson reported that he did not have the key, Rich or one of the others said that he would count to ten and, if the gate remained closed at that time, the men would have to force it open. The company police made no move either to open the

Sit-Down

4

gate or to deter the unionists, with the result that when the count ended the men broke the snap lock and forced the gate open. The pickets outside and the remainder of the sit-downers observing the scene from the inside cheered as some of the strikers rushed through the gate and mingled briefly with the people outside the plant. The captain of the company guards phoned the Flint police that he and his men had been "captured" and that the strikers were "'crowding the door and were threatening,'" and then the guards ingloriously took refuge in the ladies' rest room, from where they did not emerge until the next morning, after the fighting had ended.⁸

Reuther, who had left the sound car to observe the proceedings at the main gate, instructed the sit-downers to return to the plant and to post a guard at the door. Peace prevailed for a few minutes as sit-downers and pickets began singing a chorus of "Solidarity Forever." Suddenly, someone outside yelled, "For God's sake, fellows, here's a tear gas squad." The "Battle of the Running Bulls," as the union was later to name it, had begun, and Chevrolet Avenue was soon to take on the character of a battlefield.

Squad cars carrying about thirty policemen had come across the bridge spanning the Flint River south of Fisher No. 2. The officers, perhaps fifteen of whom were equipped with gas masks and armed with tear-gas guns, left their cars and moved toward the plant. Captain Edwin H. Hughes, in command, approached the main gate and demanded that it be opened. There was no response from inside. The captain then broke the panels of glass above the double doors of the gate and twice fired his gas gun into the plant. The pickets pressed closer to the gate but were forced to retreat and disperse when the police exploded tear-gas bombs in their midst. The police also fired their gas into the plant as they advanced upon it, but the strikers, with Reuther giving the orders from the sound car, directed fire hoses, two-pound steel automobile door hinges, bottles, stones, and assorted missiles at the police and drove them back.⁹

The tide of battle ebbed and flowed outside the plant. After their initial repulse, the police regrouped on the bridge and drove down once again on the plant, firing their gas guns and hurling gas grenades toward the factory and into the pickets in front of the establishment. The sit-downers, many of whom had rushed to the roof of the plant, and the pickets, who had received a supply of "popular ammunition" from the men in the plant during the brief lull in the battle, responded with a water and missile barrage; and as the wind blew the gas back into their faces the police had to fall back. Hurling cans, frozen snow, milk bottles, door hinges, pieces of pavement, and assorted other weapons of this type, the pickets pressed at the heels of the

retreating police. Undoubtedly enraged at the humiliation of defeat at the hands of so motley and amateur an army, the police drew pistols and riot guns and fired into the ranks of their pursuers. The strikers claimed that the police also fired into the pickets from the Chevrolet No. 2 plant directly across the street from Fisher No. 2, but this allegation appears to lack substantiation.¹⁰

Fourteen strikers and strike sympathizers, some of whom were from out of town, and two spectators were wounded in the attack on the plant, thirteen of them by gunshot. Nine policemen, Thomas Wolcott, sheriff of Genesee County, and a deputy sheriff were also injured in the affray. The deputy sheriff was shot in the knee, apparently by an errant police bullet, one policeman was gassed, and the remaining injured suffered mainly head wounds from flying missiles.¹¹

Ambulances soon clanged up to the battlefield to remove the more seriously wounded to Hurley Hospital. The police in the meantime retreated to the bridge, continuing their shooting for a time, while their opponents outside the plant, according to one account, "limped away, vomiting, tears streaming down their faces, and with torn clothes."¹² The first phase of the Battle of the Running Bulls was over, and the strikers and their allies were in command of the battlefield.

The fury of the battle had, for a dangerous moment, engulfed Sheriff Wolcott, who had arrived on the scene with four deputies after the tear-gas assault had begun and who soon became a battle casualty. His car was turned over while he was still inside it, and as he emerged from the vehicle he was struck on the head by a flying door hinge. The gasoline spilled from his car, and one of the strikers or strike sympathizers, apparently overwrought from the excitement of combat, had to be prevented from setting the car on fire.¹³ It was during this most violent phase of the battle that a Detroit *Times* reporter was slashed on the hand, and two reporters for the Flint *Journal*, which the strikers looked upon as a GM house organ, were beaten. One policeman during the melee was surrounded by strikers, knocked to the ground, and separated from his gas equipment.

Victor Reuther, from the sound car, directed the strikers' defense and a few days later was duly promoted to "General" by Bob Travis for his performance on the battlefield.¹⁴ One observer of the scene thought that from the sound car, manned by Reuther and other organizers and alternating exhortation with martial music, emanated "one steady unswerving note" during the battle. "It dominated everything!" Reuther's voice, he said, was "like an inexhaustible, furious flood pouring courage into the men." Reuther berated the police and the company, and he urged the strikers to stand firm. It was to be

Sit-Down

6

charged that Reuther ordered the strikers and strike sympathizers outside the plant to "Go home and get your guns" and if they saw "any man in uniform" to "knock him off," but the evidence does not support this allegation. Apparently, however, Reuther at one point did threaten the destruction of the plant if the police did not desist in their attack.¹⁵

After the police had been driven up the hill to the bridge across the river, Reuther ordered the erection of a barricade of automobiles across both ends of Chevrolet Avenue in front of Fisher No. 2 to prevent the police from driving their squad cars in front of the plant and firing into the building. A large crowd of perhaps three thousand spectators had by this time gathered on the street at both ends of the plant to look down upon the extraordinary scene taking place in their city. As the police had retreated southward from the plant, they had driven the spectators before them. Some among the crowd threw rocks at the police, and they, in turn, fired gas into the midst of the onlookers.

After a period of comparative calm the police, now forty-five in number—the original force of officers had been reinforced by police moving south on Chevrolet Avenue toward the north end of the plant—opened fire once again, this time from both ends of Chevrolet Avenue. The police shot gas shells at long range toward the pickets in front of the plant and the strikers on the roof of the factory. There was to be no further direct assault on the plant, but the long-range firing was to continue for some time. It was at this stage of the battle or perhaps earlier—the accounts are unclear—that a restaurant on Chevrolet Avenue in which workers and reporters were congregated was hit by a gas bomb.

In the midst of this new phase of the battle, twenty-three-year-old Genora Johnson, the wife of a union man who worked in the Chevrolet No. 4 plant, asked permission to speak from the sound car to the spectators beyond the police lines at both ends of Chevrolet Avenue. Mrs. Johnson had been rehearsing a play at union headquarters that afternoon when she heard that trouble was brewing at Fisher No. 2. She drove to the plant but finding the scene peaceful did not remain. She returned, however, later in the day to take a turn on the picket line, and soon she found herself a combatant on the battlefield. "During this time," she later declared in an affidavit, "I did not know fear. I knew only surprise, anguish, and anger." Taking the microphone in the sound car, she addressed herself first to the police. "Cowards! Cowards!," she shouted. "Shooting unarmed and defenseless men." Then she spoke to the women in the crowd beyond the police lines, telling them that it was their fight also and urging them

to join the picket line but warning them at the same time that if the police were cowardly enough to shoot unarmed men they would no doubt fire at women also.¹⁶

The firing from the bridge continued in the darkness until after midnight, as the strikers and their allies prepared for another direct assault on the plant that never came. The police ran out of tear gas and asked the Detroit police for an additional supply but were told that none could be spared. The atmosphere remained tense all through the night and into the morning, but the Battle of the Running Bulls was over.

The street in front of the plant by early morning was "littered with broken glass, bottles, rocks, hinges." A young Detroit *News* reporter who went into the plant at 3:00 A.M. was told by the strikers, who had crowded into the lobby in preparation for another attack, "We could hold this fort for a week." The reporter found the floor inside the main gate flooded with water and the windows of the plant full of bullet holes. Car bodies had been pulled across the lobby to serve as a barricade. The strikers were armed with iron bars, door hinges, and night sticks taken from the company guards, and door hinges had been placed in piles near the windows.¹⁷

The sit-downers in Fisher Body No. 1, who anticipated that their plant might also be brought under attack that day, were, if anything, even more determined than the strikers in the No. 2 factory to meet force with force. "An interested observer" who visited the plant on January 12 found every man inside armed with a blackjack made of rubber hose and with a lead heading. He saw fire hoses stretched everywhere and was told that water was the best means of combating tear gas and that a rag placed over the nose and eyes reduced the effect of the gas somewhat. He observed a hose attached to an air line and was informed that the purpose was to blow tear gas away. Near the windows were fire extinguishers filled with foamite and foamite tanks mounted on wheels. He also noticed large tanks of a colorless liquid which, he was told, the men were prepared to release and which, if ignited by burning tear gas, allegedly would have blown up the plant. He saw in the men "a determination that in this desperate struggle between capital and labor they should not lose nor retreat till every man was either dead or unable to fight anymore."¹⁸

Mrs. Johnson remained on the scene until 9:00 A.M. on January 12. She and others marched around a bonfire, sang the strikers' songs, and took turns going into the plant to sip coffee with the sit-downers. She went home for some sleep but returned once again to the plant at about 11:30 A.M. She saw that "the debris had been cleared away. The streets were swept and the broken windows patched. Many

Sit-Down

8

people were down there talking amongst themselves, but again, everything was peaceful and orderly.”¹⁹

In celebration of their victory two of the strikers added to the repertory of songs sung by the strikers by providing new lyrics for “There’ll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town To-nite”:

I

Cheer boys cheer,
For we are full of fun,
Cheer boys cheer
Old Parker’s²⁰ on the run;
We had a fight last nite
And I tell you boys we won,
We had a hot time in the old
town last nite

II

Tear Gas Bombs
Were flying thick and fast
The lousy police
They knew they couldn’t last
Because in all their lives they never
ran so fast
As in that hot time in this old
town last nite

III

The police are sick
Their bodies they are sore
I’ll bet they’ll never
fight us anymore
Because they learned last nite
That they had quite a chore
We had a hot time in the old
town last nite

IV

Now this scrap is o’er
The boys are sticking fast
We’ll hold our Grounds [*sic*]
and fight here to the last
And when this strike is o’er

We'll have our contract fast
We'll have a hot time in the old
town to-nite²¹

The Battle of the Running Bulls had its repercussions outside Flint and especially in the Michigan capital city of Lansing. Here, Governor Frank Murphy from about 6:00 P.M. on January 11 was receiving word of the riotous events taking place in Flint. The information given him by union sources and City Manager John M. Barringer was inaccurate in detail, but the general picture was clear enough. At 10:20 and then again at 10:40 P.M. Barringer, who was also director of public safety in Flint, reported that the situation was "beyond him" and that his forces were "out of gas." It was apparent to Murphy that both the city government and the union leadership wished him to intervene in force.

At 11:00 P.M. the governor summoned the adjutant general of Michigan, John S. Bersey. After talking with Murphy, Bersey at 11:30 telephoned Colonel Thomas Colladay, the commanding officer of the 125th Infantry of the Michigan National Guard and a Flint resident, to mobilize an armory guard to protect the Flint armory and to assemble certain officers to meet with Murphy. At about midnight the governor left Lansing for Flint accompanied by Bersey, Oscar G. Olander, the commissioner of the Michigan State Police, and others. As he departed, Murphy declared: "It won't happen again. Peace and order will prevail. The people of Flint are not going to be terrorized. The State of Michigan will be supreme."²²

Murphy reached Flint's Durant Hotel shortly after 1:00 A.M. on January 12 and began a series of conversations that continued for several hours. He conferred first, it would seem, with a group of city and county officials that included Barringer; the mayor of Flint, Harold Bradshaw; the chief of police, James V. Wills; and Sheriff Wolcott. He then talked with Frank Martel, the president of the Detroit and Wayne County Federation of Labor, and three federal conciliators who were seeking to settle the strike, the four of them having driven from Detroit to see the governor. Finally, at about 3:00 A.M., Murphy met with Bob Travis and Adolph Germer, the Committee for Industrial Organization representative in Detroit. The local officials wanted the National Guard and state police sent into Flint; and when Murphy asked that this be put in writing, Bradshaw and Wolcott provided him with a handwritten note stating that "a serious situation" had developed in Flint endangering life and property, that there had been "rioting and bloodshed" and that more of the same was anticipated, that because of the large numbers involved

Sit-Down

10

local law-enforcement agencies could not deal with the problem, and that therefore they were requesting him to order a sufficient number of National Guardsmen and state police to Flint to ensure the enforcement of law and order.

No less anxious than local officials to have the militia dispatched to Flint, union officials gave the governor their version of what had transpired in the preceding hours, and Travis, according to one account, warned Murphy that there would be "warfare" in the streets if one more worker were injured. The rioting was over by that time, but Murphy told Germer and Travis, "'they [GM] have more up their sleeve.'" ²³

At 5:00 A.M. Murphy gave orders for the mobilization of the 126th Infantry. "Whatever else may happen," the governor declared in a public statement, "there is going to be law and order in Michigan. The public interest and public safety are paramount. The public authority in Michigan is stronger than either of the parties in the present controversy." Since he had been advised that the situation was beyond the control of local authorities and the two parties to the dispute, he was ordering the state police and units of the National Guard to be held in readiness to support local authorities and to take such action as was "needful."

Later that day, after receiving state police reports that strikers were being reinforced by "a lot of strong-arm boys" from outside the state, and on the recommendation of Bersey, who advised the governor that it was the unanimous opinion of the National Guard, the state police, and local law-enforcement officials that the situation in Flint that night would be "much worse" than it had been the previous night and that threats were being made "to burn the plant and to destroy machinery and cars," Murphy ordered the mobilization of the 125th Infantry, the 106th Cavalry, and the 119th Field Artillery. He also requested GM not to deny heat, water, or food to the strikers in the interest of public health and because "such moves would only befuddle the already complicated situation."²⁴

Bersey and the military proved to be rather poor prophets, for January 12 in Flint was a day of peace, not war. The only dueling between the adversaries that took place that day and the next was verbal, as the union and management sought to fix the blame upon one another for the riotous events of January 11. The UAW, predictably, charged that "General Motors bears direct responsibility for the outrageous and premeditated violence employed against our peaceful pickets" and characterized the affair as a "well-planned attack to break the strike through terrorism" and as "the most disgraceful exhibition of irresponsible police leadership in recent years." The

UAW president, Homer Martin, asserted that the police had no "legal right" to aid GM by interfering with the occupancy of the plant and attempting to evict the sit-downers. They had, indeed, violated their oath of office "by engaging in a private enterprise with company-hired thugs." He accused GM of disregarding "positive verbal assurances" that it would not attempt to eject the men by force.²⁵

GM, through Executive Vice-President William S. Knudsen, insisted that the battle had been between the city police and the strikers, not between GM and the strikers. "We were not involved in that riot. Our people were not in it," Knudsen told the press. The company, of course, was responsible for cutting off the heat and refusing to allow food through the main gate, but that had been done, Knudsen explained, because the plant office was closed and the plant was in a shut-down condition. At all events, there had been no trouble, he claimed, until the sound car arrived on the scene and incited the pickets to storm the gates and imprison the plant police. Knudsen stated that GM had no intention of denying heat, light, or water to the sit-downers, which was in compliance with the wishes of the governor, and that it would not encourage violence, "since we do not believe labor disputes can be helped by violence."²⁶

The UAW to this day believes GM to have been the instigator of the Battle of the Running Bulls,²⁷ but a La Follette Committee investigator whose sympathies were clearly with the union was unable at the time to make a "definite connection" between the corporation and the Fisher Body No. 2 riot.²⁸ The available documentation still does not permit one to make that "definite connection," but GM's protestations of innocence simply do not appear to be the whole truth. The Fisher Body plant police had expected the sit-downers in the No. 2 plant to parade to the outside of the building on January 10 and had planned to offer mild resistance to this action so as to force the strikers to commit an act of violence, which presumably would have justified some counteraction against the occupants of the plant by either the plant or public police. The anticipated parade had not, however, been held.²⁹

The next day it was GM that set the stage for the battle that was to follow by turning off the heat and having its plant guards shut off the entry of food into the plant through the main gate. Knudsen offered the shut-down condition of the plant as the explanation for what had occurred, but the factory had been in the same condition since December 30 without having produced the countermeasures taken on January 11. The actual physical combat, as GM accurately pointed out, was between the city police and the strikers, not the company guards and the strikers; but it is difficult to believe that, in a

Sit-Down

12

city in which corporation and law enforcement were so closely linked, the police would have undertaken an action that could conceivably have resulted in serious damage to the corporation's property without first consulting responsible GM officials. Although there was a substantial degree of sympathy in Flint for the GM position in the strike, "popular opinion," as *Business Week* pointed out, blamed the corporation for having permitted the violence to develop.³⁰

Chief of Police Wills, although conceding that he himself had checked on the situation in front of the plant during the course of the afternoon of January 11, denied that police had been dispatched to the scene before the "capture" of the company guards had been reported. "No orders," he declared, "were issued to them [the police]. They went out to see what was going on and to act if there was anything illegal."³¹ It is difficult, however, to view these remarks as anything more than self-serving. The evidence indicates that at least some police were in the area before the main gate was forced open from the inside, and the object of the police action seems to have been the ejection of the strikers rather than the rescue of the company guards. The Flint Police Department had added to its supply of tear and sickening gas only a few days earlier,³² and when its men made their appearance before the No. 2 plant on January 11, they were prepared to use gas equipment in a major action and not just to ascertain the facts and to proceed against the sit-downers only if they were doing something "illegal."

It may be argued that if it had really been the intention of the police to seize the plant and thus to deal a shattering blow to the strikers' cause, a larger force would have been assigned to the task. It must be noted, however, that the forty-five men sent to the plant, which constituted about half of the city's entire "effective" police force, were the total number available to Wills and Barringer at that moment, that Fisher No. 2 was a small plant, that the company before the battle controlled the main gate while the sit-downers held only the second floor, and that the strikers did not possess firearms. The police were also more than likely aware that the number of strikers inside the plant probably did not exceed one hundred and that their morale was poor. Fisher No. 2, from the police and company point of view, must have looked like a far more inviting target than Fisher No. 1, a much larger factory that was held by a more numerous and more determined body of strikers who controlled access to the plant.

If the object of the police action of January 11 was, as seems likely, the seizure of Fisher Body No. 2, the effort ended in ignominious failure. The police, however, had succeeded in attaining what may have been a secondary objective of their plan: the dispatch of

the National Guard and the state police to Flint. For several days prior to January 11 City Manager Barringer, no friend of the UAW, had been trying without success to involve the state police in the strike;³³ now the governor had found it necessary to order not only the state police but also the National Guard to be prepared to support local authorities. The intervention of the state militia in a labor dispute had all too often in the past weighted the scales of victory against the strikers. But this time matters were to be different. Barringer, the police, and GM officials must have been dismayed to learn that the strikers had “cheered lustily”³⁴ when they learned that the governor had ordered the Guard to Flint.

The principal actors in the drama of the Battle of the Running Bulls and its aftermath—GM, the UAW, the responsible officials of the city of Flint, and the governor of Michigan—were not driven by some ineluctable force to play the particular roles that they did play on January 11 and 12. They were, however, the products of their respective pasts, and their individual histories help to explain their part in the unfolding events that led to the great GM sit-down strike and to the clash of arms before the Fisher Body No. 2 plant that so fatefully shaped the subsequent course of the dispute.