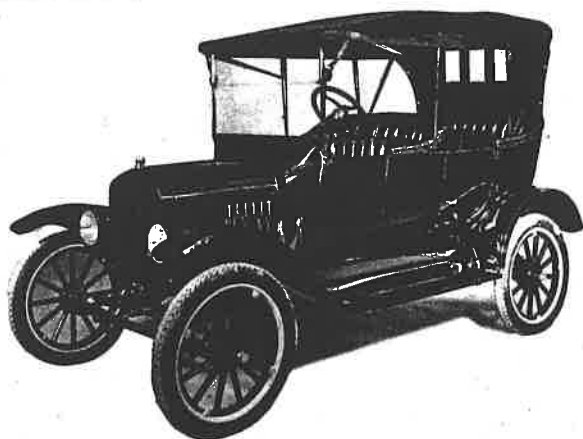


TIMES PAST

THE MODEL T
cost about
\$800 when it
was introduced
in 1908.



MASS PRODUCTION
and America's car
culture started with
Henry Ford.



HENRY FORD
imagined a car for
ordinary Americans.

The Car That

How Henry Ford's 1908 Model T—the first mass-produced and affordable

It all began a century ago in a factory on Piquette Avenue in Detroit.

In a secret back room on the third floor, Henry Ford, who by then had been building cars for several years, drew up plans for a new one. While he had already produced models he named, simply, for letters of the alphabet—B, C, F, K, etc.—it was

the Model T that would change everything.

The lightweight but sturdy Model T was the first affordable car. Mass produced along an assembly line, it not only spurred the growth of the auto industry and led the way to the adoption of mass production for industry as a whole, it also sowed the seeds of America's middle class and much of American life as we know it today.

Cars had been built in the U.S. since the 1890s, but in 1908 they were a luxury—a bit of an oddity, in fact. They were used not so much for getting around as for sport; wealthy auto enthusiasts toured the bumpy, gravel and dirt

roads from one part of the country to another, with newspapers following their journeys. In fact, there were fewer than 200,000 cars on the road when Ford built his Model T.

ASSEMBLY LINES

Ford grew up on his family's farm in Michigan but was always more interested in machines than crops. He was working as an engineer for the Edison Illuminating company in Detroit when he began building his first cars. With the encouragement of Thomas Edison himself, he founded the Ford Motor Company in 1903.

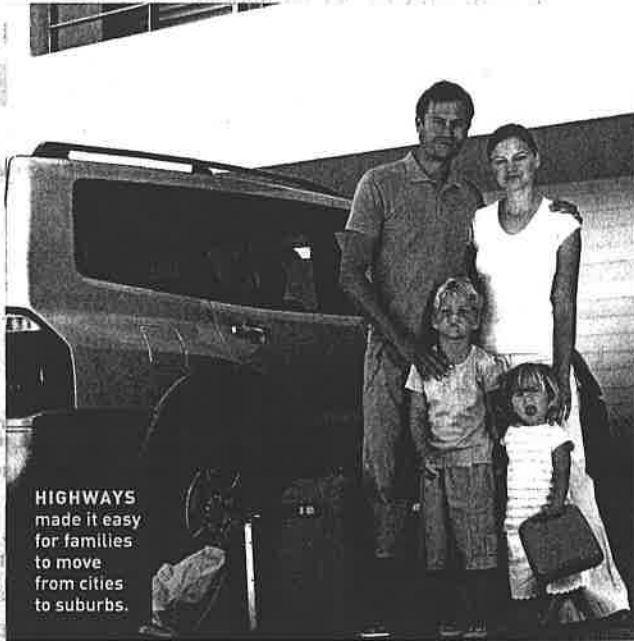
The first Model Ts, built one by one, sold for about \$800 (more than \$18,000 in 2008 dollars)—out of reach for most Americans. But then came Ford's biggest innovation: the moving assembly line, which allowed a worker to complete a task, then watch as the car moved on to the next worker and the next task.

The assembly-line concept had been used in slaughterhouses and for simple products like tin cans, but rarely with

LABOR
UNIONS
that formed
in the
1930s still
influence
the economy
and politics.



HIGHWAYS
made it easy
for families
to move
from cities
to suburbs.



Changed America

car—sparked the growth of highways, suburbs, and the middle class itself

By Monica Davey

products as complicated as cars. The assembly line lowered Ford's cost so much that he could slash the Model T's price to as little as \$260—a price that, for the first time, ordinary Americans could afford.

"If there's anything about Henry Ford that we could call genius, it was that he could imagine millions of people buying his automobile and driving it," says Charles Hyde, an automotive historian at Wayne State University in Detroit. "At the time, people thought that was crazy."

The shift was rapid. Sales of the Model T boomed. In coverage of a 1910 auto show in New York, *The New York Times* noted a 50 percent increase in sales of the Model T from a year earlier.

"The transportation problem is gradually being simplified by the practical use of the motor vehicle," *The Times* reported. According to the article, one man who looked over the exhibit of new vehicles

said, "The poor faithful old horse hasn't a chance in the world any more."

MIDDLE CLASS

Ripples from the Model T were enormous. With the cars came a nation that traveled more than ever before, that moved away from home, that built an elaborate road system.

The Model T also ended up spurring the growth of America's middle class. Because assembly line work was so tedious, Ford found it impossible

One Auto For Each 25 Americans by January 1
Remarkable Increase in Number of Cars Owned in This Country
Will Soon Bring Total to 3,946,664, Valued at \$2,000,000,000

THIS is a nation of automobile owners. Nothing like the distribution of motor vehicles in this country is to be found in any other part of the inhabited globe. Never before in history has a product, the unit value

the speeding up of the production usual in the second half year the 1,500,000 mark is sure to be attained. When more than 1,500,000 cars are added to those in operation on Jan. 1 last, it will be seen that at least 2,946,664 automobiles will be owned in the United

course, much less expensive to maintain from all points of view. The industry has been democratized. Argue as you will, say would have brought it not, or let your ire out, enthusiasm sears his with—the man who is

models for 1917. In many cases makes named below can be had in of models at varying prices, but un and the price given is cars below

THE NEW YORK TIMES,
August 6, 1916.
Today there's an auto
for every 1.2 people.

Monica Davey is the Chicago bureau chief of *The New York Times*.



FORD'S F-SERIES PICKUP has been the most popular vehicle in the U.S. for 26 years. But Ford, GM, and Chrysler continue to lose market share to foreign competitors.

to keep workers. So he boosted wages to at least \$5 a day—significantly higher than what other manufacturing workers were making at the time.

Workers flocked back to the Model T plant. But as other industrial wages rose to keep pace with Ford's, more and more workers made enough money to buy cars for themselves. By the late 1920s, 15 million Model Ts had been sold: Ford had not only created a revolutionary product, he had created, in effect, the market for it as well.

In the 1930s, as New Deal legislation gave labor unions greater legal standing, the United Autoworkers became one of the largest and most powerful unions—despite Ford's strong, sometimes violent opposition. Unions not only negotiated higher wages and benefits, they also began to have influence in Washington, where they successfully lobbied for a federal minimum wage and a 40-hour work week that still shape most Americans' lives today. In their heyday 50 years ago, unions counted 35 percent of the American workforce as members (versus 12 percent today).

By the 1950s, cars were also transforming the nation's once-rural landscape. To many people, it seemed as if America was being planted over with highways and strip malls, fast-food outlets, and sprawling suburbs outside every city.

"It's hard to find any other piece of technology that had a

Henry Ford would hardly recognize the industry he created, with foreign-owned factories in the South and West now turning out many of the cars America drives.

greater impact than Model T Fords did in the 20th century," says Hyde, the car historian. "In their own way, they helped promote the growth of suburbs, distant shopping centers, freeways. It's hard to imagine now how they changed people's lives."

THE NEW CONSUMER

The car that started it all eventually met its demise. Ford may have dreamed up the first car for the masses, but he didn't realize that he had also created a new, more demanding consumer who would soon be searching for the next model and the newest look. Ford's biggest competi-

ON THE ROAD

COMPANY	U.S. MARKET SHARE	
	1997	2007
GENERAL MOTORS	31%	23%
FORD	25%	15%
CHRYSLER	15%	13%
TOYOTA	8%	16%
HONDA	6%	10%
NISSAN	5%	7%
Other Asian and European Brands	10%	16%

SOURCE: MOTORINTELLIGENCE.COM

tors, General Motors and Chrysler, adapted his revolutionary production methods, but they went a step further and began offering new styles, colors, and features.

The Model T, which had only been made in black (suited for a speedy assembly line) since 1914, was eventually offered in other colors, but it was too late. In 1927, Ford stopped producing them.

"The Model T solved the problem that people had for basic transportation, but once that was sated, I guess people wanted something

a little flashier," says Jay Klehfoth, editor of *Vintage Ford* magazine and owner of four Model Ts.

Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler—known for decades as the "Big Three"—reached their peaks in the 1950s, when together they controlled more than 90 percent of the U.S. market.

NOT-SO-BIG THREE

But then, in the 1970s, American consumers became disenchanted with the quality, style, and cost of Detroit's cars. At the same time, foreign competitors, primarily from Japan and Europe, started producing more reliable and stylish cars using less costly workers.

In 1978, Volkswagen became the first foreign company since World War II to begin producing cars at a U.S. plant, in Pennsylvania. Other European and Asian carmakers soon followed. Last year, Toyota topped Ford in U.S. sales for the first time, coming in second behind General Motors (see chart).

Henry Ford would hardly recognize the industry he created. Though hundreds of thousands of Americans still work for the "Big Three," many of Detroit's factories have been shuttered and thousands of jobs shifted to Mexico and Asia—or to foreign-owned factories in the Western and Southern U.S., turning out the Toyotas, Hondas, Hyundais, and Mercedes that many Americans want in their driveways.

In any case, Ford, who died in 1947, was ambivalent about the America he helped shape, says Bob Casey of the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan.

"I think he would not have been all that keen on modern America," Casey says. "In a way, the Model T and mass production helped do away with small town America, rural America." ☐