"My father works at the shipyard . . ."

Fact: In 1950, more than a third of the U.S. labor force worked in the manufacturing sector. By the year 2000, the number had dropped to around 13 percent.

Hold your tongue between your thumb and forefinger, and say the phrase: "My father works at the shipyard, shoveling out ashes."

Ah . . . The old jokes are the best jokes, and during the 1950s, that one was a favorite among the grade-schoolers of Quincy, Massachusetts. Apart from the typical fourth-grader's fascination with all things scatological, the joke held special appeal for Quincy kids because they all knew someone who, at one point or another, had worked at the Fore River Shipyard.

Over the years, money from the Fore River payroll put food on a lot of tables and shoes on a lot of kids' feet. But shipbuilding was more than an engine of prosperity. It was also a source of identity and local pride. There was something special about living in a place that produced useful, tangible things for the rest of the world.

"The Yard" set the rhythm of life in Quincy and the surrounding communities. Everything from street traffic to retail sales depended on its hiring patterns. Paydays brought a sense of excitement and anticipation that's missing in our age of easy credit and instant gratification when every day is payday. The blast of its steam whistle was the sound of good times and prosperity.

Then, one day in 1986, the whistle sounded for the last time. It was as if that final blast had signaled the end of the industrial age.

Of course, the industrial age was still very much underway in China, Korea, India, and plenty of other places. But it had, in fact, come to a close in Quincy, and that was something of a milestone because in many ways, the story of Quincy and the Fore River Shipyard was a classic tale of success in the American industrial age.

It began in the 1880s with Thomas Watson. Yes, *that* Thomas Watson, assistant to Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone ("Watson, come here. I need you.").

Watson had received a stake in the Bell Telephone Company and was doing well as its director of research when he decided to take his money and buy a 60-acre farm beside the Fore River in East Braintree. But like many others before him, he quickly learned that farming was tougher and less idyllic than he'd imagined, and within a short period of time he established the Fore River Engine Company on his stretch of riverfront. By the late 1890s, the company was building destroyers for the
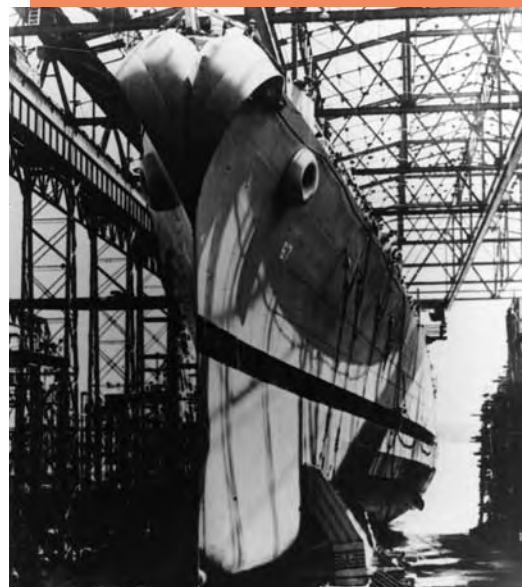
Launching of the *USS Topeka* at the Fore River Shipyard, August 1944. Photographs courtesy of the U.S. Naval Historical Center.

It's a dirty job, but . . .

Sitting in a climate-controlled office, it's easy to forget how uncomfortable – and dangerous – industrial jobs could be. And shipyard jobs had to be near the top of the discomfort index.

During the winter months at Fore River, the wind off the water would cut right to your bones. Touching the metal plates with bare hands would almost instantly drain the warmth from your body. Ice underfoot turned walking on scaffolding into a death-defying act.

Summer had its own special charms. Anyone who's ever worked on or near a sun-scorched metal bulkhead knows how a baked haddock must feel.

Then there was the asbestos. Pipe coverers spent their workdays coated in the stuff. The dust got into their lunches and went home with them in their clothes. People in the nearby houses – people who weren't even drawing a shipyard paycheck – had the dust blow into their backyards and through their open windows.

Yet, despite all that, there was always something special about watching a ship slide down the ways, knowing that you'd had a hand in building it. It's a feeling you just don't get from answering customer service calls or crunching budget numbers.

U.S. Navy, and in the early 1900s it expanded into neighboring Quincy, where it turned out many of the ships that helped win two world wars. In 1943, at the height of World War II, more than 32,000 people worked there, and even in some of the slower postwar periods, the yard's payroll often topped 5,000.

To anyone who lived in Quincy during the mid-20th century, Fore River Shipyard seemed like a permanent fixture. But, in fact, it existed for barely a century – a blip in time.

By the 1980s, it was no longer economically viable. Military contracts were going to yards that had created a niche for themselves: Electric Boat in southern New England had focused on submarines; Bath Iron Works in Maine had specialized in destroyers. Almost all the non-military work went to cheaper foreign yards after the U.S. government ended shipbuilding subsidies in the early 1980s.

What may have been the saddest chapter in Fore River's hundred year history came after the yard closed in 1986. A coalition of local leaders from the public and private sectors tried to revive it on a smaller scale. An investor came to town, much like Professor Harold Hill in *The Music Man*, promising to solve the troubles in "Fore River City." But the end result was the same as it almost always is when people try to keep a dying industry alive. Promises were made, money was spent, hopes were raised, but no more ships were built.

A corner of the old shipyard property is now home to the U.S. Naval and Shipbuilding Museum. The heavy cruiser *USS Salem*, Quincy-built and commissioned in 1949, is the museum's pride and joy. Not far from the *Salem* is the sewage sludge processing facility for the Boston Harbor clean-up. (If you're not sure what sludge is . . . well . . . hold your tongue between your thumb and forefinger and say . . . Yes, it's a byproduct of that.)

Much of the old shipbuilding equipment was sold or dismantled, and many of the old buildings were razed. A local auto dealer bought the 110-acre site in 2003. New cars, many of them imports, now occupy the space that was once used to build the carrier *Lexington* and the battleship *Massachusetts*. But maybe not for much longer. In 2006 the auto dealer filed a plan for a mixed-use development that could include waterfront condominiums, restaurants, office space, and marine-dependent uses.

Quitting time at the Higgins Shipyard, New Orleans, June 1943. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USW3-034428-D.