

*Talon*

The Missing Link

by

Jeremy Loewer

Submitted to the Department of Communication Arts in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities, as defined in the Honor Code,  
and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the College as a whole.

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Jeremy Loewer

Approved by:

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Mike Keeley

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Julie Wilson

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Beth  kins

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## Chapter 1 – Treatment

It is a challenging time to be an American citizen. Statistics such as the seven-year decrease in our unemployment rate suggest progress, but many individuals remain disillusioned, embarrassed by our politics or even angry (BLS 2017). While the root cause of this distress remains ephemeral, the American populace is left to wonder why the hometown pride and cohesive citizenship of the past has retreated.

Take a step back in time. Imagine a version of the United States in which thousands were employed in skilled labor positions, proudly making quality products. American brands—employing workers domestically, fueling the health of small towns and a robust middle class. Products were made in our backyards, giving every community vision and purpose. Americans had robust skillsets and worked in trades, encouraging interaction, interdependence, and collaboration. At one time, Meadville, Pennsylvania fit this description. Today, like most of the U.S. the story is very different.

In reviewing how Meadville has changed over the past century, it quickly becomes clear much of the changes can be attributed to local industrial shifts. During the core of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Meadville was home to several major industries including Talon Zipper Company, Avtex Fibers, and the Spirella Shirtwaist Company. Each of these plants met a demise on their own terms, but of these three it's clear that Talon's zipper had the greatest lasting influence.

In its heyday, Meadville was known as “home of the zipper”. Talon employed about 5,000 people at its peak (Boys Life 38), over 25% of Meadville's population in 1940 (Warren 112 Table-D1). For nearly eight decades, zippers were shipped to

consumers and manufacturers worldwide. Today, nothing remains of Talon's presence in Meadville except a few tattered signs and a gravel parking lot.

For my senior comprehensive project at Allegheny College I will produce a documentary film on the legacy of Meadville's Talon Zipper Company in order to contextualize the changing American industrial complex. I will focus on Talon not only because of its profound impact on the local community, but because I believe its story is one that has been sorely forgotten and left to obscurity.

The average American is blissfully unaware of where most of their products come from. Living in this echo chamber world, they fail to consider the domestic effects of deindustrialization and global trade over the past century, while also questioning the rise of Donald Trump, the only candidate that pledged to bring manufacturing jobs back to the U.S.

I want to produce this film not only to educate myself about the former reality of industrial America, but also to share that education with U.S. citizens who remain in a bubble. While this film will certainly delight Meadville residents who enjoy a portrayal of the past, it is primarily designed for an audience that has given little thought to the zipper or the rust belt of Western Pennsylvania.

My first introduction to Meadville was not positive. I remember feeling a bit perplexed. There was a certain quietness about the town, but not in the familiar country sense. Storefronts were empty, intersections seemed oversized. It was clear that the city's past was larger than its present. However, I have come to appreciate the ethos of its population, a resilient, hardworking sort which today feels strangely incongruent with the health of the city.

During my first year in college, I recall stumbling upon a book of historical Meadville photographs. These photos were not simply antique versions of the present—they revealed a mysterious metropolis and hidden world. Neighborhoods were unrecognizable. Streetcars bustled around downtown. Freighters ran boats up and down canals. Aristocrats played croquet in front of mansions. Smokestacks lined the horizon. Vendors spilled onto sidewalks with clothing and fruit. Cars filled every parking space, and marquees blasted into the darkness of night proclaiming great entertainment. This is not the Meadville I first met, nor was it the small town America I know. In that moment, seeing that book felt like holding a long lost treasure. I began to look for the story of how Meadville grew to be what it is today.

While imagining a vision and structure for this film, an obvious challenge arises that there is simply very little left to shoot. Talon's vacated factory space was demolished in 2014. However, I have had success finding a collection of subjects who not only remember Talon's presence in Meadville, but whose parents worked at the factory. My film will introduce the audience to these characters by utilizing both interactive interviews and observational-verité style footage.

I have two interviews currently scheduled with locals whose respective fathers worked at Talon. Karen Martin, a resident who currently mends zippers and clothing, and Daniel J. Leech, the 90-year-old founder of Leech Carbide, a tool and die shop. My goal is to have the film span the eight decades during which Talon was alive and well in Meadville, focusing in particular on its peak year of 1941.

Using these interviews in tandem with historical photographs, and if possible, archival video footage, the first half of the film will introduce the audience

to the city of Meadville that once was. I plan to contextualize this section in the greater framework of American life by having my interviewees talk about growing up in the early and mid 20th century of small town America. This section will take the audience up to the 1940s.

The third quarter of the film will focus on Talon's departure from Meadville, its purchase by Textron, competition with YKK and subsequent bankruptcy into the 1990s. I plan to use a series of on location comparison images to bring the viewer into today's 21st century world. I will use a variety of b-roll from around the city to illustrate both its blighted, forgotten regions and current manufacturers such as Ainsworth or Channelock. I am currently in search of younger interview subjects in their 30s and 20s who can speak about current life in Meadville, although I hope to choose locals rather than college students.

The final quarter of the film will deal with the present, which for many of us remains a mystery. I would like to speak with Meadville residents on both sides of the aisle about Donald Trump's presidency, but in particular document the feelings and lives of Trump supporters. I do not wish to villainize their choice, but to better understand their rationale. I want to determine if their vote has any relation to the scars that Meadville has received over the past several decades, and discuss what their vision is moving forward.

Rather than relying solely upon talking heads, I plan to delve further into the lives of my interview subjects so the viewer can understand what these folks currently do for a living, and how they have survived the seismic shifts of Meadville

history. This will consist of verité footage in which they demonstrate various Talon memorabilia, or show their current workplace and trade.

These individuals must be documented for a variety of reasons. Right now, entire segments of the population are ignored and misunderstood. They are misrepresented by the media as dangerous extremists with no value to society. Communities like Meadville, which fail to keep up with the ruthless pace of innovation are disposed of, their former merit made obscure.

Given the pressures we face in this short life, it is understandable that most members of the Talon community have moved to locales with greater promise. The crumbling monuments they left behind may scare the outsider away or fail to inspire the remaining citizen, but they are simply a cruel reminder of the passage of time. Meadville is much more than a coat of paint. I firmly believe its ethos has endured; now waiting in hibernation for the next grand opportunity.

My objective is to demonstrate and plow through this blight, to show the resiliency of Meadville's people. To illustrate an era in which it thrived, in order to contextualize its current dilemma. And to take responsibility for the tangible detriments of global capitalism, while representing the scars of ruthless competition. Although Meadville must learn to reinvent itself, it cannot adequately move forward without first recognizing its former strength.

My hope is that by introducing disparate segments of the American populace to one another through the compelling story of a common piece of technology, I may restore a bit of vigor and understanding in a divisively idle era.

## Chapter 2 - Research

### **Section I - An Introduction to Meadville**

Meadville Pennsylvania is a small city in Northwestern Pennsylvania located 134 miles north of Pittsburgh and 55 miles south of Erie. At one time, its name was proudly placed on the packaging of products shipped around the world. The production of these goods employed many and gave the town an almost collective purpose. I have heard numerous times while conducting interviews, that during the time of Talon's peak success, one would be hard pressed to find someone in the community unfamiliar with a job at one of three zipper plants. Today it can be hard to imagine this prosperity, but in many ways Meadville has always been an ideal setting for oddball experimentation.

As the seat of Crawford County, Meadville was originally settled by David Meade and his companions in 1788 for its proximity to French Creek and various canal ways (Meadville City Gov.). By the early 1900s, the Erie-Lackawanna Railroad shops west of Water Street were a bustling half-way point between New York and Chicago, servicing over 7 passenger trains per day and employing more than a thousand workers (Moore & Rekas 9, 26-30; Riverside Inn; National Railway Publication Company). This connectivity encouraged Meadville to develop into a region of industry, ingenuity, and honest hard work. It was only a matter of time before large-scale employers moved into town. By the 1930's, the pace of these industries kept Meadville bustling, while the majority of our country was faced with unemployment and the great depression. Journalist Eugene Du Bois of Brooklyn's *Daily Eagle*, ran a front page story on Meadville's prosperity in May of 1935, and

Ripley's *Believe It or Not* classified it as the "town that never knew their was a depression" (Du Bois 1; Gray & Brown 72-73). Today, the picture is very different. Meadville is searching for a new identity, and the shoes of the previous century are hard to fill. Rather than a few large industries, Meadville now relies upon a handful of small-scale tool and die shops, which produce precision parts, wrenches, and industrial machinery. Several exceptions to this trend, such as the plant for Channellock tools, Acutech, and Ainsworth Pet Foods simply do not fill the void.

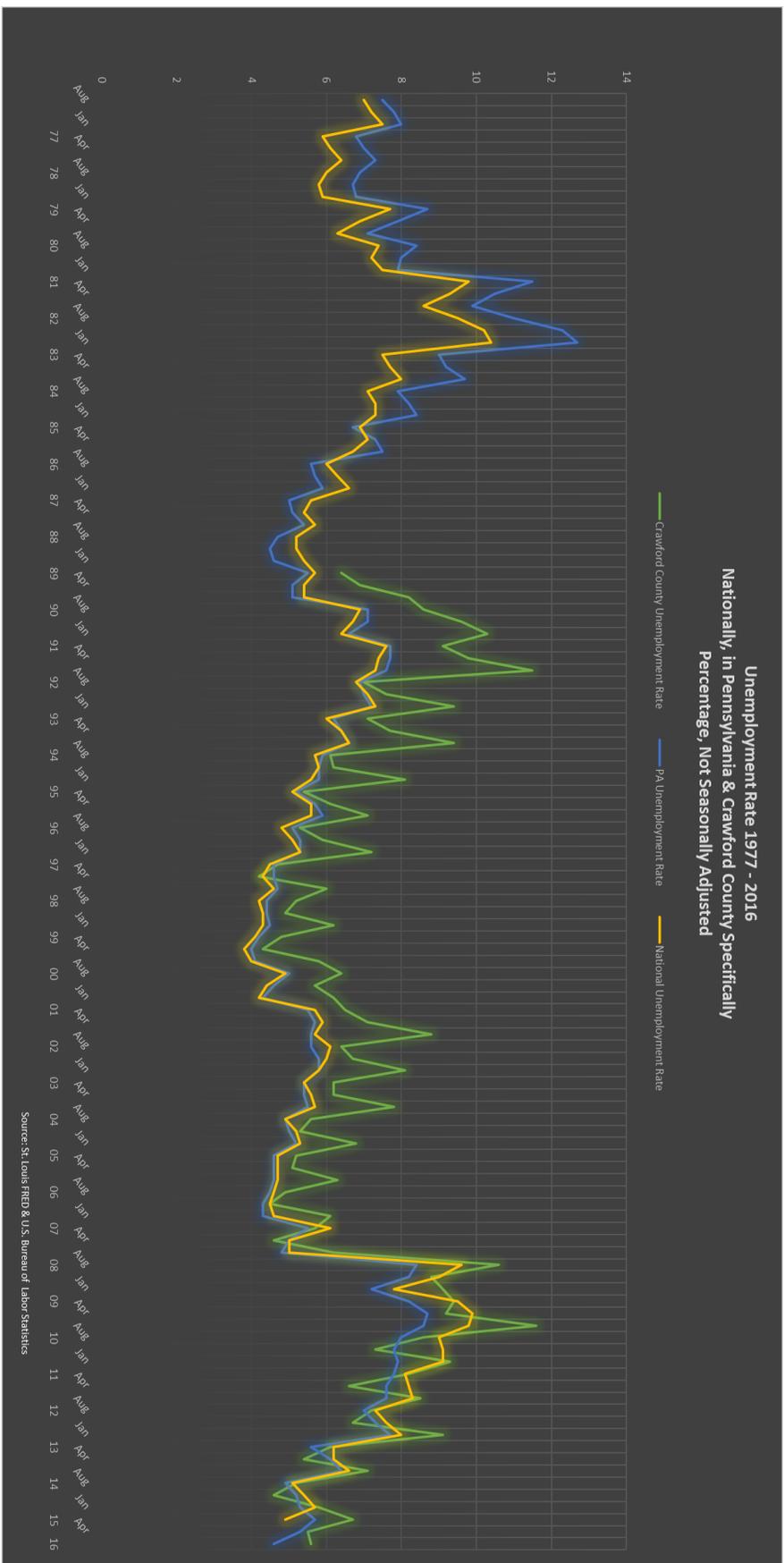
Meadville, Pennsylvania lies at the fringes of what has become colloquially known as the "Rust Belt", a region of the United States stretching from Eastern New York State, through Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan, terminating in Eastern Illinois and Wisconsin (Pickard). As a whole, this swath of our nation has suffered severe economic and population losses over the past three decades. Communities across the Midwest, whose former strength was founded upon the manufacture of heavy metals, automobiles, textiles, and unique tools like zippers, are struggling to find a new identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

With changes in employment, come shifting population figures. The U.S. Census Bureau's Population Estimate of 2015 reported a total of 13,061 Meadville citizens, which was a decrease of 2% since 2010 (US Census Bureau, 2010 Demographics). Meadville's population has been decreasing in fits and spurts since its peak of 18,972 in 1950, making the percent change to today a notable -31.1%. Also of note is the decade immediately following the peak, which brought nearly half of this loss at -12.1% individuals (Warren 112 Table D.1). Much of these shifts can be attributed to the gains and losses in Meadville's employment rate, which has

traditionally been based in a few large-scale employers rather than a plethora of small ones. Chart one demonstrates that beginning in the late 1980s into the 90s, the unemployment rate in Meadville's Crawford County was higher than the national and state averages. Overtime, these three figures have balanced out even though Crawford County still struggles. Additionally, a 2015 report calculated Meadville's poverty rate was 10.4% higher than the national average at 23.9% (US Census Bureau, Poverty; University of California, Davis).

Even with a significant change in the local employment landscape, Crawford County continues to have significantly more jobs in manufacturing than Pennsylvania as a whole. A 2016 profile by the Pennsylvania Center for Workforce Information and Analysis showed that 25.2% of the county's employment was based in this sector. For the state as a whole, this number was only 10.0% (PA Dept. of Labor). As a point of reference, the second largest employment sector in Crawford County was Health Care and Social Assistance, at 18.5%, compared to 17.5% statewide (PA Dept. of Labor).

The city's ethnic makeup is largely homogeneous. A 2015 estimate showed that for the majority identifying as one race, the community was 88.9 % White, 5.4 % Black or African American, 1.5% Asian, with the other 4.2% made up of additional minorities and individuals identifying as two or more races (US Census Bureau, ACS Demographics). These figures define Meadville as a traditionally white, working-class town.



*Chart 1 - A comparison of non-seasonally adjusted unemployment rates at the national, state, and county levels.  
 (Source: St. Louis FRED)*

## Section II – Why Zippers?

The modern zipper is a highly unique, heavily utilized, and criminally underappreciated piece of equipment. Depending on the design, the brass or nylon components are painted and dried. Then tapes, or long pieces of ribbon-like fabric are woven and run through a chain machine at great speed. At this point, they are studded with metal teeth, better known as scoops because of their catching shape. Careful inspection will reveal that the scoops on either side of a garment are staggered to encourage inter-locking. Notice the thinness of the tape allows it to guide alongside the slider effortlessly. Examine how the interior surface of the slider is polished in the area which garners the most friction.

Once a desired length is reached, the illustrious slider is attached, and a pull-tab is affixed to it. The slider guides the teeth to interlock and brings the two sides together. Inside the slider is a small spring, which is released when the tab is pulled up or down in order to keep everything at the desired height. Finally, the tape is cut

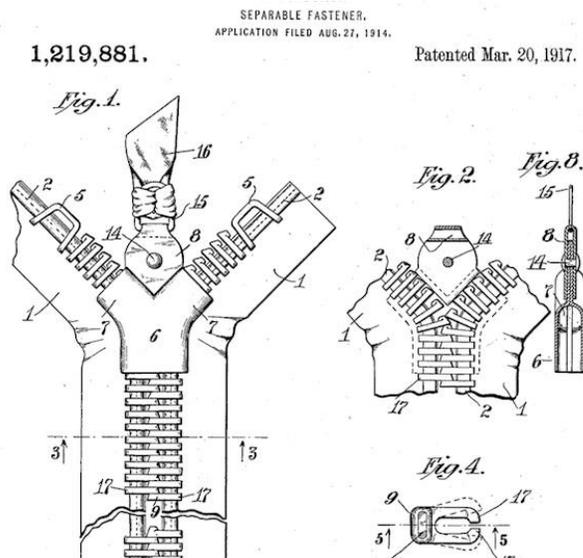


Figure 1 - Gideon Sundback's Hookless Zipper Patent, 1914  
(Source: Google Patents)

and top and bottom stops are attached to prevent the slider from coming off of the chain. The entire package is sewn into a garment, or sold as its own unit for home sewing.

In an era of complex computing where silicon is king, the zipper remains purely

mechanical. These details combine to make a design which works so simply that it has not been questioned for over a century (Lynch; Hubert; Rogers). Despite its relative simplicity, the majority of its users do not understand the design. Although it sometimes jams or breaks entirely, the faults are more often blamed on the user or manufacturer than the design itself.

Unlike most products, the zipper has been produced in largely the same way since it was perfected in 1914 (Freidel 91-100). Thus, it is with good reason that at one time, no one expected Talon to leave Meadville. Indeed, the reasons for its departure are not inherently based in the quality of product, but rather a series of unfortunate miscalculations regarding budgeting and management to be discussed later in this report.

In its humble way, Meadville seems to take very little credit for its former glory. Acknowledging our past is a key to interpreting the future. Talon may never return to Meadville, but we must celebrate rather than ignore our heritage, asking why it left and how we can avoid such a mistake in the future.

### **Section III – History of Talon’s Zipper**

Like most inventions, the zipper as we know it today came into existence through a series of fits and starts. Its arduous story of development involves overcoming hurdles in both engineering and sales. In fact, the brand name of Talon didn’t come to existence until 1928, nor did the company move to Meadville until 1913 (Gray & Brown 71, 36). The man credited with the zipper’s invention, Whitcomb L. Judson, was a Chicago born inventor described as one who enjoyed

complex solutions to simple problems. In 1893 he brought his quirky clasp locker to the Chicago World's Fair (Friedel 2, 9).

The device, which loosely resembles a modern zipper, included a series of

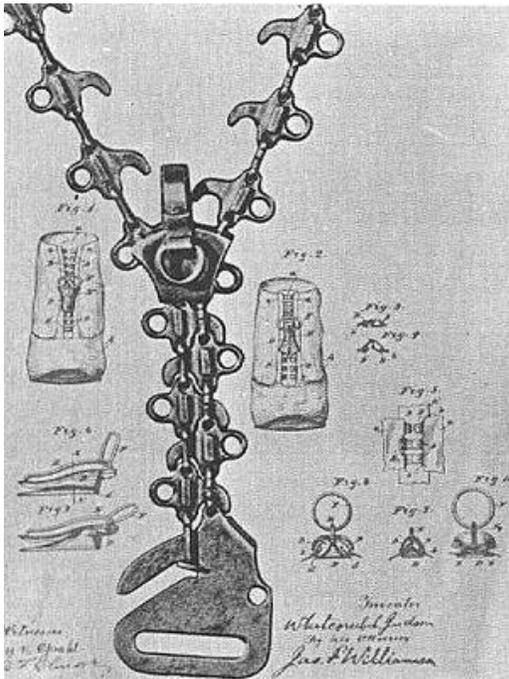


Figure 2 - Judson's Clasp Locker  
(Source: Schewe, Andrea)

hooks and eyes brought together by a central pull. Its intended use was for fastening high button shoes, a popular item in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Judson had devised the time saving device, hoping to ease the cumbersome process of buttoning and unbuttoning (Pertoski 97). However good his intentions, this early iteration of the slide fastener was unquestionably overcomplicated and prone

to jamming. As professor Robert Friedel puts it in his text, *Zipper: An Exploration of Novelty*, “The origins of the zipper cannot be explained as problem solving, but rather as problem seeking” (Friedel 250). Indeed, at its outset the zipper was a luxury item—novel and unnecessary.

The story could have easily have ended there without the insight and wherewithal of Colonel Lewis Walker. He was the man responsible for making Meadville the home of the zipper, for little reason aside from his love for the city. It is hard to say what Walker saw in Judson's ideas, but Meadville is greatly indebted to his belief and unwavering commitment.

Born in Ohio during the year 1855 Mr. Walker moved to Meadville at the age of seventeen to attend Allegheny College. After graduating in 1877 he received his certification in law, and became an investor and representative for over 15 different industrial interests throughout Western Pennsylvania (Gray & Brown 15). Walker earned the distinguishing title of Colonel for his long time service in the National Guard, and was locally identified by this prefix for the majority of his life (Gray & Brown 17). By sheer circumstance, Walker found himself at the same World's Fair as Judson and was impressed by his meager shoe-fastening device (Lusher). An order made in 1893 by the US Postal Service only contributed to Walker's confidence—20 mailbags were to be affixed with Judson's janky fastener. That fall, the Colonel, Judson, and an investor by the name of Harry Earle created the Universal Fastener Company of Chicago (Gray & Brown 19-20).



*Figure 3 - C-curity Fastener  
(Source: Friedel 37)*

The trio would labor through several meager designs, constantly changing locations to turn a profit. By 1905, with the help of mechanic Peter Aronson, the team brought Judson's most recent hook-and-eye based design to market, known as the C-curity Fastener. This device was sold as a quick and convenient solution for fastening women's skirts, touting the phrase "A Pull And It's Done". However, the quality of the product did not support such claims, causing the fastener to burst open and jam at embarrassing moments. For the consumer, the only solution to this failure was to cut out the fastener, destroying the garment and taking the C-curity's reputation with it (Friedel 37-45).

By 1906, it was clear to the fastener entrepreneurs that another such mistake could not be afforded. The improvement upon Judson's Chicago design was far from logical or immediate, nor could it rely solely on the business prowess of Mr. Walker or funding of Mr. Earle. That same year, Peter Arnson called upon a man named Gideon Sundback to save the day.

Sundback was born in Sweden during the year 1880. He earned his degree in electrical engineering from a Polytechnical institute in Germany and then emigrated to the United States in 1905 to work for Westinghouse. Although he initially refused to downgrade for such a small-scale operation, the engineer was eventually persuaded by a falling out with Westinghouse and a romantic encounter with Aronson's daughter Naomi Elvire Aronson (Friedel 46-48).

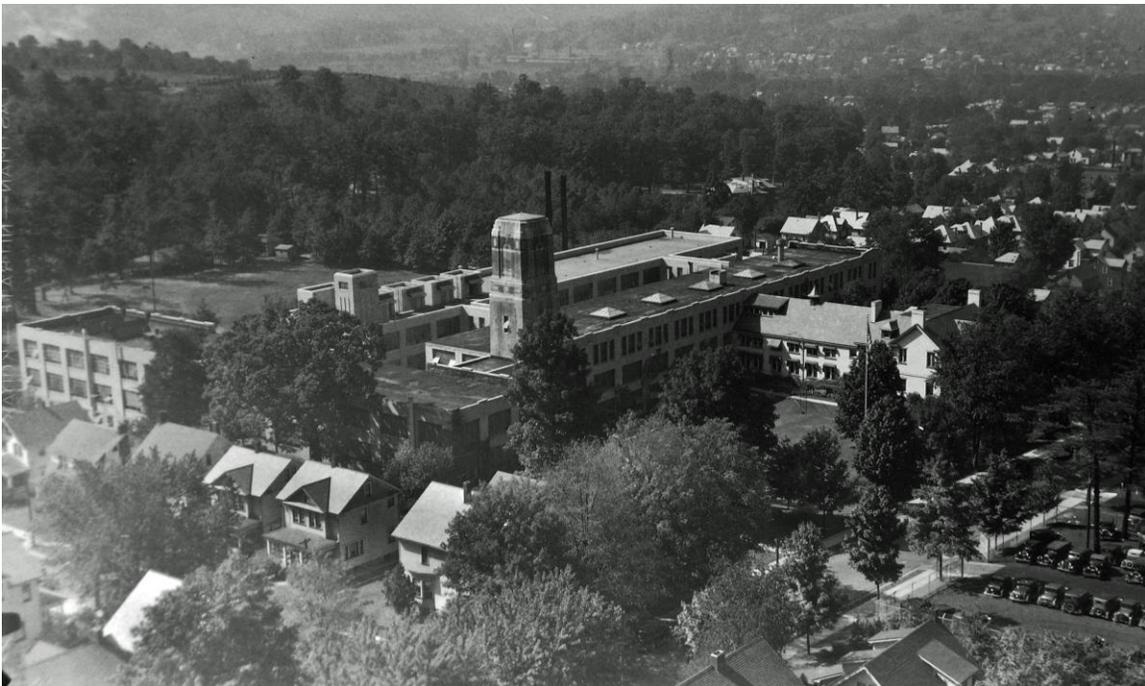
At the time of Sundback's arrival the Automatic Hook & Eye Company was located in Hoboken, New Jersey. Sundback's first major contribution to the effort was the development of the Plako Fastener in 1908. From the time he joined the zipper team in 1908 until his death in 1954 Gideon Sundback filed a total of 79 patents relating to the zipper at an average of two per year. However, it is estimated that with maturation accounted for, Sundback's name holds as many as 95 U.S. patents today (Adams 79-81).

The Plako was marketed around the world with a rather feminist bent, in that "the wearer can fasten the back of her own waist" (Friedel 51, 55). Although it was a minor improvement to the C-security, the its greatest downfall was the continued reliance upon Judson's hook-and-eye based system.

In 1911 Sundback's beloved Elvira died, and it is said that the agony he experienced precipitated into a flurry of productivity (Gray & Brown 33). Over the next two years Sundback would lie awake at night, striving to perfect the design. Eventually he decided to move away from Judson's original components, writing in his diary "**...I WAS FED UP WITH HOOKS AND EYES...[AND] I DECIDED TO TURN IN AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT DIRECTION...GET AWAY FROM THE METALLIC APPEARANCE [AND] MAKE SOMETHING ATTRACTIVE TO THE WEARER**" (Tribune-Republican Sesqui-Centennial C 1; Walker 121; Sundback qtd. in Friedel 77).

After nearly bankrupting the operations in Hoboken, Sundback presented Walker with his "hidden hook" design. Walker's support of the new model was strong enough for him to justify refinancing and moving the company to his home city of Meadville so that he could manage it more effectively (Friedel 77-82).

In 1913, what was then called the Hookless Fastener Company quietly moved into a modest wooden building in Meadville's Fifth Ward (Moore & Rekas 25). Although the transition to Pennsylvania's Crawford County was unquestionably motivated by Lewis Walker's devotion to the city, the company cited the "wish to locate in a community where there is a minimum of labor troubles...and where the members of the concern and its employees may enjoy the comforts and advantages of pure air and water, good schools and wholesome influences" (Friedel 85;



*Figure 4 - Talon Plant 5 - Meadville, PA (Source: Doug Sekerski)*

Meadville Evening Republican 8 Aug 1913). By 1926 Talon had expanded enough to command three different plants in the city. Plant 4, on Cherry Street between Park Avenue & Cottage Street in the heart of downtown focused on research and development. Plant 5, an addition to the former Meadville Theological Campus, was the most ornate and frequently photographed facility. Its expansive structure, located on upper Arch Street, was home to engineering and a massive tool room. It

featured rod iron gates and an art deco water tower. Finally, plant 7 on South Main Street housed chain machines, with a billboard on top, while plant 6 was based in Erie, Pennsylvania (Tribune-Republican Sesqui-Centennial C 4-7).

Additional refinements to machinery allowed for economical production of the fastener on a large scale. Contracts were signed with the military to produce fasteners for aviation suits and fuselage covers, as well as a maker of tobacco pouches in Gloversville, NY (Walker the III 128).

Before long these successes would seem meager in light of Hookless' most famous deal with B.F. Goodrich of Akron, Ohio in 1921. Goodrich saw Sundback's fastener as a prime application for their new Mystik Galosh-Boot series, and requested an order of 170,000 fasteners. Although this figure may seem small today, it was in excess of the prior year's total output, presenting a rather formidable challenge (Petroski 110-112).

Those reflecting upon the legacy of Lewis Walker's business decisions should be glad he was not shaken by such a request (Associates 8). Not only did Goodrich succeed in selling the galoshes, a slight adjustment to their marketing technique would influence the Hookless product line forever. Seeking to improve upon the name Mystik, which could easily be mispronounced as "mistake", Goodrich president Bertram Work suggested using an action word, which eventually led to the term "zipper", referring to the sound of the fastener being moved. Although Goodrich still technically holds the trademark on the term, its use has become colloquial and synonymous with a slide fastener (Petroski 110; Friedel 148).

The success of the zipper did not go unnoticed by industry competitors, who were beginning to gain their own foothold. La Crosse Rubber Mills of Wisconsin developed their own fastening boot which used a wire and spiral, dubbing it the “helical spring” fastener. Finding it to be too similar to their galosh, Hookless enlisted the help of Goodrich patent attorney William McCoy to file litigation for infringement (Gray & Brown 70-71).

A diligent fight for Hookless’ patent rights would continue until they became public in the 1930s. Towards the end of the 20s, the team decided to update the brand name in order to further secure their trademark. Legal advisor T.F. Soles offered a prize for a new name. At the time, the name “Hookless” felt outdated. Options such as “Utilock” and “Bobolink” were explored, until William McCoy, the aforementioned patent lawyer, faithfully brought forth his idea. He noted that five letter words are often the most pleasant to the tongue, and offered the phrase “Talon” as a possibility. Officially changed in February 1928, the name just made sense – the fastener gripped with firmness much like the claw of an eagle.

One of the interview subjects in my film made an interesting speculation, that an eagle’s Talon also holds things – “this is what a zipper does”, he remarked, “zippers hold things together” (Lynch). Ultimately, it’s clear the decision to rebrand the company was wise, for it helped cement Meadville’s tried and true as a household phrase that lasts today.

At its peak, Talon employed workers globally in the production, engineering and sales of their zipper. An estimated 4,000 employees worked in Meadville alone, manufacturing zippers in over 400 colors and sizes.

Part of the reason for the zippers' continued success has been its versatility. Eventually Talon held contracts with the manufacturers of sleeping bags, tents, tobacco pouches, automobile seats, skirts, and of course—jeans. As shown in chart two, 1946 boasted record-breaking profits (Gray & Brown 71; IV Onspaugh; 1951 Talon Annual Report).

Following the Second World War, Talon acknowledged the zipper market was changing and their product line had to diversify. On this track, they acquired several companies to make products like *Universal Buttons*, *Ethicon Surgical Staple Sutures & Hypodermic needles*, aluminum casted machine parts, and microscopic diodes (Gray & Brown 132-135). While a casual observer may note these acquisitions are seemingly unrelated and sporadic, it can be argued that the ethos of conglomeration is extremely common in today's business world. Talon recognized early on that it could leverage its workforce to produce other types of precision products with as well. In retrospect, it is hard to determine whether such foresight was a collective benefit or hindrance to Talon's business model.

In addition to making their own ventures, Talon was also contracted by the government on numerous occasions. In one instance, the company was tasked with engineering the first "pressure-proof" zipper, suitable for a NASA space suit. The final version, featuring over 12 fasteners, safely carried American astronaut John Glenn into Orbit aboard the Friendship 7 spacecraft on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1962 (Loff). Today, one spacesuit remains in Meadville at the historical society.

According to several of my interviewees, Talon was also contracted to make products such as gas masks bags and bomb fuses for various military efforts during

the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although these items are poorly documented because of their inherent classification (Lynch; Onspaugh).

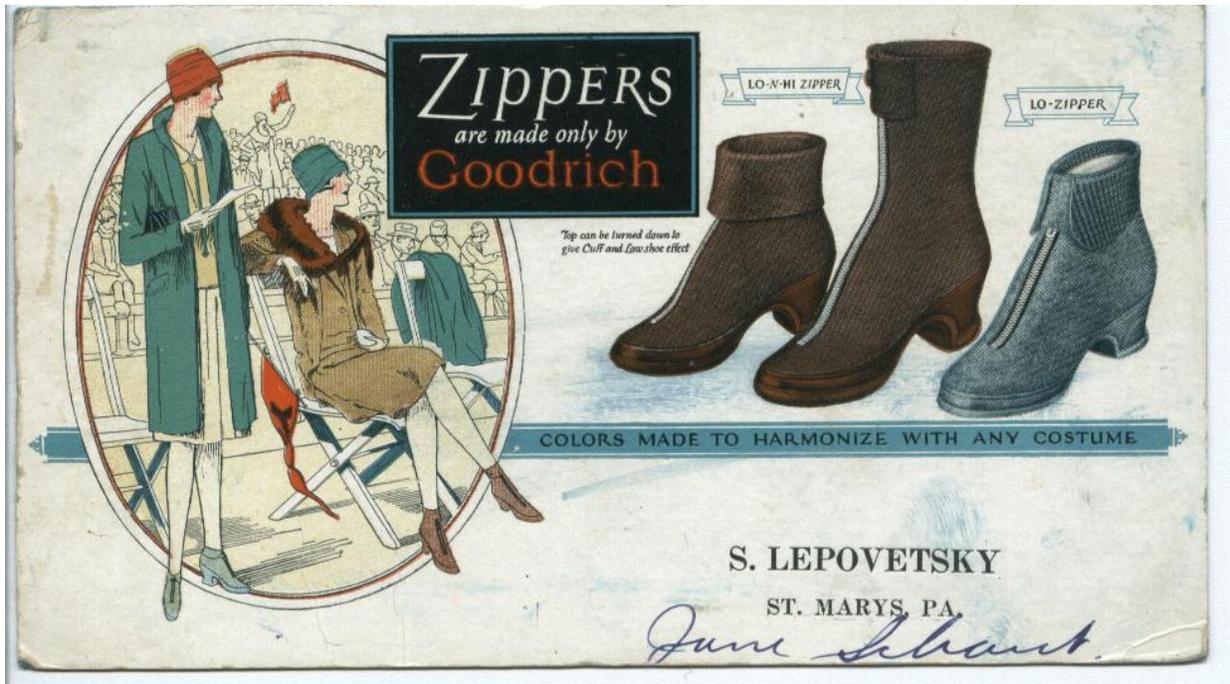


Figure 5 - Goodrich Zipper Boot (Source: University of Mary Washington)

One aspect of Talon’s business model which made such multifariousness possible was their unique apprenticeship program. In order to make hiring more efficient, they developed classes to train high school graduates in skilled labor positions. By design, a majority of graduates ended up working for Talon, but many also went onto form their own tool & die shops. Today, Meadville continues to benefit from the diverse skillset these programs developed, and has self-proclaimed itself as the tool and die capital, or “Tool City” (Onspaugh; Martin; Hubert; Lynch). Because of its patriotic flavor and shrewd management, it is clear to see how Talon Zipper became synonymous with quality, continuing to capture its prey into the post war boom.

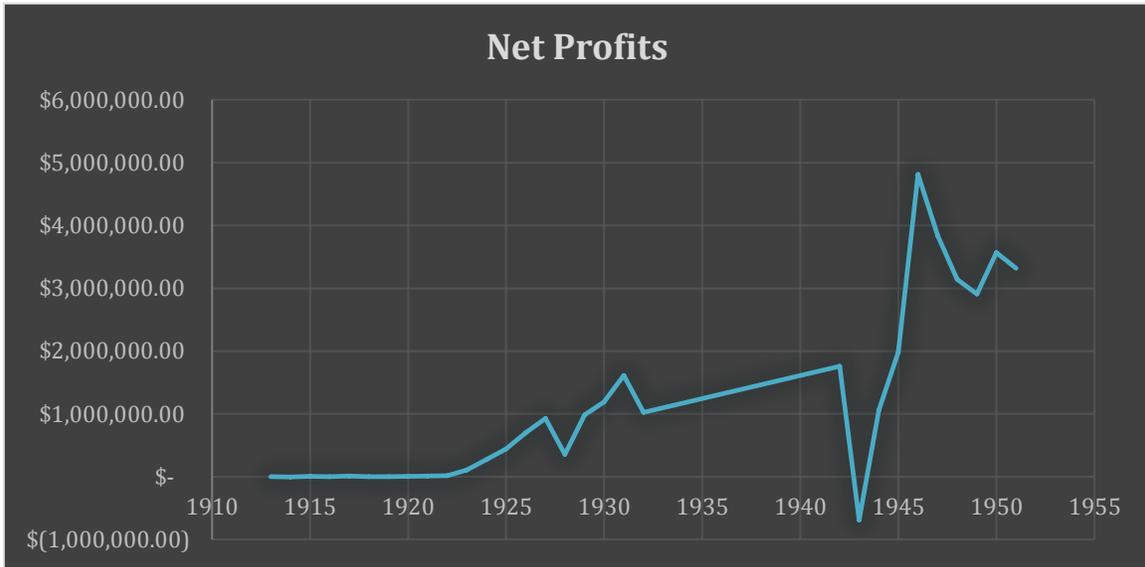


Chart 2 - Talon's Net Profits from their entrance into Meadville during 1913 to 1951. 1943 came with a serious hit because of a materials shortage during WWII. Peak profits in this series occurred during the post war boom in 1946. (Source: Friedel 267 & Talon's 1951 Annual Shareholders Report)

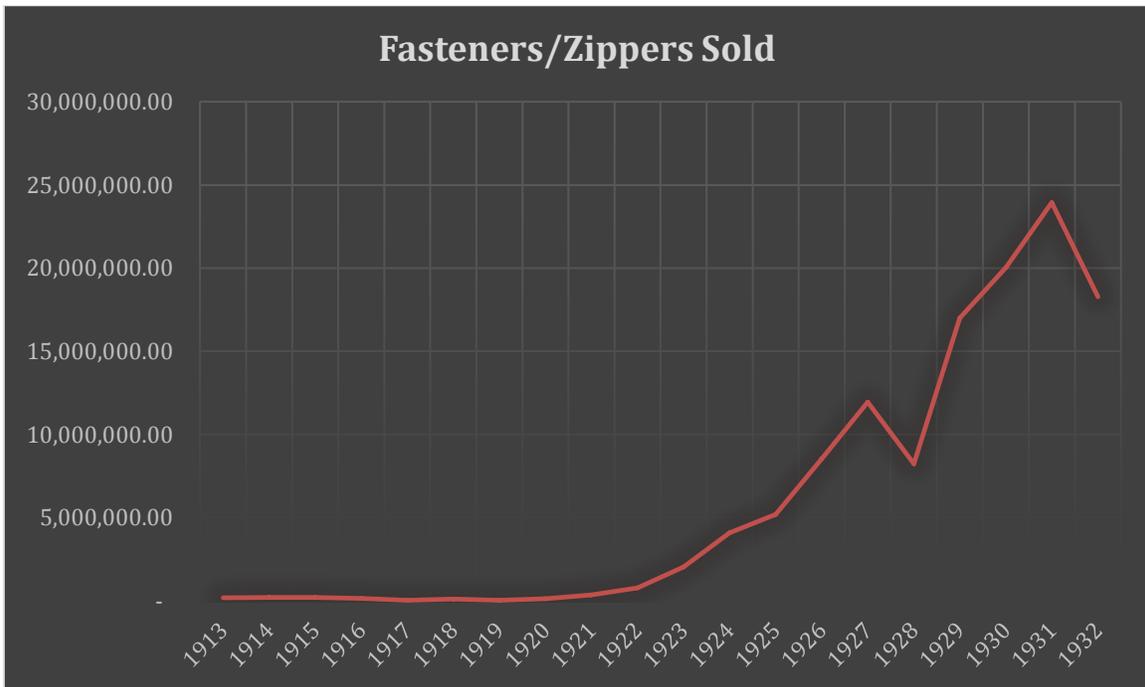


Chart 3 - Inventory did not begin moving out the door until the mid 1920's, when a contract with Goodrich was acquired to produce the "Zipper Boot". Peak units sold in this series occurred during the great depression, demonstrating strength. The downward trend at the end of this series is insignificant, as demonstrated by Chart 2. (Source: Friedel 267)

Unfortunately for Meadville, this unimaginable success would not last. On one hand, it is a cruel twist of fate how Talon and its community worked for many years to design a flawless fastener. On the other, this may have contributed to the lack of national recognition when Talon left Meadville in 1993 (Friedel 248).

The first major shift leading to Talon's departure was the acquisition by conglomerate Textron in 1968. In some respects, this merger must have made sense, given that Textron maintained control of many assets, including several in the textile industry (Little vii-viii). Diversification was seen as the way forward. One of Textron's first moves was to buy out marketing partner Donahue sales as a way to cut costs, at which time the home sewing market, and a primary source of income collapsed. Some would suggest that Textron could not be blamed for this market shift and that they just made a bogus purchase at the wrong time (Friedel 243).

Today, many choose to blame the conglomerate for a lack of appreciation for Talon's business structure. Indeed, in his autobiography Textron founder Royal Little regrets making many such mistakes over the years: "If you're on an acquisition binge—slow down! Be more careful than I was in checking industry trends, the competition's profit margins, and particularly the management of the company to be acquired" (Little 148).

It was likely a combination of these factors that led Textron to sell the company back to the Meadville managers in 1981. By that point the market had changed so severely, they decided to sell the remnants soon afterward to British firm Coats Viyella PLC in 1991 (Friedel 243).

While this chaos was taking place stateside, Japanese company YKK was



*Figure 6 - Tadao Yoshida, founder of YKK at the 50th Anniversary celebration in the UK. (Source: Carl Sukonik)*

rising in the ranks. The company was founded in 1934 by Tadao Yoshida, a man who studied the writings of Andrew Carnegie as a child (Kirk 30). By 1954, Yoshida was making trips to the U.S. and Europe to study efficient business management practices. Meanwhile, his associates were unabashedly importing and copying zipper equipment from these same regions. Theories of espionage were confirmed in several of my interviews.

Perhaps it was naive of Talon to be so welcoming and quick to boast their achievements in later years, but it seems that the shrewdness of Yoshida's approach could have easily impetrated the most resilient company.

For YKK, a modern approach to management welcomed criticism from employees, and authorized managers to make large purchases on Yoshida's behalf (Kirk 31-32). The Company expanded its presence to the U.S. in 1964 (Kirk 33). Part of what Yoshida realized was the advantage of vertical integration. This is something Talon/Textron hinted at in the late 70s with the production of threads, never quite catching up to YKK who had the advantage of starting this practice from the very beginning.

Ultimately it is hard to determine precisely why YKK won over Talon. Today, a nostalgic Meadvillian is quick to criticize YKK for their poor treatment of workers in exchange for a cheaper product, but according to Yoshida this was not the case (Kirk). The truth seems to be that Talon's downfall could be summarized by a few

years of bad management, and a failure to innovate. Zippers pulled out of Meadville initially, relying upon their southern plants to compete with a YKK plant in Macon, Georgia, but this was unfortunately a dying attempt.

In 2007, Vantage Healthcare purchased Talon 7 after being vacant for many years (PA DEP). Talon 5, the grand plant on Arch Street was donated to the Meadville Redevelopment Authority in 1983, when it was refurbished as an incubator style office park (Gushard 5 Feb 2008). After the property continued to run a deficit, it was sold to the county in 2011. Plans to move governmental offices into the space were discussed and eventually abandoned, prompting county commissioners to demolish the structure in 2014, the former Universalist Divinity School. In a recent effort to cut costs, Crawford County has bought the lease from the property's sole tenant and placed Talon A (the former divinity school) on the market, leaving a large gravel lot in the rear (Gushard 10 Mar 2016).

Today nothing remains of Talon in Meadville, yet to the untrained eye the *Talon* brand is alive and well. In 2001 California based company Tag-IT Pacific acquired the Talon identity, and has today changed its name to Talon International. According to a press release from 2007, the opening of an office in Bangalore, India marked the west coast firm's 3<sup>rd</sup> international opening in a six month period (Business Wire). On *Talon International's* website they claim to have invented the zipper in 1893 without any mention of Mr. Judson and his shoes (Talon International, Inc.). And although such falsehood is certainly a travesty, the patents have expired and it is entirely within their right to do so. The real victim of this arrangement is the uninformed consumer, who purchases the Talon brand with the

intent of buying American-made quality. However, the real question is – does this matter to anyone these days?

#### **Section IV – Rapid Changes in Manufacturing**

In 1960, about 1 in 4 Americans were employed by a manufacturing job. Today, that figure is closer to 1 in 10. Over the past seventeen years alone, 5-million U.S. factory-jobs have been lost (Long). Plant closures have been rampant as well, declining at a rate of 12.8% between 1998 and 2008 (Lach).

These shifts in the economy have left an entire portion of our population without employment. Although this certainly has negative consequences for our nation, it remains for many economists an insignificant detail. As theorist Michael Porter attests, the U.S. has “not lost manufacturing”, but “manufacturing jobs”, making the argument that “U.S. multinational [companies] sell through their foreign affiliates three times more than they export” (Smil 181-182).

Consider a company like Apple, who designs their products in California, and manufactures them across Asia. When Apple sells an iPod, it boosts the U.S. GDP without employing a single U.S. worker in the manufacture of the device. Economists praise steady growth, while lower-class Americans suffer in poverty, financially unable to attain the education necessary for a different career. This is the cruel essence of globalization.

One fallacy propagated by this arrangement, and inflamed by the contentious electorate of Donald Trump, is that workers in the manufacturing-sector are simply hands without heads who can be paid horrendously low wages in the Third World.

While it is fair to say the relentless pace of Fordist mass-production and the intensive education of white-collar workers has exacerbated this argument, the intellect of blue-collar work often goes unnoticed.

Talon, and tool & die more broadly, nullify this misconception. As evidenced by this report, the production of zippers in Meadville required all kinds of skill, from engineering, to mathematics, chemistry and metallurgy. Consider the benefits of having all this knowledge under one roof, made accessible to any individual by Talon's apprenticeship program. This unique arrangement surely left the city of Meadville employed, educated and prosperous (Lynch; Onspaugh).

While some critics would argue otherwise, I believe the growth of the service sector has been a contributing factor to divisive politics. Economist Jagdish Bhagwati, a free trade enthusiast, considers the "fetishization" of American Manufacturing to be a "quasi-Marxist fallacy" (Smil 182). Perhaps the concept of having all types of knowledge within a singular community is a bit far-fetched in today's economy. Surely, such de-diversification has negative effects.

When manufacturing jobs are moved overseas, so are the specific skills associated with these jobs. In most cases the advantages do not return, as Intel's founding chairman Andrew Grove attests: "Not only did we lose an untold number of jobs, we broke the chain of experience that is so important in technological evolution...abandoning today's commodity manufacturing can lock you out of tomorrow's emerging industry" (Grove qtd. in Smil 184). In essence, global competition has gifted countries like China and Japan with the knowledge that

countries like the United States paid to develop. Gideon Sundback's chain machines, for example, were copied by the Japanese during the rise of YKK (Martin).

Although an iPhone may be cheaper to produce in China, the scale of its import back into the U.S. leads to an increase in our trade deficit. While in most cases this would pose a risk for the value of U.S. currency, a unique arrangement with China which allows their currency to remain artificially high, encouraging the U.S. to import more than we export (Hayes). This economic scheme may work for the time being, but is surprisingly precarious and, in my view, contributes to the devaluation of American-made products.

Other studies, such as one by Ball State University in 2015, indicate that the loss in manufacturing jobs has less to do with trade than with an increased emphasis on robotics and automation (Lehmacher). In fact, the study suggested that as much as 88% of manufacturing losses should be attributed to changes in productivity (Hicks & Devaraj 6). As human work declines, robots fill the gap and the economic benefits are noticeable. Over the past two decades, investments in robotic technology have doubled the output of each human worker, leading the Boston Consulting Group to estimate that 25% of all manufacturing tasks will be robot-based by 2025 (Lahmacher).

## **Section V - Conclusion**

Ultimately, the dramatic shifts in global manufacturing over the past several decades have irreversibly altered how we produce goods. So ruthless is the quest for profit, that we have ignored the value of human life itself. Consumers, in search of

the best deal, fail to recognize the difference in quality. Educated and wealthy citizens slide into service sector jobs, while America's working class and their valuable trades are left behind and forgotten. No longer do we make products for our own citizens. Today, we value some talents over others, and have begun to do the same with individuals and lives. Ultimately, this trend leads to competing visions for our nation, and forces us to ignore the potential of combined strength. Perhaps it is time to relearn how to work collaboratively. Let us first ask what costs are associated with such rapid change.

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- Credits for archival footage & stills used in the film are listed at the end of the DVD.*

## Chapter 3 – Scenario / Film Outline

- Appreciating the zipper
  - Describing formation of the scoops
  - What's Talon?
  - John Glenn Friendship 7 Mission – Pressure Proof Zippers
  - Everyone wears zippers – Instructional Video
  - Talon advertisements
- Talon Culture
  - Introduction to Meadville
  - Culture of employees, interactions
  - Mike's *Scoops* cover story
  - Description of the factory
  - Bustling downtown
- Employment Past & Present
  - What is Meadville today?
  - Karen's career
  - Apprenticeships, training
  - Mike describes grinding job
  - Karen going to find work
  - Relationship between industry and town – a nation of builders
- Talon loses stronghold
  - YKK competition with USA
  - Quality of Talon zippers – Mike shows collection
  - Textron
  - Meadville decline
  - Impact of Talon's departure
  - How manufacturing jobs have changed
  - Demolition photos/FDR – call for action
- Ending credits

## Chapter 4 – Reflection

Looking back upon the successes and failures of this project, it is amazing to consider how it began. Back in 2015, I set out to write a senior comprehensive project on the decline of small business in American life. After struggling to find an appropriate subject for this analysis, I widened my scope and realized that businesses are unquestionably motivated by jobs, which in the case of Meadville have historically been predicated upon manufacturing and skilled labor.

As I worked to narrow my thesis I kept returning to one particular memory. During my experience covering local history for our 2015 project, *14 Filmmakers In Search of A Town*, I knew I wanted to photograph the former site of Talon Zippers. A few hours prior I was excited to find on Google street view photos of the massive, old buildings on Arch Street. As I tracked my location in Google maps and approached the site, I thought there had been some sort of glitch for the images on my phone did not match up with what I was seeing out the window. Suddenly it hit me—I was too late. As I stepped out of the car into a pile of rocks, I had the distinct pain of disappointment. It was hard to reconcile how much had changed, and the loss felt impossible to capture. For nearly a year after that day, I continued to wonder if it was too late to tell this story.

Today Meadville continues to produce a small variety of precision products whose national identity goes largely unnoticed. An Acutec-built braking piston for an airplane engine may be crucial for the safety of your next flight, but does not formulate the same type of solidarity that Lewis Walker did. Talon created a culture

that was robust for both the local community and the world. Its namesake was matched with quality, and so was the town of Meadville – together they grew and declined for nearly a century.

Sometimes I enjoy thinking of Meadville as a sandbox. Allegheny is much the same way, and looking back upon my four years here I am extremely grateful for the storytelling skills I have acquired. Now, when I venture beyond Meadville's supportive framework, the world is full of lives to capture and stories to share. Every house and seemingly simple life has the profound potential to demonstrate real passion, generate empathy, and connect disparate citizens across imagined boundaries.

In this way, filmmaking serves both the audience and the maker. One side gets to share their deepest joys, anxieties, passions, and frustrations, while the other listens and strives to understand. Making films has allowed me to educate myself on important issues, while also forming meaningful friendships. I hope my work has had some impact upon the community, and inspired us to think collaboratively.

In many respects, it is humorous to consider my relatively unsuccessful and haphazard attempts at narrative filmmaking during my freshman year, because they were based in selfishness – trying to share *my* life with others. Today, my goals have reversed, and I want to continue capturing and sharing the stories of others. I have discovered the joy of making someone else's voice heard is truly meaningful.

One of the most terrifying aspects of making a documentary film is having no idea what it will become. As I did research for this project during my time in New

York, I was only able to find a meager set of resources surrounding Talon and feared that the local knowledge would be scarce as well.

However, my mind was changed with just a few Facebook posts asking for project support. Upon reaching out to various groups like *Meadville Memories* and *FYI Crawford County*, I was shocked and elated to receive hundreds of comments. I found myself feverously opening new tabs and scribbling down names, speeding to sort through all of the information in a timely fashion. In the end only a few of these comments provided helpful connections, but it became clear from that point forward this was a story which meant a lot to many people. Much of the stress I have experienced during this project has not resulted from the work itself, but from the task of trying to do such a large and complicated story justice. As I write this, I'm not entirely confident I did so. Rather, it feels like I have merely captured a slice of it. Indeed, I never imagined feeling this way when I set out upon the topic of Talon.

Documentary film begins with no expectations – it is a journey, which necessitates curiosity and a willingness to be wrong. My time at Allegheny has taught me the balance of being informed for an interview, without being presumptuous. To that end, one of the most challenging parts of this project has been finding appropriate subjects to interview. Some of the leads I received on Facebook sounded unbelievably promising.

In one instance, when I heard a 90-year-old gentleman had a father who worked at Talon, and had spent his entire life living in Meadville to start his own tool shop, I felt like I had hit the jackpot. I was so excited to speak with him that I

found myself checking out equipment within days of returning to campus for fear that his health might interfere with our interview. However, when I arrived to his home on a cold 30-degree day, after walking about a mile with a camera and tripod on my back, the door was locked and the lights were off. When we had confirmed our appointment just day's prior, he had assured me to wait, and so I did. There I stood, pacing for about 45 minutes until he finally pulled into the driveway.

When we eventually got to talking he had very little to say. It felt as though he was withholding information. He made comments about other students who had "attempted" such a project, never to be seen again, and openly criticized one of my primary resources, Robert Friedel's novel. When asked about the changing face of Meadville, he said he simply didn't care. Here I was, sitting in the office of a man who surely knew something about my topic – on paper, but it just wasn't working.

I am glad to say the remainder of my project went more successfully, but have to come to realize that failures like this are a key part of making a documentary. Conversely, some of my best interviews came when I least expected them. Other interviewees, who modestly claimed they had nothing to contribute to my project, gave some of the most profound and meaningful statements. Even their facial expressions were genuine, and some of them continue to wash over my subconscious. This difference has demonstrated to me that in most cases, the people worth capturing are the ones who think they have nothing to say.

The written research for this project was relatively straightforward, aside from the massive amount of information I discovered along the way. As it turns out,

the story of Talon is much more complicated than a few plants in Meadville, Pennsylvania. Learning this information was crucial for me to develop a walking understanding of Talon's history, but it became evident that not very much of it could be put into my film. This film is designed for people outside the rust belt, just as much as it is for the local community. I felt for this varied audience, it is ultimately more meaningful to know why Talon failed and what scars its departure has left. Celebration of the past only gets us so far, and I believe Meadville must continue to discuss the present, however painful this can be.

In many ways, this was a sad film to make. It is hard for me to know whether I framed the issue this way, or if it is merely presentation of reality. I still find myself wondering, is it productive to dredge up happy memories, only to take them away again without a solution? Although I cannot answer the question of what comes next for our city, I hope this piece will start a meaningful conversation about its strengths.

If I were fueled by infinite resources to expand this project further, I would have traveled beyond our region. After all, the Hookless Fastener Company had presence in multiple regions, including Hoboken, NJ. Engineer Gideon Sundback was based out of Sweden, and at least one of his relatives still resides in West Virginia. The written work of author Robert Friedel, professor at the University of MD, was vital to my project and it would have been interesting to meet him in person. All of these expansions could have added different colors to the film, but such travel was

not practical. Instead this film has become defined by the borders of our community, and in the end, I think this was a benefit to the story.

Upon looking back at my treatment, there were other elements which did not make it into the final version. Initially, I wanted this project to have a contemporary component, which gauged political sentiments fueled by President Trump's election and his promise to bring jobs back to the U.S. I asked several of my subjects about this topic, and usually got uncomfortable reactions. It was clear that for many, it was simply too soon to tell what effect his presidency could have.

This sentiment came with one exception. One of the individuals I interviewed started talking about his support for Trump before I had attached a microphone to his collar. Wanting not to offend him or get off subject before our interview, I initially dodged the question. Later on when I had covered my list, I brought it up again and it became clear his advocacy was adamant. The remainder of our interaction was uncomfortable – not because of his opinion, which he has every right to hold, – but because I found myself without a counter argument. In that moment I felt as though I had to hide my identity. His point of view was in this case a non sequitur and did not add to the project when I demoed it in my rough cut. Instead, I believe I was able to capture the essence of sorrow and frustration, which has resulted from Talon's departure. These emotions present themselves without overt political bias, challenging Trump's claim with objective facts rather than opinions. This was an imperative distinction that I hope carries through to the final version.

It was clear to me; even a year ago, that one of the greatest ways I have grown during my time at Allegheny is in forming a relationship with Meadville. Over the past four years, I have had the privilege to learn from, listen to, and meet the characters that make up the fabric of our amazing town. I have yearned to understand, and in return have been inspired by stories of passion and hard work. My knowledge is not, and cannot be comprehensive – but I trust that it is honest, fair, and representative. As I conclude, our world remains filled with divisiveness, prejudice and fear. To move forward, we must first look out, unblock our ears, and open our minds.