

Henry Ford and the Model T

Adapted from "Today in History: July 30 (see <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/jul30.html>)."

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Figure 1. In this film from the Henry Ford Estate, volunteer Ed Hebb shows you how to care for and drive a Model T.

Automobile manufacturer Henry Ford was born July 30, 1863, on his family's farm in what is present-day Dearborn, Michigan. From the time that he was a young boy, Ford enjoyed tinkering with machines. Farm work and a job in a Detroit machine shop afforded him ample opportunities to experiment. He worked successively as an apprentice machinist, a part-time employee for the Westinghouse Engine Company, and an engineer with the Edison Illuminating Company. By then, he was earning enough money to experiment on building an internal combustion engine.

By 1896, Ford had constructed his first horseless carriage, a gasoline-powered motor car that he named the Quadricycle because it ran on four bicycle tires. He sold that vehicle, which was built on a steel frame and had a seat but no body, in order to finance work on an improved model.

Ford incorporated the Ford Motor Company in 1903, proclaiming, "I will build a car for the great multitude." In October 1908, he did so, offering the Model T for \$850. In the Model T's nineteen years of production, its price dipped as low as \$260—without extras. More than 15 million cars were sold in the United States alone. The Model T heralds the beginning of the Motor Age; the car evolved from luxury item for the well-to-do to essential transportation for the ordinary man.

Ford revolutionized manufacturing — combining precision manufacturing, standardized and interchangeable parts, division of labor, and by 1913, a continuous moving assembly line. By 1914, his Highland Park, Michigan, plant, using innovative production techniques, turned out a complete chassis every 93 minutes — a stunning improvement over the earlier production time of 728 minutes. Using a constantly moving assembly line, subdivision of labor, and careful coordination of operations, the company realized huge gains in productivity.

In 1914, Ford announced his plan to profit share with the workers and began paying his employees five dollars for an eight-hour day, nearly doubling the wages offered by other manufacturers. And, he reduced the workday from nine to eight hours in order to convert the factory to a three-shift workday. Ford's mass-production techniques eventually allowed for the manufacture of a Model T every twenty-four seconds. His innovations made him an international celebrity.

Ford's affordable Model T irrevocably altered American society. As more Americans owned cars, urbanization patterns changed. The United States saw the growth of suburbia, the creation of a national highway system, and a population entranced with the possibility of going anywhere anytime.

This film by Thomas Edison, Inc., shows what may be the first annual automobile parade. Held on November 4, 1899, in downtown Manhattan, the parade demonstrated at least ten different makes and models, including models with electric and steam-powered machines. Just three years earlier, in 1896, Henry Ford, Charles Brady King, Alexander Winton, and Ransom Eli Olds had each introduced gasoline cars. In 1900, the first National Auto Show was held at Madison Square Garden. Favorite models were the electrics and the steamers. In 1901, newly discovered Texas oil fields lowered gasoline prices. That same year, mass production techniques were introduced into car manufacturing. These two factors would prove to be key in the rapid growth of the American automobile industry.

On the web

Auto manufacturers in North Carolina

<http://www.historync.org/autos.htm>

Henry Ford's assembly line made the automobile much cheaper, but in the 1910s and 1920s cars were simple enough that they could be manufactured all over the country, on a small scale. NC Business History tells the story of several early automobile and truck manufacturers in North Carolina.

Who invented the automobile?

<http://www.loc.gov/tr/scitech/mysteries/auto.html>

Several men could lay claim to the title of "inventor of the automobile." This site from the Library of Congress explores the origins of the "horseless carriage."

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