

Henry Ford and the Model T ^[1]

Automobile manufacturer Henry Ford was born July 30, 1863, on his family's farm in what is present-day Dearborn, Michigan. From the time that he was a young boy, Ford enjoyed tinkering with machines. Farm work and a job in a Detroit machine shop afforded him [ample](#) ^[2] opportunities to experiment. He worked successively as an apprentice machinist, a part-time employee for the Westinghouse Engine Company, and an engineer with the Edison Illuminating Company. By then, he was earning enough money to experiment on building an internal combustion engine.

By 1896, Ford had constructed his first horseless carriage, a gasoline-powered motor car that he named the Quadricycle because it ran on four bicycle tires. He sold that vehicle, which was built on a steel frame and had a seat but no body, in order to finance work on an improved model.

Ford incorporated the Ford Motor Company in 1903, proclaiming, "I will build a car for the great multitude." In October 1908, he did so, offering the Model T for \$850. In the Model T's nineteen years of production, its price dipped as low as \$260—without extras. More than 15 million cars were sold in the United States alone. The Model T heralds the beginning of the Motor Age; the car evolved from luxury item for the well-to-do to essential transportation for the ordinary man.

Ford revolutionized manufacturing — combining precision manufacturing, standardized and interchangeable parts, division of labor, and by 1913, a continuous moving assembly line. By 1914, his Highland Park, Michigan, plant, using innovative production techniques, turned out a complete [chassis](#) ^[3] every 93 minutes — a stunning improvement over the earlier production time of 728 minutes. Using a constantly moving assembly line, subdivision of labor, and careful coordination of operations, the company realized huge gains in productivity.

In 1914, Ford announced his plan to profit share with the workers and began paying his employees five dollars for an eight-hour day, nearly doubling the wages offered by other manufacturers. And, he reduced the workday from nine to eight hours in order to convert the factory to a three-shift workday. Ford's mass-production techniques eventually allowed for the manufacture of a Model T every twenty-four seconds. His innovations made him an international celebrity.

Ford's affordable Model T irrevocably altered American society. As more Americans owned cars, urbanization patterns changed. The United States saw the growth of suburbia, the creation of a national highway system, and a population entranced with the possibility of going anywhere anytime.

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In this [film from the Henry Ford Estate](#) ^[16], volunteer Ed Hebb shows you how to care for and drive a Model T. (Thanks to Henry Ford Estate-Fair Lane, a National Historic Landmark, for supporting our educational mission.)

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