factory," Tate explained. "It was very labor intensive then, and we were given the jobs no one else wanted to do."

Back then, there were no unions nor labor laws to enforce health rules. And any kind of worker's compensation was less than a notion. Working in the paint shop was no picnic either; there was no protection from toxic fumes, and no rules or regulations concerning worker exposure. Remember, the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Labor weren't around to address those issues.

At the time, for African Americans, moving past back-breaking, low-paying, unskilled jobs was unthinkable. There was no Roy Roberts, an African American who started out working on an assembly line but retired recently as a group vice president at General Motors Corp. And going out and actually recruiting African-American talent didn't begin until the 1950s.

Here is a glimpse of what the auto scene looked like during the first 60-years of the 106-year-old U.S. auto industry.

Chassis Driving Percy Lee

Sometime around 1915, Percy Lee Gardner made what many believe was one of the first breakthroughs by an African American into management ranks. He was a machinist of sorts for GM who drove Chevrolet chassis from one location in St. Louis to a nearby assembly plant. To be sure, this was a highly prestigious job, one which conveyed trust, acknowledged skill, and required minimal supervision. Gardner worked largely independently, and by all appearances functioned as an entry-level supervisor.

Not much else is known about Gardner, other than he retired from GM in 1952.

While Gardner was driving chassis for Chevy, an African-American engineer surfaced at Buick in 1938. Not much is known about this man either, including his name. But his photo turned up in a book on Buick's history, says Tate. Other finds are similarly inconclusive, but tend to confirm that African Americans were in the white-collar ranks of the auto industry during its formative years. For example, Tate, who is doing research for a book about African-Americans in the auto industry, happened upon a photograph of several suit-wearing white men who were executives with Packard Motor Co. Also in that photo is a similarly dressed African American. Though his identity is unknown, Tate explains, it is believed that this man held some kind of management job at Packard, perhaps as a board member, manager or supervisor.

A Star On and Off The Field

Levi Jackson

It wasn't until the 1950s that things began to open up for African Americans in the "white collar" sector of the auto industry. Levi Jackson joined Ford Motor Co in 1950 in its urban affairs and labor relations department. By the time he retired in 1983, he was a vice president.

Before joining Ford, Jackson had already made a name for himself on the football field. He was a star running back at Yale who in 1949 became the school's first black captain of the football team, just 19 months after Jackie Robinson had broken major league baseball's color barrier. Jackson set 13 modern-day football records and his 2,049 career rushing yards is sixth best in Yale history. He graduated with majors in sociology, psychology and economics. Still, after graduating in the top 10 percent of his class, Jackson's employment prospects appeared limited to the world of pro sports.

Jackson told reporters: "I didn't go to college to learn to play football. But I did go to college to get an education, and I intend to use it." Unfortunately, a black man with a college degree had few opportunities in an era where blacks were relegated to the rear of the bus in the South and worked on often segregated assembly lines.

But while at Yale, Jackson got to know fellow student and football enthusiast William Clay Ford, one of three grandsons of Ford founder Henry Ford. While interviewing for a job at Ford, Jackson noticed that the interviewer was indifferent and kept his feet up on the desk. Spotting his old classmate walking by, Jackson greeted him. Taking notice, the interviewer suddenly sat up straight, giving Jackson his full attention.

Jackson was hired and worked his way through industrial relations before becoming personnel services manager for the general parts division. Years later, Detroit, a city then heralded as the "model of racial integration," was exploding during one of the most incendiary and violent race riots in U.S. history. It was 1967.

Not one to stand pat, Jackson sent a 10-point plan to Henry Ford II which addressed the underlying problems of unemployment and frustration among young African Americans. What resulted was the Ford Minorities Hiring Program. Jackson devoted ten months in 1968 to setting up and administering it and was recognized for his efforts with the manufacturer's highest honor, the "Ford Citizen of the Year Award."

Jackson continued to create opportunities for minorities in industrial America, according to Ford records. For example, he was an architect in the creation of minority dealers and suppliers, and he encouraged white-owned companies to increase minority hiring. He also worked to increase the size of contracts for minority businesses. In addition, he launched a federally-financed program to train disadvantaged individuals to become dealer mechanics.

Two presidents, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, appointed him chairman of the National Selective Service Appeal Board. For African-American workers inside and outside of Ford, Jackson was looked up to as an African-American man with power, something that had previously been rare, if not nonexistent, in the history of the automobile industry.

Jackson died at the age of 74 on Dec. 7, 2000, but his legacy lives on in this generation of African-American auto executives.