

Visteon Automotive Systems

Founded: 1898

Location: 1500 Western Avenue, Connersville (1898–1954); 4747 Western Avenue (1954–)

In 1898 Charles C. Hull purchased a building once occupied by the Munk & Roberts Furniture Company. Beginning with a capital stock of \$65,000, Hull and his partners William H. Harris, Herman Munk, Col. James E. Roberts, and Frank G. Volz began crafting horse-drawn carriages at the Rex Buggy Manufacturing Company. Until 1916 the partners were one of the largest producers of buggies in the nation. The steel-bodied buggies came equipped with electric lights and were widely known to be reliable. A customer could also buy a “storm shield” that protected the driver and passengers from rain, snow, and wind.

Hull was a native of Fayette County. After graduating from the Central Normal College (Danville Teachers College) in 1882 he taught for two years before taking a position at a hardware store, remaining there until 1888. He then accepted the position of assistant superintendent at the Parry Manufacturing Company in Indianapolis, where he learned a great deal about the requirements of buggy manufacturing. After a decade in Indianapolis, he and his partners returned to Connersville to start the Rex Buggy Company. Hull remained the president of the company for forty-six years, retiring in 1944.

By 1916 Hull realized that the automobile was the vehicle of the future and joined the transportation revolution by committing the company to the manufacture of tops and enclosures for automobiles. The name of the company was changed to Rex Manufacturing Company to reflect the new emphasis. Business remained brisk as the company provided parts for twelve carmakers including Cadillac, Chevrolet, and Studebaker. The company also produced its own

car, the Empire, between 1912 and the eve of World War I. A short time later the firm purchased the Anchor Top and Body Company of Cincinnati to increase profits and market share.

In 1927 Rex Manufacturing began to transition into the production of household appliances, beginning with refrigerator cabinets. The Great Depression accelerated the trend. By the mid-1930s the company had completed the transition and was busily making freezers and refrigerators. Contracts with Sears, Westinghouse, and five other companies occupied almost the entire activity of the firm during the depression, allowing it to remain a profitable enterprise during America's worst economic calamity. For a short time at the end of the 1930s the company also produced "Rex Trailers," which were used for general hauling and livestock transport, even producing one that could open up into a camper that could fit four comfortably. The trailer-making portion of the business was later sold to an Indianapolis company.

During World War II all civilian production ceased at the company, and the company began packaging parachute flares and bombs, as well as other products, for the army and the navy. The War Department used the company as an experimental plant. Rex Manufacturing would work out the problems with the assembling of material before mass production began nationally. The company completed eighty-one military contracts and received the "E" for Excellence award from the army and navy four different times.

After World War II the company converted its facilities back to the production of refrigerators, freezers, and household appliances. Within two years, with the demand for luxury items and even basic necessities at high mark, the company had produced more than 500,000 refrigerators in twelve different models. In 1947 the company became a subsidiary of Philco Corporation of Philadelphia, and within a year 1,800 men and women worked at the plant. In the

mid-1950s room air conditioners were added to the manufacturing list, and a new 674,000-square-foot building was erected on State Road 1 North, designated Plant Number 59.

Ranges and laundry appliances were added to the list of Philco products. The Ford Motor Company purchased Philco in 1963. A year after the acquisition the Connersville plant again began making car parts, specifically air conditioner coils that employed a tube fin evaporator mechanism, not phased out until 1988. In 1966 the name of the company was officially changed to Philco-Ford. A \$30 million expansion of Plant Number 59 occurred in 1967, increasing plant space at the site to more than 1.5 million square feet. By the late 1960s the company found that it could not be competitive in the range and laundry appliance markets. Since these items accounted for less than 3 percent of total company sales, the plant discontinued their manufacture.

By the mid-1970s the company realized that it was no longer competitive in the home air conditioner market and discontinued air conditioner production at the plant in 1974. During the 1970s Ford gradually expanded climate control mechanism production for cars at the Connersville plant, and the company stopped producing the Philco Cold Guard home refrigerator in 1977 in order to concentrate on automotive climate control production. After the company stopped making the home refrigerator, employment dropped from an estimated 5,000 to 2,400. Within two years the company was making copper-brass radiators and vacuum actuators. The Connersville plant became part of Ford's Climate Control Division, later merging with Ford's Aerospace and Communications Corporation.

During the 1980s efficiency became the goal of the plant's managers while its parent company invested heavily in the plant's future. The emphasis on efficiency paid off in 1983; Sen. Dan Quayle presented the company with a Senate Productivity Award. With smaller

engines and electronically controlled cars hitting the market, the radiators and compressors that helped cool and power them became more sophisticated. The Connersville plant began producing vacuum-brazed radiators and Ford's new FS-6 compressor early in the decade. Later in the period the plant manufactured the FX-15 compressor. Throughout the decade the plant received more than \$200 million in investment by its parent company, including a 115,000-square-foot expansion of Plant Number 59. The company was placed into a new division with a Ford restructuring plan in 1982. After 1982 the Connersville plant became part of the Ford Electronics and Refrigeration Corporation. It was one of the few plants to receive Ford's Q1 Preferred Quality Award.

During the 1990s the company continued to expand and win recognition for its efficiency. In 1993 the plant was awarded the Preventative Maintenance Excellence Award. Two years later Ford's high capacity condenser was launched. In 1997 the company's name was changed to Visteon Automotive Systems. In a move to make its component parts group semi-independent the Ford Motor group restructured almost all of its parts producers and assigned them to the Visteon label. The products that leave the Connersville facility are used in all Ford and Lincoln Mercury vehicles made in North America and most of the Ford cars produced in Europe. In addition, the company manufactures climate control items for forty-nine non-Ford businesses throughout the world. In 1998 the Connersville plant employed 3,400 and was anticipating the production of a six-millimeter automotive compressor slated for inclusion in Ford cars after 1999.