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## Henry Ford

By Mary L. Bushong

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When Lincoln was president, most of the people in the United States lived on farms. This was also true of the William Ford family near Dearborn, Michigan. Who would have thought that a Michigan farm boy named Henry Ford would so revolutionize industry that it would change American society?

Young Henry was born on July 30, 1863, and was one of eight children. In those days, large families were necessary as the workforce of a farm. When he wasn't laboring in the fields, he attended a small, one-room schoolhouse. He loved mechanical things, especially clocks, and would repair them for free just for the opportunity to study the workings.



When he was 16, Henry left home and walked to Detroit. There he apprenticed himself to a mechanic for three years before moving on to work in an engine shop. By 1884, he returned home to work a farm given to him by his father. He married and appeared to be happy, but after two years, he was back in Detroit with his wife and son. His work at the Detroit Edison Company as a night engineer left him free during the day to work on his own version of the automobile in the shed behind his home.

In 1899, after building several different cars, Henry helped organize the Detroit Automobile Company, which later became known as Cadillac. The other partners wanted to build cars for rich people, but Henry disagreed and left.

Henry started the Ford Motor Company in 1903. He wanted to produce cars that the average man could afford. They originally started producing 8 different models, but in 1908 he introduced the Model T, which became the only car his company produced for many years.

Ford introduced several innovations that quickly propelled his company to the top. The cars were produced on a continuously moving assembly line, while workers did the same job over and over again. Building the cars in this fashion allowed them to produce a car every 93 minutes instead of the usual 728 minutes. This reduced time cut costs so the price was kept down.

Ford's other innovation caused a stir among employers all over the country. He paid his workers five dollars a day, which was twice what other manufacturers were doing. To add to that, he cut the workday from nine hours to eight hours. By paying his workers a living wage instead of a subsistence wage, they were able to afford things, like the cars they helped manufacture. This was exactly what Ford had in mind. His strategy worked and by 1927, his company had made half of all the cars on the road.

One of the biggest challenges of using an assembly line was keeping things moving. Sometimes suppliers would not be able to keep up with production, and it held up the line. Henry Ford solved this problem by buying up sources of raw materials; rubber plantations, coal mines, large tracts of forests, as well as transportation; ships and railroad cars to bring the materials to the plant. The River Rouge plant could take raw iron ore and manufacture it into all of the necessary parts in 28 hours. The construction of the plant was amazing, because Ford used only the profits from sales of the Model T to build it. That plant alone employed 100,000 people.

Unfortunately, not everything Ford did was a success. His lack of schooling caused him to distrust others who had an education. He believed in his own instincts for the automobile market and would not listen to others around him. His stubbornness caused the company to fall from being number one to number three, behind General Motors and Chrysler. He made an unsuccessful run for the Senate and angered many people with his anti-Semitism and Pacifist position during World War One and World War Two.

Ford also hated labor unions. His was the last of the large car manufacturing companies to be unionized. In 1941, he gave in only because the workers threatened to shut the plant down.

In 1936, Ford established the Ford Foundation. It was partly a way to keep control of the company within the family, but it also helped preserve aspects of history, which were quickly disappearing in Michigan. Through the Foundation, he constructed Greenfield Village and the Henry Ford Museum. They also purchased buildings such as Edison's laboratory and created the Edison Institute and Museum.



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Henry Ford died in his home, Fair Lane, on April 7, 1947, but not before he touched the lives of almost every person in the United States in some way. By 1912 he had sold 7000 Ford dealerships all over the country. He pushed for gas stations and better roads. Many people credit his desire to create a mass market for cars with the emergence of the middle class.

Ford used the inventions of others to innovate new manufacturing techniques, but his personality baffled those around him. James Couzens, his one-time business manager summed it up this way, "You cannot analyze genius, and Ford is a genius."

Henry Ford

## Questions

1. Why were large families necessary on the farm?

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2. Henry wanted to build cars for

- A. The rich
- B. The average man
- C. The working poor

3. How did the continuously moving assembly line affect working class families?

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4. The large manufacturing plant, which put all of Henry Ford's ideas into motion was called

- A. River Rouge plant
- B. The Rouge River Valley plant
- C. River Valley plant
- D. The Red River plant

5. Why do you think Ford sold so many dealerships around the country?

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6. Why would Henry Ford's poor education make him distrust people who were educated?

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7. What character quality of Ford caused the company to slip from first to third place among car manufacturers?

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8. What is the difference between a subsistence wage and a living wage?

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