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Small town stung by automobile industry woes

Sandwich engine-parts manufacturer closes down

By Russell Working

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The Monday after his high school graduation in 1974, Tom Johnson started working for \$2.60 an hour at a car engine parts manufacturer in Sandwich.

The work was steady, even when the company changed ownership. But this month, West Irving Die Casting collapsed, eliminating 200 jobs as the automobile industry's woes echoed in Sandwich, a DeKalb County farming and manufacturing town of 7,326.

Now Johnson finds himself out of work, like his son, who just got out of the Marine Corps, and his sister-in-law, who is living with the Johnsons and was laid off last summer in nearby Plano.



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Johnson, with two other children in college and several close relatives who are out of work, epitomizes the hard times facing the working family, particularly in small towns with less economic resilience. Even their neighbor is a laid-off construction worker.

"I don't know anybody who isn't on the edge," said Nancy Johnson, Tom's wife, who was laid off from her job as a disability case manager this year but has been rehired.

Not long ago, Sandwich lay at the edge of the construction boom that overtook neighboring Kendall County and other fast-growing areas around metropolitan Chicago.

The Kentucky-based West Irving, which was selling \$60 million a year to companies like Toyota and GM, was talking about moving its headquarters here, potentially bringing in a flood of new jobs to this town 52 miles southwest of Chicago.

But times have changed. Toyota and GM canceled orders or cut their business with the company, and the entire firm is going under, unable to stop the hemorrhaging of \$750,000 a month, according to a consultant with the company on its closing.

"It's sad," said Johnson, 52. "There's a guy out there that had 43 years in [West Irving]. They had hard times before, but they always were able to bounce back. But there was no bouncing back from this one."

The shuttering of a factory stings in a small town where the mayor earns just \$20,000 a year and the executive director of the Sandwich Economic Development Corp. used to deliver newspapers on the side to help put his daughters through college.

"Any time a small town like Sandwich loses a manufacturer, it's devastating," said Mayor Tom Thomas. "We don't have that many."

Dave Mack, of MorrisAnderson & Associates Ltd., a consulting firm that helps companies with liquidations or assessing business plans, is guiding West Irving through what he calls "a poor man's bankruptcy." The company also has a plant in Kentucky and considered consolidating them but saw that it would still lose money. "It's a pretty dire situation," Mack said.

The Sandwich plant ceased production Dec. 19. A skeleton crew will break down the machinery.

West Irving isn't the only plant in the area to suffer. Other companies have shuttered their doors in the industrial park on East 6th Street.

And Plano Molding, which makes gun cases and tackle boxes in the nearby Plano, also laid off workers in June.

Nancy Johnson's two sisters were among those laid off. One of them, Deborah Van Etten, a 56-year-old assembly operator, got a temporary job at a small Sugar Grove plant that made automobile parts, but that company closed too.

She laughed bitterly as she recalled that.

"It's crazy out there."

This year, the Johnsons are scrimping where they can. They agreed not to exchange Christmas presents among the older generation, although they couldn't resist buying gifts for the kids on a credit card. They have scaled back on expenditures for groceries: Instead of grilling, they are living off Hamburger Helper and macaroni and cheese. Nancy Johnson has stopped contributing to her 401(k) plan.

One of the Johnsons' sons helps out by working in a Wal-Mart.

Tom Johnson had been hit hard in the wallet before: When his former factory was sold to West Irving seven years ago, the new owners hired workers back but at lower salaries and no accrued vacation.

But at least he was still employed. Now, for the first time since he was a teenager, he has no work or prospects. He plans to check out a career center and see what he might be able to do. Maybe it can provide some job training, he said.

Nancy Johnson insists her husband is the kind of hard-working employee any boss would value, but in this market, they worry it may be a while before he gets another chance to prove that.

"He's never missed work," she said. "He goes to work when he's sick. He has a strong work ethic. He doesn't have a lot of skills, but he's a smart person."

But then she adds, "He's never really done anything else but factory work."

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