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Henry Ford

Henry Ford did not invent the automobile, but few men did more to help its development and give it a central place in American society. When he began his automotive work in the 1890s, cars were playthings for the wealthy, but Ford's goal was to make affordable cars for the working class. The concept of the assembly line allowed Ford Motor Company to make thousands of identical cars in a short time and at low prices. Not only did this bring him higher profits but it also began America's love affair with the automobile. Soon, everyone could afford a car, and thousands of Americans started traveling across the country. The automobile helped bridge the gap between the countryside and the city, and hastened the United States' transformation from a rural, agricultural land to an urban, industrial nation.

Early Years

Henry Ford was born on July 30, 1863, on a farm near Dearborn, Michigan. His parents, William and Mary (Litogot) Ford, were not wealthy but made a comfortable living at farming. William Ford was a Protestant immigrant from the south of Ireland, while Mary Litogot was a native-born American of Flemish or Dutch heritage.

Young Henry received an elementary education at the nearby one-room schoolhouse, and spent the rest of his time helping on the farm where he showed an aptitude for mechanics. Ford's father understood that his boy was not happy on the farm, so in 1879 William Ford sent the sixteen-year-old to the city of Detroit, about ten miles away, to become a machinist's apprentice. Henry found employment first at the Michigan Car

Works and then at the Dry Dock Engine Company, where he discovered his love for engines. Ford soon returned to Dearborn and took a job working with steam engines.

Engineering Career

In 1888, at the age of 25, Ford married Clara Jane Bryant. At first the small family did their best to settle in Dearborn, living on a small parcel of land that Ford's father had given them. But the young man's interest in engines drew him back to Detroit in 1891, where he became an engineer with the Detroit Edison Illuminating Company. In November 1893 Clara gave birth to the couple's only child, Edsel Bryant, who would one day inherit his father's lucrative automobile business.

Ford spent eight years with Detroit Edison, eventually becoming the chief engineer in 1893. The promotion gave him enough spare time and money to experiment with internal combustion engines. These were engines that were powered not by steam but by gasoline. He built and successfully tested his very first gas engine over the family's kitchen sink, with help from Clara. By June 1896, Ford had built his first car, known as the Quadricycle. This vehicle had four wheels and a two-cylinder engine, and was unable to travel in reverse. Within a few days, Ford added a seat so he could take his wife and son for a nine-mile ride to visit his father.

Ford resigned from Detroit Edison in 1899 in order to spend all his time as an automobile manufacturer. The sale of his first car meant that he had no difficulty finding investors to help him start a company. He worked unsuccessfully from 1899 to 1902 to get the Detroit Automobile Company and the Henry Ford Company off the ground, but both companies eventually failed. Meanwhile, Ford worked to improve his design, setting the goal of making automobiles capable of racing at the speed of one mile an hour.

The Ford Motor Company

Ford's next business endeavor was finally a success. On June 16, 1903, he joined with John and Horace Dodge and Alex Y. Malcomson, among others, to incorporate the Ford Motor Company. Ford owned twenty-five percent of the stock. Ford and Malcomson got along in the beginning, but soon had a falling out. Malcomson wanted to make a high-priced luxury car, while Ford wanted to produce a cheap but functional automobile for the working class. The difference of opinion ended when Malcomson sold his shares to Ford, giving Ford majority ownership of the company.

Ford was now free to pursue his goal, one that would alter American society forever. He designed and manufactured the "Tin Lizzie," or Model T. This model began rolling out of the factories in 1908. The Model T lacked style and comfort, but it made transportation available to the majority of Americans. Soon, many Americans owned one.

Since so many people now had acquired automobiles, the nation needed better roads. In the early 20th century, very few good roads existed in the United States except in cities. Most roads were impassable in bad weather, and it was easier to use the train to travel from one town to another. Ford himself spear-headed the push for a national system of highways which would bypass small towns and cities so that drivers could travel even faster.

The automobile also triggered urban sprawl, as people moved away from crowded city centers to build homes in the suburbs. "Commuting to work" no longer meant simply getting on a train or streetcar. Now the automobile was part of the work week as well.

Car Culture

As demand grew, Ford continued to try to improve on the production process to make the Model T even more inexpensive. He began applying the concept of assembly line manufacturing, to construct cars faster. Before the assembly line, each employee worked on only one car at a time and had knowledge of the car's entire construction. The new method meant that each worker would add only one part as the unit passed him on a conveyor belt. Workers no longer needed special skills, spent no time thinking, and made movements more efficient. By 1913, the factory at Highland Park, Michigan, produced Model T's faster and cheaper than ever, so that each car only cost \$500. The assembly line changed Ford Motor Company's output and revolutionized manufacturing.

With these improvements, the company was doing so well that Ford was able to raise the minimum pay of his employees to an astonishing \$5.00 a day. He even created a profit-sharing system for them. Though Ford appeared to be more generous than the "robber baron" industrialists who came before him, in reality he retained some of their attitudes. Ford feared, as did steelmaker Andrew Carnegie, that the lower classes would waste their ample pay on such vices as alcohol and gambling. Thus, he instituted the "Sociological Department" to help avoid workers avoid misusing their wages.

Ford had other causes to spend his money on. With World War I approaching, Ford's pacifism fueled his next project, the "Peace Ship." He chartered a ship that carried a number of American pacifists to Europe where they could support non-violence and stop the war. The ship sailed in 1915-16 but the project failed miserably. The war marched on and many people mocked him for his effort. Still, Ford cashed in on the situation by turning his corporate energies to war production.

Though his peace effort failed, Ford continued throughout the 1910's and 1920's to be active in politics. In 1918 he ran unsuccessfully as a Democrat for the U.S. Senate. In 1919 he sued the "Chicago Tribune" for libel because the newspaper had published remarks questioning his patriotism. Ford won the case, but gained only six cents in damages.

Ford's son, Edsel, became president of the Ford Motor Company in 1919. Edsel Ford proved to have a more cooperative style of management than his father, as well as a taste for technological innovation. Unfortunately for the company, Edsel was unable to convince his father to undertake many of his reforms. His refusal placed the company at a competitive disadvantage.

Ford increased his wealth by purchasing as many resources as he could. He sought a vertical monopoly, which would give control over all the industries he needed to produce automobiles. He bought glass factories, coal and oil mines and rubber producers. Thanks to these efforts Ford brought the price of a Model T down to \$280. In 1922 Ford bought the Lincoln Motor Company, which produced cars aimed at wealthier customers.

Competition in the Auto Industry

The automaker continued to expand his interests and branched out into producing other types of machinery. He made the Fordson tractor and even tried his hand at making airplanes in 1926. However, his golden years could not last forever. Improvements in road conditions meant that consumers no longer needed the Model T's durability. Only when General Motors began to surpass Ford in sales did Ford reluctantly formulate a new model in 1927, the second version of the Model A. By this time, Ford was faced with even more competition, from Walter P. Chrysler's motor company.

Ford's competitors were the least of his worries as the prosperity of the 1920's came to an end. When the Great Depression first hit, the Ford Motor Company could afford to keep their standard of pay high for a few months, but soon the money was gone. Ford began laying off employees, reducing pay and taking the company out of side ventures such as aviation production. Workers began to strike, and unions such as the United Auto Workers began to spring up. Ford, who was notorious for his hatred of organized labor, refused to work with the unions. In 1933 he prevented efforts to unionize Ford workers. But in the late 1930's his heavy-handed tactics caused the courts to order him not to interfere with the union organizers. In 1941, the company signed a contract with the United Auto Workers.

Other things began to go wrong in the 1920's and 1930's. His reputation was damaged when his publication, the "Dearborn Independent," made racist slurs. During his life, Ford was repeatedly accused of anti-Semitism, but he denied the charge.

Competition continued to hurt his business, despite the newly designed V-8 engine, which came out in 1932. Ford Motor Company found itself at the bottom of the Big Three automakers (General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford), but he was saved by the outbreak of the Second World War. Ford remained a pacifist but he again took advantage of war production. The Willow Run factory in Dearborn produced an immense number of B-24 bombers for the United States military. This plant and others around the world had produced 86,000 planes by the end of the war. Ford also produced tanks, jeeps, armored cars, and engines for robot bombs.

Edsel Ford died in 1943, at the age of 49, and his father took over again as the company's president. The old man's term did not last long, for he suffered a stroke in 1945. He died on April 7, 1947, at "Fair Lane," the Dearborn estate which he built in the firm's pre-Depression golden years. Control of the company then went to Edsel's oldest son, Henry Ford II.

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By Sara Ann McGill

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