



# Rocket Review

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## New Eras in Lansing

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By Wayne Mason

***An era has ended in Lansing, Michigan*** on the property currently owned by General Motors. The site is bounded by Logan Street/MLK Boulevard on the west, Olds Avenue (formerly Isaac Street in the 1860's) on the north, Division Street on the east, and the Grand River on the south. Here, in early 2006, demolition began of the decades-old General Motors factory. This once bustling factory manufactured Oldsmobiles by the thousands from its humble beginning in 1901 until the last Olds Alero was produced on April 29, 2004. When Oldsmobile sales declined toward the end of the twentieth cen-



***Demolition of the Oldsmobile plant in Lansing is almost complete. What will occupy this site next? What occupied this site in the past? Read on, and discover the history of this land!***

tury, GM decided to discontinue the Oldsmobile brand, and the Olds nameplate faded from existence. Production of other GM cars continued at the factory for one more year before the plant closed permanently on Friday, May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2005. Ultimately, GM decided to bulldoze the decades-old factory initially known as the Olds Motor Works, or as old-

timers called it, "the Olds." An era had ended. Yet, this was not the first time in Lansing's history that major change had occurred on this site.

Today, as we view the plot of land from the Logan Street bridge, we see piles of twisted metal, crumpled bricks and mortar, and abandoned machinery from a once-busy

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## New Eras in Lansing

# Central Michigan Fair Grounds - 1866-1888 & State Fair Grounds - 1889-1892



Partial map of Lansing from the 1895 Standard Atlas of Ingham County, published by Geo. A. Ogle &amp; Co., Chicago, 1895

## New Eras cont. from page 1

factory complex. When the debris is finally cleared, will the land be restored to its former native state of the 1800's - mainly shade trees and grass? Probably not - we can only speculate on the site's future. The property's appearance today is clearly very different from its makeup in the mid-1860's. Try to imagine the GM property as wooded parkland, complete with a horse racing track, baseball field, and exhibition buildings. Try to imagine rail lines stretching from downtown Lansing to its terminus on Olds Avenue. Try to imagine a horse drawn trolley car riding these

rails, bringing fair goers to these grounds. Try to imagine this site as a fairground! Although it may be hard to imagine, that is exactly what first occupied the property during Lansing's early history; in 1866, this property was called the Central Michigan Fair Grounds!

As Paul Harvey would say, here is the rest of the story. In 1865, the population of the young Capital City of Lansing was a mere 3,573 people, and the United States was emerging from the ravages of the Civil War. Post-war reconstruction had begun, and Lansing had become a regional trading center, primarily due to its easy access to De-

troit by way of the plank road completed in 1853. Agriculture was the primary activity in and around Lansing during this time period.

An October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1865 newspaper article in *The State Republican* urged the local Union Agricultural Society to join forces with surrounding towns, and help to organize an annual mid-Michigan fair. The news article stated a good fair should be "... an annual festival of pleasure, when all could gather together and spend a day or two in respite from labor, showing each other the result of his handiwork

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Above is a drawing which appeared as part of an advertisement appearing in *The State Republican* newspaper (forerunner of *The Lansing State Journal*) on August 26, 1889, just before the start of the first-ever Michigan State Fair held in Lansing. The street running in front of the fairgrounds (at bottom of illustration) is the current-day Olds Avenue, while the street running along the right hand side of the fairgrounds is Logan Street. The illustration was drawn looking south and a little east. Surprisingly, the Grand River, which runs along the back of the fairgrounds, is not depicted in this illustration. Note the Detroit Free Press identification in the lower RH corner; the local Lansing newspaper must have bought/borrowed the ad from the Free Press. See page 7 for the full ad.



## New Era | cont. from page 5

unitedly giving thanks to the Great Benefactor for his goodness in preserving and blessing all."

Answering the newspaper's challenge, the Union Agricultural Society held an organizational meeting in Lansing on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 1865, which led to the creation of the Central Michigan Agricultural Society (CMAS). Members included representatives from surrounding towns and the counties of Ingham, Eaton, Clinton, Shiawassee, and Livingston. CMAS immediately formed a search committee to select suitable grounds on which to hold the fair. An April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1866 article in *The State Republican* announced the selection and purchase of 49-1/2 acres along the Grand River on which to build the new fairgrounds. The property was located about one mile from the center of Lansing along the Grand River; we know this site today as part of the GM assembly complex mentioned above.

Construction began on the new grounds with the creation of a horse race track and floral exhibition hall. The new fair grounds were deemed "... one of the finest agricultural enterprises in the northwest." Annual fairs continued until July 1889, when the Central Michigan Agricultural Society transferred ownership of the fairgrounds to the State Agricultural Society. The Central Michigan Fair Grounds, thereafter, became known as the State Fair Grounds. In preparation for the first State Fair to be held in Lansing in 1889, thirty-thousand dollars worth of improvements were made to the grounds. A newspaper ad in *The State Republican* on August 26, 1889

lavished praise on the new State Fair site: "WE POSITIVELY ASSERT that no Fair Ground in the United States can equal them. A magnificent forest of Maple and Elm, shading twenty acres of undulating land, form a cool and delightful promenade where 20,000 people may amble at leisure." Additional amenities included a grandstand at the race track which seated 2,400 people, newly constructed stables for housing 600 head of horses and cattle, pens for pigs and sheep, and cages for poultry "without limit." Activities during fair week included numerous horse races, trotter races, and a Roman chariot race. The Michigan Fish Commission displayed 500 varieties of fresh-water fish in nine aquariums housed in a 52 feet long exhibition hall. Lansing's mayor, James M. Turner, was the largest exhibitor in the livestock department with 40 head of horses and cattle and 20 sheep. The State Fair continued to

be held annually on this site through 1892. No doubt, the State Fair years were the fairground's zenith. Toward the beginning of the twentieth century, with the annual State Fair moving permanently to Detroit, the fairgrounds became less of an attraction, and fell into inactivity. An era was coming to an end, but a new one was about to begin.

During the 1880's and 1890's, Ransom E. Olds began tinkering with steam and gas powered vehicles, working out of his father's engine shop on River Street in Lansing. In 1897, R. E. Olds and a group of Lansing investors formed the Olds Motor Vehicle Company. Ransom built the first few vehicles in Lansing. Then in 1899, a new factory was built in Detroit to manufacture the Olds vehicles. Production began in March 1900; however, on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1901, fire completely destroyed the Detroit factory. Upon hearing this

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Demolition of the old Oldsmobile factory buildings shown in June 2006. According to the map on page 8, the old test track would have been near the "isle" between the scrap piles shown in this photo. (looking east from Logan Street / MLK bridge)

**New Era** | cont. from page 6

news, the Lansing Businessmen's Association, composed of Lansing's most prominent businessmen, immediately began to coax and entice the Olds factory back to its birthplace in Lansing. To sweeten the deal, the Lansing Businessmen offered Mr. Olds the use of the old fairgrounds property on which to locate his new factory. Finally Mr. Olds agreed to return. The property which had held yearly agricultural fairs since 1866 was about to be transformed into a huge manufacturing complex.

*The Lansing Journal's* August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1901 edition announced, with a large, front-page article, the return of the Olds factory to Lansing, and labeled it "one of the most important deals in the history of the Capital City." Work on the new factory's construction began immediately, with manufacturing operations commencing on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1901. Housing in Lansing was in such short supply that the grandstand near the old race track was converted to temporary housing for the newly-hired factory workers. The old horse racing track was put to good use as well, serving as a test track for the newly manufactured Oldsmobiles. And so began a new era on the old fairgrounds.

From 1866 to 1900, thousands of people made an annual pilgrimage to the well-known Central Michigan Fair, later known as the State Fair Grounds. Today, the only pilgrimage made to the site is from an occasional, former Oldsmobile employee wishing to catch one last glimpse of the once proud factory before it, too, finally disappears from our landscape, and another new era begins.

# ◇ GRAND INAUGURATION ◇

Of the 41st Annual Exhibition of the

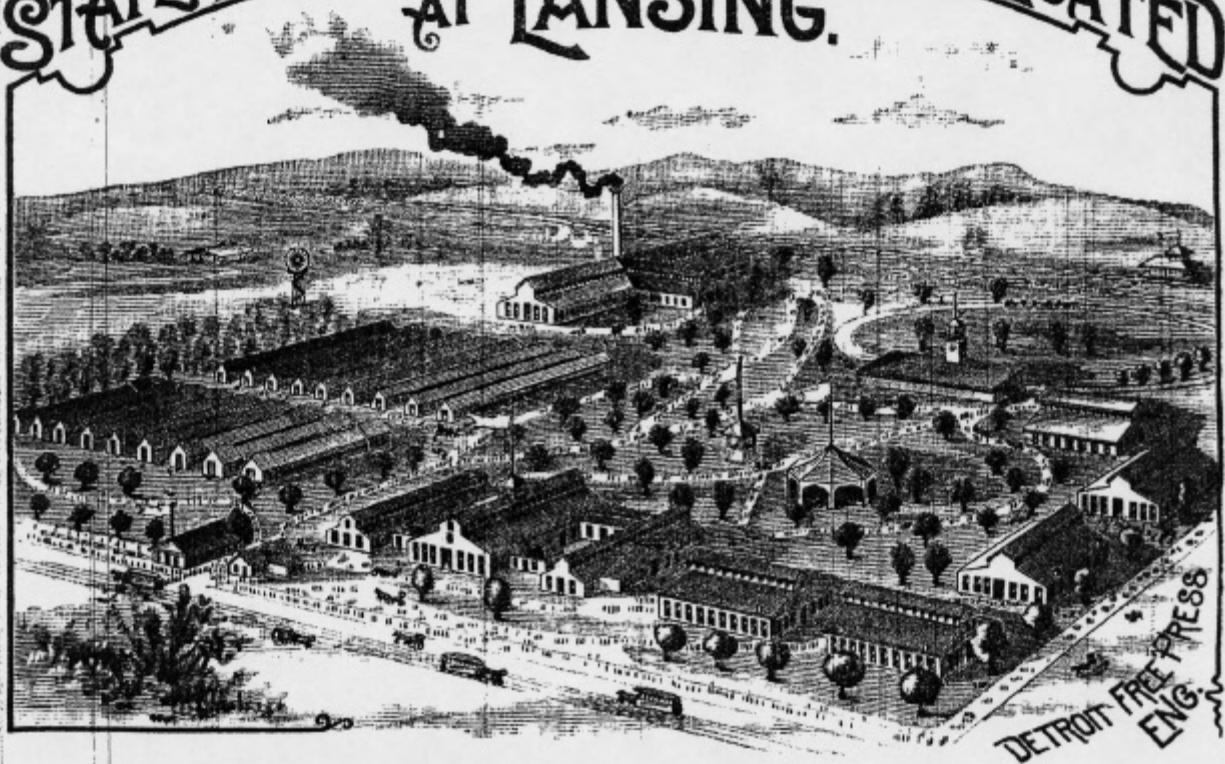
## MICHIGAN STATE AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY

Now Permanently Located on their Own Grounds,

# AT LANSING!

Will Open on MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 1889

STATE FAIR GROUNDS PERMANENTLY LOCATED  
AT LANSING.



**AND CONTINUE FIVE DAYS.**

THE GROUNDS, heretofore known as the Central Michigan Fair Grounds, have become the property of the State Agricultural Society. Nearly \$30,000 have been expended in improvements this year, and when the gates are opened to the public on Monday, September ninth, WE POSITIVELY ASSERT that no Fair Ground in the UNITED STATES can equal them. A magnificent forest of Maple and Elm, shading twenty acres of undulating land, forming a cool and delightful promenade where 20,000 people may amble at leisure. A new Grand Stand, with all modern improvements, seating 2,400 people; faces the FINEST RACE TRACK in the State outside of Detroit; A NEW MACHINERY HALL, with unlimited capacity; a light airy, commodious ART HALL, covering one acre of ground; NEW AND MODERNLY CONSTRUCTED STABLES, for 800 head of Horses and Cattle; Pens for Sheep and Swine, and Cages for Poultry without limit. In all, 113 BUILDINGS for various uses—artistically designed and especially arranged for the Exhibition of everything that goes to make up a GREAT FAIR, are promiscuously distributed throughout these Picturesque Grounds. THE COMFORT AND CONVENIENCE OF THE PEOPLE amply provided for—Grounds moistened and refreshed with artificial showers from numerous fountains at short intervals.





A map of Lansing as it appeared sometime after 1904. Note the Olds Motor Works property with one factory building and testing track north of the Grand River. The State of Michigan Library labeled this map as 1902 vintage; however, the REO Car Works property is shown on the map in the lower RH corner. Since REO did not exist until September 1904, this map must have been created after 1904. Note Moores Park located south of the Grand River; in the 1895 Lansing map shown on page 4, this same park was named Belvidere Park. The park remains named Moores Park to this day.



Both photos above were taken from virtually the same location; however, the LH photo was taken in April 2006, while the RH photo taken in December 2006. Very little remains of the old Oldsmobile factory.