

The Life of Henry Ford

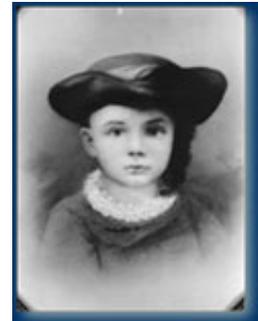
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childhood

Henry Ford, born July 30, 1863, was the first of William and Mary Ford's six children. He grew up on a prosperous family farm in what is today Dearborn, Michigan. Henry enjoyed a childhood typical of the rural nineteenth century, spending days in a one-room school and doing farm chores. At an early age, he showed an interest in mechanical things and a dislike for farm work.

In 1879, sixteen-year-old Ford left home for the nearby city of Detroit to work as an apprentice machinist, although he did occasionally return to help on the farm. He remained an apprentice for three years and then returned to Dearborn. During the next few years, Henry divided his time between operating or repairing steam engines, finding occasional work in a Detroit factory, and over-hauling his father's farm implements, as well as lending a reluctant hand with other farm work. Upon his marriage to Clara Bryant in 1888, Henry supported himself and his wife by running a sawmill.

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Henry Ford, age 2 1/2
Photo: P.O.2436

the engineer

In 1891, Ford became an engineer with the Edison Illuminating Company in Detroit. This event signified a conscious decision on Ford's part to dedicate his life to industrial pursuits. His promotion to Chief Engineer in 1893 gave him enough time and money to devote attention to his personal experiments on internal combustion engines.

These experiments culminated in 1896 with the completion of his own self-propelled vehicle-the Quadricycle. The Quadricycle had four wire wheels that looked like heavy bicycle wheels, was steered with a tiller like a boat, and had only two forward speeds with no reverse.

Although Ford was not the first to build a self-propelled vehicle with a gasoline engine, he was, however, one of several automotive pioneers who helped this country become a nation of motorists.



[Learn more about The Quadricycle in the Showroom of Automotive History](#)



Henry Ford and the
Quadricycle, 1896. Photo:
P.O.490



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ford motor company

After two unsuccessful attempts to establish a company to manufacture automobiles, the Ford Motor Company was incorporated in 1903 with Henry Ford as vice-president and chief engineer. The infant company produced only a few cars a day at the Ford factory on Mack Avenue in Detroit. Groups of two or three men worked on each car from components made to order by other companies.

Henry Ford realized his dream of producing an automobile that was reasonably priced, reliable, and efficient with the introduction of the Model T in 1908. This vehicle initiated a new era in personal transportation. It was easy to operate, maintain, and handle on rough roads, immediately becoming a huge success.

By 1918, half of all cars in America were Model Ts. To meet the growing demand for the Model T, the company opened a large factory at Highland Park, Michigan, in 1910. Here, Henry Ford combined precision manufacturing, standardized and interchangeable parts, a division of labor, and, in 1913, a continuous moving assembly line. Workers remained in place, adding one component to each automobile as it moved past them on the line. Delivery of parts by conveyor belt to the workers was carefully timed to keep the assembly line moving smoothly and efficiently. The introduction of the moving assembly line revolutionized automobile production by significantly reducing assembly time per vehicle, thus lowering costs. Ford's production of Model Ts made his company the largest automobile manufacturer in the world.



Aerial view of the Rouge Plant in 1930
Number of men on payroll at capacity:
81,000. Total floor space: 6,952,484 sq.
ft. Total cost: \$268, 991, 592.07.
Dearborn, MI. Photo: P.833.55282.A

The company began construction of the world's largest industrial complex along the banks of the Rouge River in Dearborn, Michigan, during the late 1910s and early 1920s. The massive Rouge Plant included all the elements needed for automobile production: a steel mill, glass factory, and automobile assembly line. Iron ore and coal were brought in on Great Lakes steamers and by railroad, and were used to produce both iron and steel. Rolling mills, forges, and assembly shops transformed the steel into springs, axles, and car bodies. Foundries converted iron into engine blocks and cylinder heads that were assembled with other components into engines. By September 1927, all steps in the manufacturing process from refining raw materials to final assembly of the automobile took place at the vast Rouge Plant, characterizing Henry Ford's idea of mass production.



[Learn more about the Model T](#)
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