

Looking Back

The Model T and American Life

Henry Ford is variously praised for having invented the internal combustion engine, invented the automobile, and invented the assembly line. He didn't do any of these three; but he did make possible the Model T—the car that “put America on wheels”—which marks its centenary this fall.

Ford was born in 1863 to a farming family in rural Michigan. At the age of sixteen, he got a job in a Detroit machine shop; by the time he was thirty, he had worked his way up to chief engineer of the city's main electrical plant. A man of considerable mechanical talent, Ford developed a gasoline-powered engine in 1893 and a “quadricycle” in 1896; he sold his inventions to finance further tinkering. In 1903 he founded the Ford Motor Company, one of hundreds of car firms in those days, most of which soon failed (as had two of Ford's own previous efforts, in 1898 and 1901). On October 1, 1908, the first Model Ts began rolling off the lot, with a price tag of \$850 (\$20,000 in today's money).

Ford's business model incorporated Frederick Winslow Taylor's ideas on efficiency and assembly-line production; his design emphasis was simplicity, his industrial aim mass production at low cost. By 1914, production time per car had dropped from 13 hours to 93 minutes and the price to \$575—“so low,” Ford hoped, “that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one.” To enlarge the market for his product, he instituted a \$5 workday for his employees, double the national norm. Sales peaked in 1923; 1.9 million Model Ts were sold that year at \$260 a pop. Some 15 million were sold overall by the time production ceased.

Ford spoke expectantly of car owners being able to “enjoy...the blessings of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces,” and indeed, the Model T and the automobile revolution did make it faster and more affordable to travel the countryside. But it also fundamentally changed the nation's landscape. Muddy and rutted trails gave way to paved roads and vast superhighways. Within Ford's own lifetime, the proportion of Americans living in urban areas almost tripled, and the suburb soon became the standard American pattern of settlement.

For all the pleasure and profit the car has made possible, it has also given us pollution, noise, nerve-wracking traffic, dislocated and distant families, and a dangerous dependency on foreign sources of energy. Our forebears unknowingly chose this trade-off—and even if we want to, we cannot unchoose it. In just the two short decades that Ford's inexpensive Model T was in production, owning a car went from a rare luxury to an affordable commodity to a simple necessity. Ford, who foolishly called history “bunk,” added, “We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history that we make today.” But we must remember our responsibility to those who will follow us, who will live with our choices and mistakes, in the shadow of the history we make today.