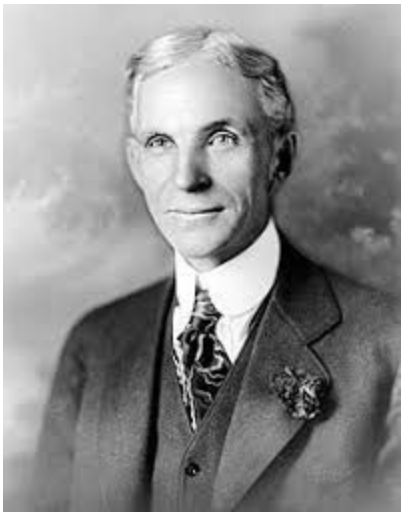
Henry Ford And The Model T



On May 26, 1927, Henry Ford watched the fifteen millionth Model T Ford roll off the assembly line at his factory in Highland Park, Michigan. Since his "universal car" was the industrial success story of its age, the ceremony should have been a happy occasion. Yet Ford was probably wistful that day, too, knowing as he did that the long production life of the Model T was about to come to an end. He climbed into the car, a shiny black coupe, with his son, Edsel, the president of the Ford Motor Company. Together, they drove to the Dearborn Engineering Laboratory, fourteen miles away, and parked the T next to two other historic vehicles: the first automobile that Henry Ford built in 1896, and the 1908 prototype for the Model T. Henry himself took each vehicle for a short spin: the nation's richest man driving the humble car that had made him the embodiment of the American dream.

Henry Ford invented neither the automobile nor the assembly line, but recast each to dominate a new era. Indeed, no other individual in this century so completely transformed the nation's way of life. By improving the assembly line so that the Model T could be produced ever more inexpensively, Ford placed the power of the internal combustion engine within reach of the average citizen. He transformed the automobile itself from a luxury to a necessity.

The Advent of the Model T seemed to renew a sense of independence among Americans who had lost their pioneer spirit to industrialization. Yet the methods that Henry Ford devised for producing his car so efficiently advanced that very industrialization. Like its inventor, the Model T represented both high ideals and hard practicalities.

Building a Motorcar for the Great Multitude

Ford, insisting that high prices ultimately slowed market expansion, had decided in 1906 to introduce a new, cheaper model with a lower profit margin: the Model N. Many of his backers disagreed. While the N was only a tepid success, Ford nonetheless pressed forward with the design of the car he really wanted to build. The car that would be the Model T.

"I will build a motorcar for the great multitude," he proclaimed. Such a notion was revolutionary. Until then the automobile had been a status symbol painstakingly manufactured by craftsmen. But Ford set out to make the car a commodity. "Just like one pin is like another pin when it comes from the pin factory, or one match is like another match when it comes from the match factory," he said. This was but the first of several counterintuitive moves that Ford made throughout his unpredictable career. Prickly, brilliant, willfully eccentric, he relied more on instinct than business plans. As the eminent economist John Kenneth Galbraith

later said: "If there is any certainty as to what a businessman is, he is assuredly the things Ford was not."

In the winter of 1906, Ford had secretly partitioned a twelve-by fifteen-foot room in his plant, on Piquette Avenue in Detroit. With a few colleagues, he devoted two years to the design and planning of the Model T. Early on, they made an extensive study of materials, the most valuable aspect of which began in an offhand way. During a car race in Florida, Ford examined the wreckage of a French car and noticed that many of its parts were of lighter-than-ordinary steel. The team on Piquette Avenue ascertained that the French steel was a vanadium alloy, but that no one in America knew how to make it. The finest steel alloys then used in American automaking provided 60,000 pounds of tensile strength. Ford learned that vanadium steel, which was much lighter, provided 170,000 pounds of tensile strength. As part of the pre-production for the new model, Ford imported a metallurgist and bankrolled a steel mill. As a result, the only cars in the world to utilize vanadium steel in the next five years would be French luxury cars and the Ford Model T. A Model T might break *down* every so often, but it would not break.

The car that finally emerged from Ford's secret design section at the factory would change America forever. For $825, a Model T customer could take home a car that was light, at about 1,200 pounds; relatively powerful, with a four-cylinder, twenty horsepower engine, and fairly easy to drive, with a two-speed, foot-controlled "planetary" transmission. Simple, sturdy, and versatile, the little car would excite the public imagination. It certainly fired up its inventor: when Henry Ford brought the prototype out of the factory for its first test drive, he was too excited to drive. An assistant had to take the wheel.

Questions:

1. What was the name of Henry Ford's company?

2. When was the first automobile built?

3. What did Ford accomplish by improving the assembly line?

4. What did the Model T do for Americans?

5. What was Model N?

6. Were people supportive of affordable cars at first?

7. What was Ford's goal in building an automobile?

8. Where was Ford's plant?

9. How long did Ford work on the plans for the Model T?

10. How much did a Model T cost?