The Rouge River is the namesake of some of the most notable cogs in the machine that made Detroit a household name. The river itself flows 127 miles from Oakland Country through Wayne County into the Detroit River at Zug Island. It acts as the border between the cities of Detroit and River Rouge.

In the north, the river, sometimes called Rouge River, flows through suburban residential neighborhoods into Dearborn. It was dredged (deepened and widened with machinery) in the early 1900s to allow freighters carrying iron ore, coal and limestone to access to inland factories that were part of Ford's River Rouge Plant.

The Ford River Rouge Complex

It is because of this river that Henry Ford was able to operate his iconic River Rouge Complex that was an “ore-to-assembly” facility renowned for its architecture, streamlined production system and scale.

In 1917, with architect Albert Kahn's designs, Ford began constructing a unique facility that would be admired by architects and industrialists for its utilitarian design made for the assembly-line organizational system. Originally, the plant was to make war ships to hunt German submarines at the request of then-Undersecretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt, later the 32nd president of the United States.

The end of WWI halted the need for the warships, but the factory had already been built. The first land-vehicles to be assembled in the Rouge were farm tractors. Only later was automobile production introduced. By 1926, after several additions to the site, the facility featured blast furnaces, steelmaking furnaces, rolling mills, and a glass plant that churned out parts for the Model T that was assembled in Highland Park.

The illustrious era of the plant died down in the late 1960s as a more environmentally-conscious America began criticizing the black smoke rising from the stacks every day. Some facilities were closed under stricter air and water quality standards. Ford also looked to third-party suppliers of natural resources (ore, lumber) and glass when its national production chain began to downsize.

Over the next few years, many operations at the plant were sold off to other companies and Ford gave up ownership of all Rouge River frontage, boat docks and about 45 percent of the original 2,000 acres. The last remaining car to be built at the plant was the Mustang that almost went out of production in 1992 if not for the help of UAW Local 600 that fought to keep production going.

Renewal and modernization of the plant began in 1997, but a boiler-explosion that killed six employees in 2000 temporarily halted plans of renewal. Today the plant has been modernized, but only 600 acres of the original site remain employing 6,000 workers in contrast to more than 100,000 in the 1930s. The Henry Ford institution regularly runs tours of the facility to visitors.

Zug Island is the last piece of land the Rouge River touches before it spills into the Detroit River. The island is a heavily industrialized island that belongs to the city of River Rouge. It was originally a Native American burial ground for thousands of years, until businessman Samuel Zug and his wife, built their home on the marshy island. The dampness of the marsh was too much for the couple and 10 years later they abandoned their home.

Zug let the River Rouge Improvement Company cut a small canal through the south section of his property that was enlarged in the 1920s by Henry Ford. Soon after, he sold the island for $300,000 (nearly $800,000 today) to for use as a dumping ground. In 1901 Detroit Iron Works began making iron on the island after commissioning a blast furnace. A succeeding company to purchase the land added another furnace in 1909. At the time, the island's furnaces were the largest of their kind in the world producing pig iron for foundry companies.

Quick Facts:

* The river caught on fire in 1969 because of heavy pollution from residential storm water runoff and industrial use.
* The area where the River Rouge and the Detroit River meet was almost designated as a bird sanctuary, but instead it became the site of the current Ford River Rouge Complex built in 1915.
* Originally intended to build submarine chasers for the war, the first land vehicles to be assembled at the plant were tractors for farming and only later the Model T in 1927.
* The plant was intended to be an “ore-to-assembly” complex with no pause for warehousing or storage.
* At the time of its inception, the foundry (factory that produces metal castings) at the complex was the largest of its kind in the world.
* In 1932, Mexican artist Diego Rivera studied the facilities at River Rouge Plant through Edsel Ford’s support. These studies served as a major part of his series of Detroit Industry murals on display at the Detroit Institute of Arts in Midtown.
* Around the same time of Rivera’s visit, American painter and photographer Charles Sheeler also visited the plant and produced numerous oil paintings (hanging in this room).