

Automobiles for the Masses

by Rose Wilder Lane

In a short time Couzens returned from Chicago, bringing not only the delayed check, but several orders as well, which he had obtained largely because of the astounding record made by the Ford car in its race over the ice on Lake St. Clair.

The Ford company was not yet firmly established, but prospects were bright. America was awaking to the possibilities of the automobile, not merely as a machine for spectacular exhibitions of daring and skill at track meetings, or as the plaything of wealthy men, but as a practical time and labor-saver for the average person.

The automobile industry rose almost overnight. Orders poured into the offices of companies already organized; new companies were formed by dozens, capitalized at millions of dollars. Fly-by-night concerns sprang up like mushrooms, flooded the country with stock-selling schemes, established factories where parts of motor cars, bought elsewhere, were assembled. Fortunes were made and lost and made again. Almost every day saw new cars on the market.

Every one wanted an automobile. It was a luxury, it appealed to our longing to have something just a little better than our neighbors could afford. At the same time its obvious usefulness was an argument which overcame economy. The comic supplements, those faithful reflectors of American life in terms of the ridiculous, played with every variation of the theme, "He mortgaged the home to buy an automobile."

Amid this mounting excitement, in spite of millions to be made by building a car bigger, finer, more beautiful and luxurious than those of his competitors, Henry Ford still clung firmly to his idea. He seems to have been, at that time, the only automobile manufacturer who realized that the automobile supplied a real need of the average man, and that the average man is a hard-working, frugal individual, used to living without those things he must mortgage his home to get.

"The automobile of those days was like a steam yacht," Ford says. "It was built for only a few people. Now anything that is good for only a few people is really no good. It's got to be good for everybody or in the end it will not survive."

Radical philosophy, that. You might hear it from a street corner orator, one of that dissatisfied multitude which will insist, in spite of all the good things we have in this country, that merely because those things are not good for them they are not good. There is something of Marx in such a statement, something of George Washington, even something of Christianity. No wonder men were astounded by the notion that success could be founded on a theory like that.

"It's plain common sense, I tell you," Ford insisted, and in spite of good advice, in spite of sound business reasoning, that obstinate man went on in his own way and acted on that belief.

The Ford cars were cheap. Already underpriced nearly a thousand dollars in comparison with other cars, they were to be sold still cheaper, Ford insisted. Every cent he could save in construction, in factory management, in shrewd buying of material was deducted from the selling price.

The cars sold. Orders accumulated faster than they could be filled in the shop on Mack avenue. The profits went back into the factory. More men were added to the pay-roll, more machinery was installed, and still the orders came and the output could not keep up with them.

Mrs. Ford could afford to buy her own hats instead of making them, to get a new set of furniture for the parlor, to purchase as many gloves and shoes as she wanted. She did these things; she even talked of getting a hired girl to do the cooking. But Ford himself made little change in his way of living. He had always dressed warmly and comfortably, eaten when he was hungry, slept soundly enough on an ordinary bed. He saw no way to increase his comforts by spending more money on himself.

“More than enough money to keep him comfortable is no use to a man,” he says. “You can’t squander money on yourself without hurting yourself. Money’s only a lubricant to keep business going.”

He continued to work hard, designing simpler, cheaper cars, struggling with business difficulties as they arose, planning a new factory. Most of all he was interested in the new factory.

The success of his four-cylinder car provided money enough to warrant building it at last. A small tract of land on Piquette avenue was bought and Ford prepared to move from the rented Mack avenue place.

The watch-factory dream was finally to be realized. Henry Ford declared that by a large equipment of special machinery and a sympathetic organization of the work, cars could be produced at a hitherto unheard-of price. He planned to the smallest detail, to the most minute fraction of space, time, labor, the production of those cars.

Every part was to be machined to exact size. No supplementary fitting in the assembling room was to be necessary. From the time the raw iron entered one end of the factory till the finished car rolled away from the other end, there was not to be a moment’s delay, a wasted motion. The various parts, all alike to the fraction of an inch, were to fit together with automatic precision. And Ford announced that he would produce 10,000 cars in a single year.

The manufacturing world was stunned by the announcement. Then it laughed. Very few people believed that Ford would go far with such a radical departure from all accepted practice. But the new building was finished, Ford installed his machinery according to his plans, and when the wheels began to turn the world learned a new lesson in efficiency.

Still Ford’s success in the automobile field was not easily won. As a poor, hard-working mechanic, he had fought weariness and poverty and ridicule, to build his motor car; as an unknown inventor, still poor, he had struggled for a foothold in the business world and got it; now he was in for a long, expensive legal battle before he should be able to feel secure in his success.

The Association of Licensed Automobile Manufacturers, a combination of seventy-three of the biggest motor car companies, brought suit against the Ford company to recover tremendous sums of money because of Ford’s alleged violation of the Seldon patent.

Seldon held a basic patent covering the use of the gasoline engine as motive power in self-propelled vehicles. When automobiles began to be put on the market, he claimed his right under that

patent to a royalty on all such vehicles. Other automobile manufacturers almost without exception acceded to his claim and operated under a lease from him, adding the royalty to the selling price.

Henry Ford balked. He had been running a self-propelled gasoline engine long before Seldon had applied for his patent; furthermore, the royalties interfered with the long-cherished dream of cheapening his cars. He flatly refused to make the payments.

The lessees of the Seldon rights, perceiving in Ford a dangerous adversary in the automobile field, who would become still more dangerous if he succeeded in eliminating the royalty payments from his manufacturing costs, immediately began to fight him with all the millions at their command.

Source:

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