

# Henry Ford, An Introduction

by Unknown

Henry Ford spent his early life on a farm. He was born in a small frame house that stood in a grove a few miles from Detroit, near the River Rouge. On each side of the river were the farms of people who had come to the Middle West to get land of their own. Henry's father, William Ford, was one of these early settlers.

The elder Ford came to America from Ireland in 1847, the year of the great potato famine in that country. He made his way to southern Michigan where he found work. At first, he labored on the railroad and then at the arsenal in Dearbornville. Later, he was a "hired hand" on the farm of Patrick O'Hern in Springwells Township. Here William Ford settled down. He purchased forty acres of land, and with his employer, Patrick O'Hern, built a farmhouse. In 1861 he married Mary Litogot, the foster daughter of O'Hern.

Henry Ford, the first son of Mary and William, was born in 1863. Soon there were brothers and sisters. Their life on the farm was a round of doing chores, working in the fields, and taking trips to town. In the winter, the children went to the one-room school over at the "Scotch settlement."

Henry Ford might well have remained on the farm and followed in his father's footsteps. The soil around Dearborn was fertile, and the products of the land found a good market in nearby Detroit, a busy lake port. Although farming meant hard work and long hours, it was an honorable trade. William Ford was not rich, but neither was he poor. He held a position of respect in the community.

But Henry Ford had other ideas. He wanted to have something to do with machinery. He was interested in the tools of the farm rather than in the farm itself. He also tinkered with watches; at the age of thirteen he was repairing the timepieces of his friends. It was a real thrill for him when Fred Reden, a neighbor, brought the first portable steam engine to Dearborn. Henry was permitted to fire its boiler. On the trips to town with his father, he saw other machines, road engines, carding mills, and grist mills.

When Henry finished school at the age of sixteen, he did what thousands of other farmers' sons were doing—he left for the city.

Detroit was a bustling town of one hundred thousand people. It was a commercial center for the Great Lakes shipping trade, and it was also an industrial center. It was to the shops and factories of Detroit that Henry Ford came to learn a trade.

His first job, at the Michigan Car Works, lasted only six days, but he soon found another one at the machine shop of James Flowers and Bros., where he became a machinist's apprentice. In this shop he learned about engines, and about the tools and machines that made parts for other machines. At night he repaired watches in the jewelry shop of James Magill. A few months later, he left the Flowers' shop to work at the Dry Dock Engine Company where he had greater opportunity to learn about steam engines. When his apprenticeship was over, he became Henry Ford, the machinist.

Instead of continuing to work at his trade in the shops of Detroit, he went back to Dearborn. William Ford lent his son eighty acres of timbered land, and Henry Ford set up a saw mill. During the

harvesting season, he operated an engine for a group of threshers. He also found time to travel about southern Michigan repairing Westinghouse portable steam engines.

Henry Ford was also continuing his education. For several months he attended a business college in Detroit, all the while tinkering with machines and learning still more about tools. He had an opportunity to repair, and thus become familiar with, a “gas engine” at an iron works in Detroit. As an apprentice, he had read about such an engine, invented by a German named Otto, which received its power from an explosion inside the cylinder. Several Americans were also thinking about this “internal combustion” engine.

In 1888 he married Clara Bryant, whose father owned a farm near the Ford homestead in Dearborn. After their marriage, the young couple built a “square” house nearby, where they lived for nearly three years. During this time, Henry farmed as well as repaired and operated steam engines.

In 1891, Henry Ford ended his days on the farm by moving back to Detroit, where he was employed by the Edison Illuminating Company, one of several companies that furnished electricity to the city. Detroit was changing—in the days of his apprenticeship, there had been no electric lights for homes and streets and shops. Henry’s new job was to keep the steam engines running at the Willis Avenue power station.

The year 1893 was a good year for Henry Ford, in spite of the fact that it was a hard year of panic for many other people. At the World’s Fair in Chicago that summer, he was able to add to his knowledge of gas engines and “horseless carriages.” Late in the year, his son Edsel was born. Shortly after this, his pay was raised and he was transferred to the main plant of the Illuminating Company. To be nearer his new job, the Ford family moved to 58 Bagley Avenue in Detroit. In the back yard of the new home was a brick shed; here Henry set up his tools and continued his tinkering with gas engines.

His first experiment was not long in the making. With a piece of gas pipe, an old wheel, some wire, and other scraps of metal assembled on a long board fastened to the kitchen sink in the Ford home, he made his first model gas engine. Although it sputtered and jumped, it worked.

During the years that Henry Ford worked on his homemade engines, other men were also experimenting with gas engines, and they were just as determined as he was to make them operate successfully. The fair in Chicago had aroused the curiosity of many people, and the newspapers began to carry stories about “horseless carriages.” From France came word of the exploits of Daimler and Benz with their “road wagons,” and in 1895, New Yorkers saw three Benz “horseless wagons.” Henry Ford traveled East to see them. Late in the same year, the *Chicago Times-Herald* announced that it would give a \$5,000 prize to the winner of a race between these new contraptions. Only four cars were ready at race time, and only two got away from the starting line—a Duryea and a Benz. The Benz won. One of Henry Ford’s friends, Charles B. King of Detroit, was an umpire of the race. Back in Detroit, the two friends probably discussed the merits of the cars that King had seen in Chicago. At any rate, King gave Ford some intake valves for his engines.

Henry Ford continued to add to his knowledge of gas engines. Soon after the race in Chicago, the *American Machinist* magazine told of an engine invented by E. J. Pennington which, in a day when most gas engines were bulky and heavy, was light and compact. This idea appealed to Ford, and his work took a new turn.

Source:

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