

## The Vision That Remade America

by Diane Weaver

Instructor Dr. Susanna Robbins

It was the beginning of a typical day in Detroit, Michigan. In the early morning hours, the city lay quiet. Soon it would awaken, and the clip-clop of horses' hooves joined the long, low, distant whistle signaling an approaching train. The sound of pedestrians calling out greetings to their neighbors blended with streetcars clicking across the tracks. Inside the cars, debates centered on the upcoming presidential election. Was the Republican William McKinley, who promised prosperity with a gold standard, the better candidate? Those who favored coining silver argued for Democrat William Jennings Bryan (Tindall and Shi 673-675). Yes, it appeared to be a typical day. But as it turned out, this day was extraordinary.

The date was June 4, 1896. Suddenly, the quiet of the morning was disrupted by a peculiar noise, the sound of an engine making its way down the street. The engine belonged to a horseless carriage, also known as the Quadricycle. Its rider and builder was Henry Ford, a passionate machinist who had spent the preceding three years building it (Watts 37-41). It was a small start, but Ford had big plans. Although many others were also building automobiles, Ford was the only one envisioning every American with a car (Henry Ford). In his book *My Life and Work*, Ford explains that others were "operating under the false principle that there was only a limited market for automobiles" (60). Ford promoted a new ideology, consumer prosperity, and believed that an affordable car would transform people's lives (Henry Ford; Watts 120). It was Henry Ford's vision, not his intellect, which made him a genius.

Ford was born into a farm family near Dearborn, Michigan, in July of 1863, only a few weeks after the battle of Gettysburg (Chronology; Snow). Ford's childhood was sheltered from the unrest in the country, and was mostly influenced by a loving mother and by working the land. As a young boy, Ford lived a typical farmer's life, working hard in the fields during planting and harvesting seasons, and going to school in the winter (Watts 6-16). The events that most shaped Ford's life happened between the ages

of twelve and thirteen. When he was twelve, for the first time in his life he saw a machine-operated vehicle. He was riding in a wagon with his father when they passed the “road engine” (Ford 23). Immediately, he jumped from the wagon to inspect the machine (Ford 22-23). Ford calls it “the biggest event in those early years” (22). The most devastating event, though, was the sudden death of his mother when he was thirteen. Her nurturing and love had always made home a happy place for him. Losing her was a dreadful shock for the young Ford, causing pain that he carried for years to come (Watts 9+).

The woman who most supported Ford in adulthood was his wife of almost sixty years, Clara Bryant. Recognizing her faith in him, Ford nicknamed her “The Believer” (Snow). The couple was married in April of 1888 (Chronology). Five years later, on November 6, 1893, their only child, a son, was born. They named him Edsel Bryant Ford (Chronology). Edsel was a bright child, and as a youngster he made his father proud. When Edsel became an adult, however, the relationship between father and son was strained. In spite of raising Edsel in an environment that was quite different from his own childhood, the elder Ford expected his son to exhibit, like himself, the grit of a farmer (Henry Ford).

Although Ford barely finished eighth grade, a strong drive to learn had taken him from an inquisitive twelve year old to an employed engineer (Henry Ford). When he was sixteen years old, he left the family farm and moved to Detroit to follow his dream (Chronology). Over the next twelve years, he held numerous jobs, and even returned to the family farm for a time. Eventually, in 1891, he was offered an engineering position at the Edison Illuminating Company (Watts 23-34). Everywhere he went, he was hungry for knowledge about machines. His supervisors at Edison remembered him as “unusually dedicated to learning about engine technology” (qtd. in Watts 35).

Although he was working at Edison, an energy provider, two things sparked Ford's interest that put him on the path to building a car. First, the national popularity of bicycles captivated him and “seemed to trigger new thinking about the mechanical possibilities of transportation” (Watts 36). At the same time, he started to learn about gasoline engines. He focused his attention on the development of such an engine, spending every spare moment working on it. Finally, on Christmas Eve of 1893, in the

kitchen sink, his first internal-combustion engine came to life. Over the next few years, Ford recruited friends and colleagues to join him on the journey to building an automobile (Watts 36-41). Ultimately, on that joyous day in 1896, the Quadricycle made its debut. It was built without brakes and ran at a maximum speed of twenty miles per hour, but it was an instant success (Henry Ford). Within a few months, it was attracting crowds everywhere it went (Ford 33).

The Quadricycle opened the door to publicity and financial support, but it would be another twelve tumultuous years before Ford was able to build the car he envisioned, a machine he described as the “universal car” (Henry Ford; Watts 112). During those years, Ford resigned from his job at Edison, became a race car hero, and launched two automobile companies that failed. Both companies experienced similar challenges – Ford was unable to deliver a car that the company could take to the market. The cause of the failure may have hinged on the fact that Ford believed in producing a car for the common people, and was unwilling to sell the luxury car his investors wanted. After the second failure, Ford vowed to work for himself from that point forward (Watts 50-82). He was unable to keep that promise, however, and on June 16, 1903, the Ford Motor Company was established with the support of new investors. This time the company focused on building cars that were affordable and dependable (Watts 86-88). Ford later remembered this period with affection, writing that “The business went along almost as by magic. The cars gained a reputation for standing up. They were tough, they were simple, and they were well made” (56). In 1909, six years after the launch of the Ford Motor Company, they released the “universal car” Ford had been pursuing. Named the Model T, it was a lightweight, open-top car with a crank start. Starting at a cost of only \$850, orders quickly poured in. In less than a year, the factory became so backlogged that they had to put a hold on new orders (Watts 116-118).

The popularity of the Model T had Ford immediately thinking about mass production. He yearned to produce 1,000 cars per day (Henry Ford). In order to simplify the manufacturing process, he limited production to only the Model T with basic features. “Any customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants,” he declared, “so long as it is black” (72). This decision, coupled with the purchase of land at

Highland Park, near Detroit, to build a bigger factory had critics speculating that the Ford Motor Company would soon be out of business (Ford 73). Ford, however, was undaunted by the criticism. Orders for the Model T continued, and on January 1, 1910, production began at the new Highland Park facility (Chronology). With focus shifted to mass production, work at Highland Park became more about efficiency. Borrowing an idea from meat packing plants, they tested the use of a conveyer belt to move the car past workers who were assembling it, instead of having the workers maneuver around the factory (Henry Ford). The process worked extremely well, and a few years later the world's first assembly line was producing half of the automobiles in the United States (Henry Ford; Watts 139). With this, Ford had achieved another goal: 1,000 cars were rolling off the line each day (Henry Ford).

Although efficient, the assembly line was monotonous; the work was neither compelling, nor satisfying. In 1913, ten percent of the employees at Highland Park were absent each day and the turnover rate was 370 percent (Watts 181). Along with these realities, Ford held a populist perspective, “a tradition [that] bestowed social dignity and economic independence upon the average citizen and defended a kind of old-fashioned, property-owning individualism” (Watts 183). The two converged to bring about unprecedented labor reform. On January 5, 1914, Ford announced that wages would be increased two-fold to five dollars per day, while the work day would be reduced to eight hours. The response was overwhelming. Newspapers across the country wrote about it, while thousands of men sent letters or traveled to Detroit hoping for an opportunity to work at the Ford Motor Company (Watts 178-179). The wage, however, was conditional. In Ford's description, “It was a sort of prosperity-sharing plan. But on conditions. The man and his home had to come up to certain standards of cleanliness and citizenship” (128). Even with prerequisites, the plan was successful. Most of the new hires the following year were attributed to growth, not turnover (Ford 129). More significant though, was the birth of a labor policy that benefited workers without the typical conflict between labor and capital.

By 1922, Ford had realized his vision. He had sold millions of cars and become a national hero. Success, however, did not look good on Ford. As Richard Snow writes in *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of*

*Henry Ford*, “At the peak of a success unsurpassed in history, Ford's nature began to curdle and darken.”

While Ford was always determined and a bit controlling, he became obsessively stubborn and domineering in his later years. Once, when his team took initiative to build a follow up to the Model T, he looked at the prototype for a few minutes, then proceeded to destroy it, tearing off the doors and ripping the seats (Watts 133). Ford became an authoritarian, which led to labor disputes in the 1930's. His relationship with his son Edsel was the biggest calamity. In one example, after appointing him president of the company, Ford humiliated Edsel by ordering a stop to construction Edsel had approved, and subsequently demanded that the hole for the foundation be left unfilled. “I don't know what kick Father gets from humiliating me this way,” Edsel disclosed to a friend (Henry Ford). It is a common belief that Ford's badgering of Edsel ultimately caused the terminal illness that cost Edsel his life in 1943 (Snow; Chronology).

Ford lived five years after his son's death. By the end of his life, he had built a two square mile factory, the gigantic River Rouge, to replace Highland Park (Watts 30). The list of his ventures went far beyond automobiles, however. He built Greenfield Village, a museum dedicated to American history, took a trip to Europe in an attempt to stop World War I, owned a newspaper, and unsuccessfully ran for the United States Senate (Watts 31+). When he died in 1947, at age 83, thousands of people lined the streets, waiting in line to pay their last respects (Henry Ford).

Ford died an American hero, not because he was an intellectual genius, but because he was a man with a vision. In 1922 he wrote: “It is a very human tendency to think that what mankind does not yet know no one can learn...One good way to hinder progress is to fill a man's head with all the learning of the past” (249). He was quite flawed, not formally educated, and admitted to rarely reading more than the headlines of newspapers, yet Henry Ford left the world a radically different place (Watts). In the end, one cannot help but admire his fierce determination and the unwavering commitment to his vision.

## Works Cited

*Chronology*. The Henry Ford, 2013. Web. 17 April 2014

<<http://www.hfmgv.org/exhibits/hf/Chronology.asp>>.

Ford, Henry, and Samuel Crowther. *My Life and Work*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1922. Print.

“Henry Ford.” *American Experience: The Titans*. For PBS by WGBH Educational Foundation, 2012.

Web. 17 April 2014. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/henryford>>.

Snow, Richard. “The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Henry Ford.” *The Daily Beast*. The Daily Beast

Company LLC, 14 May 2013. Web. 17 April 2014. <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/05/14/the-wonderful-horrible-life-of-henry-ford.html>>.

Tindall, George Brown, and David Emory Shi. *America: A Narrative History*. Vol. 2. Brief 9th Ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2013. Print.

Watts, Steven. *The People's Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century*. 1st Vintage Books Ed. New York: Vintage Books, 2006, c2005. Print.