

The Model T is Born

by Unknown

In spite of experimentation, reorganization, and patent difficulties, the year 1907 found the Ford Motor Company operating successfully. This was a year of panic in the nation, but the company made plans to build an even bigger factory to manufacture automobiles. In 1908, it was announced that the Ford Motor Company had purchased a race track in nearby Highland Park where it would construct the largest automobile plant in the world. At the same time, draftsmen and engineers were planning a new model, to be called model T. In October, 1908, the first model T appeared, and before the year ended, over three hundred of them had been shipped to dealers throughout the nation. The Ford company claimed that this new automobile “would sound the death knell of high prices and big profits.” Its advertisements announced that “we can devote all our time and money to taking care of the orders for the car that people have actually been waiting for—a family car at an honest price.” The engine was new and “get-at-able,” an important feature in a day when most automobile owners repaired their own cars.

While Henry Ford had been a prominent automobile manufacturer before 1908, it was this new “universal” car that brought a new era in America. The automobile was no longer intended for sportsmen alone, but for all those who could afford to buy one, and Henry Ford intended to see that the price of his automobile was low enough for millions of people to own a Ford car.

Soon after the success of the model T was assured, Henry Ford was asked about the secret of his ability to produce automobiles. He divulged his “secret” in these terms: have a simple design, use the latest machinery, standardize the parts, make the entire automobile yourself, and always have a good supply of materials on hand. Throughout the rest of his life, he held to these principles.

By 1911, Ford cars were manufactured by the hundreds of thousands. The process of assembling automobiles received more and more attention, and by 1914, a Ford car could be put together in an hour and a half. By the end of 1915, a million model T’s had been produced. It had taken seven years to make this many of them, but in the next eleven years, fourteen million more were placed on the market. The model T Ford was the “universal car” in fact as well as in name.

While model T’s changed in appearance from year to year, there was an even greater and never-ending change in the process of manufacturing them. The resulting economies brought lower prices, and this meant more cars for more people.

Henry Ford was ever on the lookout for ways and means to produce cars more efficiently. By 1914, a floor conveyor was in operation at the Highland Park plant, so that the half-completed cars moved through the plant while the workers stayed in one place. This assembly line became the key to greater production. In order to keep the line moving smoothly, machinery was continually being rearranged and new chutes and conveyors were installed. Each improvement brought new and often unforeseen problems in the never-ending task of fitting together the pieces of the huge jig-saw puzzle of production.

Although the Ford Motor Company did not manufacture the parts that were used in assembling the first Ford, this policy was changed through the years. More and more of the model T was made by the company in its own plant. In 1915, Henry Ford sent an agent out to Dearborn to buy farm land

along the River Rouge—thousands of acres were purchased. Now there would be room not only to enlarge the assembly line itself, but to manufacture more of the Ford in one factory. Here it would be possible to begin with raw materials—iron ore, sand, cotton, rubber, and the countless other materials—and convert them into steel, glass, and cloth to make the Ford. With this in view, a tremendous program of construction was begun along the banks of the River Rouge.

Soon there were industries within industries at the Rouge. Blast furnaces and coke ovens were fed with coal, iron ore, and limestone brought to the plant from Ford mines by Ford railroads and Ford freighters. There were glass mills, paper factories, tire plants, and saw mills. The products of these mills and plants flowed into the assembly lines not only at the Rouge plant but at other assembly plants scattered all over the world.

The production of Ford cars rose to gigantic proportions. In 1914, the year that Henry Ford and his engineers began to plan for the plant on the Rouge, over two hundred thousand automobiles were produced. But in the year 1923, over two million model T's rolled off the assembly lines. In 1925, nearly ten thousand Fords were completed in a single day in Ford plants. The world had never before seen such an industrial giant as the one Henry Ford and his son Edsel had created.

The automobiles produced by Ford and his competitors did more than replace the horse and carriage. They changed the daily habits of Americans everywhere.

No longer did families in the cities have to live in the shadow of the factories where the head of the household was employed. Some families moved to the “suburbs” many miles away from stores and industries, while other city dwellers left the urban areas completely to live in the country. On the other hand, those who had always lived on farms could come to the city with ease in automobiles. The farmers were able to enjoy the advantages of the city. Thus it was that Americans moved about in a way unheard of years before.

As travel increased, dirt roads were replaced by the super-highways. Service stations, motels, and garages dotted the newly-built concrete and brick roads. In the cities, people became aware of the “parking” problem, and of “traffic jams.” The increasing number of automobiles also brought death on the highways and city streets to hundreds of Americans each year.

As the years went by, automobile manufacturers changed too. At first, there were dozens of makers of automobiles whose names are all but forgotten now. As the number of manufacturers decreased, the number of cars made annually by the remaining companies grew larger and larger. Eventually people talked about the “big three” of the automobile industry.

Competition between rival makers and Henry Ford brought the days of the model T to an end. From 1908 to 1927, fifteen million Fords had been produced, the Ford Motor Company had become the colossus of the industry, and Henry Ford's name was known all over the world. Nevertheless, in order to maintain this position, it was necessary to keep pace with the times. In order to do this, the Rouge plant was silenced until a “new” Ford could be designed and put into production. Machine tools had to be replaced, and new dies and fixtures made. To accomplish this in the largest factory in the world was a herculean task. Industrial leaders all over the nation watched with eager eyes for news from Henry Ford at Dearborn. Finally, in December, 1927, the new model A was shown to the public. This new Ford was front page news over the nation. At the Madison Square Garden in New York City, attendance records were broken when crowds came to see the model A.

This new Ford bore little resemblance to the model T. It now had a gear shift, four-wheel brakes, and a foot throttle. It offered many variations in body styles and color, and it was the first automobile to have a safety-glass windshield.

The River Rouge plant once again hummed with activity. Thousands of model A's were produced each day. By 1932, five million of the "new" Fords were on the highways of the nation. That year, the Ford Motor Company introduced the V-8 engine, which was unique in its field.

The transition from the gas-pipe cylinder on the kitchen sink back at 58 Bagley Avenue in the 1890's to powerful eight-cylinder engines that were turned out by the thousands each day at the largest industrial plant in the world had taken a long time to accomplish. During these decades, Henry Ford relentlessly pursued his idea—more cars for more people.

Source:

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