

# Moving Out and Up

**The First African-American Auto Executives  
Blazed Corridors That Led Beyond Assembly Lines**



*By Jacqueline Mitchell and Mary Chapman*

It took quite a while before African Americans began filling the managerial ranks of the automotive industry.

In the early 1900s Detroit was littered with small automotive firms, all of them producing one or two models in small quantities. For African Americans, it was rugged, very labor-intensive work. Black men were hired almost exclusively to perform menial tasks like

moving boxes and heavy machinery, and they filled low-skilled jobs on developing assembly lines.

But amid all of this, African Americans were making inroads in the auto industry. Indeed, many moved beyond the corp of rank and file workers. Finding them isn't easy because records were not too well maintained. But if one digs long enough and deep enough, one will uncover snapshots of their evolution. Still, it is nearly impos-

sible to name the auto industry's first African-American employee. Finding face-to-name photographs is even harder. Robert Tate, who oversees the memorabilia shop at the Walter P. Chrysler Museum in Auburn Hills, Mich., is one of a handful of African Americans dedicated to documenting blacks in the auto industry. He recalls what the business was like before things began to change.

"We were given the worst jobs in the