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## END OF THE LINE FOR FREIGHTLINER TRUCKS

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The last Freightliner commercial truck to be manufactured in Portland was driven off the assembly line at 8:15 p.m. March 29, taking with it 802 union jobs.

It was a bittersweet moment, pride mixed with pain, and was witnessed only by a few plant managers and about three dozen swing-shift factory workers, most of whom would be laid off the next day. The company brass who made the decision chose not to be there.

Freightliner corporate headquarters will remain in Portland, for now, but no longer will Freightliner's signature over-the-highway trucks be made in Portland, the brand's birthplace.

Instead, assembly will shift to Mexico — the latest defection in the long march of manufacturing jobs out of the United States.

Freightliner was the brainchild of Portland shipping tycoon Leland James, founder of Consolidated Freightways. To lighten up the heavy steel trucks of his era, James wanted to try using aluminum components, and decided to build the truck himself when he couldn't find a truckmaker willing to experiment. He hired engineers and in the late 1930s started production. Though sidelined a few years by wartime shortages, James' Freightliner Corporation returned to truck production in 1947 with a new plant in Portland. Since then, generations of Portlanders have made Freightliner trucks.

In 1981, Consolidated Freightways sold Freightliner to German-owned Daimler-Benz. With aggressive marketing and new designs, the company increased market share, and Freightliner became the leading long-haul truck brand in North America by 1992.

But then, piece by piece, Freightliner production began leaving Portland.

In 1998, Daimler-Benz merged with Chrysler; two years later, a plant in Santiago Tianguistenco, Mexico that had produced Daimler-Benz switched to exclusive production of Freightliner trucks.

The plant in Portland's Swan Island industrial area began shipping

components to Mexico for final assembly.

Meanwhile, Daimler-Chrysler bought Canadian Western Star truck brand in 2000, and closed the Kelowna, British Columbia production plant, shifting Western Star production to the Portland plant.

In 2001, Freightliner closed its parts manufacturing plant in Portland.

Several years later, the steel frame rails that begin the Portland truck production line started arriving stamped "Hecho en Mexico," with a Mexican eagle insignia. They used to be made in the United States.

"Seeing that was one of my biggest disappointments when I came back from layoff," said quality assurance inspector Zack Beard, 32, who was recalled in 2004 after three years of underemployment.

The Columbia model truck was the first to shift assembly to Mexico. The mid-range Century Class left later. The high-end Coronado was the last to go.

"Freightliner was making money here," said Machinists Business Rep Joe Kear, "but they want to make even more money in Mexico."

Half the Portland workforce will stay on to manufacture Freightliner military trucks and specialty commercial trucks under the Western Star brand. The other half will trade \$21.55-an-hour jobs for something else — a couple years of school, another job, or unemployment.

At a March 28 job fair for Freightliner workers, just 30 employers showed up, one-third of what had been expected. Mexican-owned Bimbo Bakeries, which bought Orowheat in 2002, was there to recruit for 16 summer positions making hot dog buns at Bakers Union scale: \$13 to start, rising to \$19. Tri-Met, another union employer, was seeking applicants for 200 part-time bus operator jobs, at a wage that starts at \$12.34 and rises to \$22.43.

At the same time Freightliner is laying off workers in Portland, it's hiring workers in Santiago Tianguistenco, about 90 minutes outside Mexico City. Top pay for a day-shift mechanic there is 465 pesos a day, about \$5 an hour — roughly a quarter

(PHOTO ABOVE) As swing shift workers look on, a Freightliner manager hands Ron Bennett the keys to the last Portland-made commercial Freightliner truck. Bennett, a Freightliner retiree, drove the first Freightliner truck out of the Swan Island plant when it opened in 1969.

(PHOTO LEFT) Freightliner welder and Machinist steward Morris Price points out custom features of the final truck — signatures, on the unfinished inside door panels, of the workers who made it.