The Rise of Henry Ford

Just a businessman in search of fortune?

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Who really was Henry Ford? Most people are familiar with the Ford name, knowing he was a leader in the automotive industry who pioneered

mass production and assembly lines. What most don’t know though is that he was more than just a big businessman looking to make his fortune. One might ask, how did Ford build such an empire without the thought of how much wealth he could amass? I believe it’s important to fully understand the nature of his life and business endeavors, and how his passion for invention, mixed with philanthropy, allowed him to achieve great success.

Henry Ford was born on his family’s farm in Dearborn, Michigan on July 30, 1863, and was the first of eight children born to William and Mary Ford. Even at a young age Henry showed an interest in mechanical work and fixing things. When he was 13 years old, he was able to fix a pocket watch his father had given him, quickly taking it apart and figuring out how to reassemble it. He was soon being asked by friends and neighbors to fix their watches as well, seeing Fords natural talent after repairing his first watch (“Henry Ford Biography”).

Though he enjoyed working on and building things, he didn’t care much for working on the farm. Ford stated on page 22 of his book, *My life and Work*, “It was life on the farm that drove me into devising ways and means to better transportation.” He went on to explain how his first notions of the farm was that, “considering the results, there was too much work on the place. That is the way I still feel about farming.” When Ford was 12 years old, he had an experience he would never forget. While heading into town he met a road engine just outside of Detroit. “I remember that engine as though I had seen it only yesterday, for it was the first vehicle other than

horse-drawn that I had ever seen. The engine had stopped to let us pass with our horses and I was off the wagon and talking to the engineer before my father, who was driving, knew what I was up to.” That encounter alone of being exposed to his first engine is what sparked his interest in automotive transportation (Ford 22, 23).

While Ford always knew he wanted to work with machinery, his father didn’t quite like the idea and thought the farm is where he should be working. “When I left school at seventeen and became an apprentice in the machine shop of the Drydock Engine Works, I was all but given up for lost (Ford 24).” After Fords apprenticeship was over, he decided to go back to the farm while working at the Westinghouse Engine Company part-time. He made his own machine shop to work on things in his spare time and built out of it his own steam powered tractor (Gelderman). Interestingly, Ford initially wasn’t building steam vehicles with road use in mind. “I thought it more important first to develop the tractor. To lift farm drudgery off flesh and blood and lay it on steel and motors has been my most constant ambition. It was circumstances that took me first into the actual manufacture of road cars (Ford 26).” What he later began to realize is that people weren’t looking for machinery to work on the farm but were more interested in a wagon for road use. He even believed that, had it not been for the display of the automobile, farmers wouldn’t have been convinced of the usefulness of farm tractors (Ford 26).

His main focus had always been gaining knowledge and experience for building a horseless carriage, and he never let much get in the way of that goal. “The work with the Westinghouse representative only served to confirm the opinion I had formed that steam was not suitable for light vehicles. That is why I stayed only a year with that company. There was nothing more that the big steam tractors and engines could teach me and I did not want to waste time on something that would lead nowhere (Ford 27).” In 1885 he had his first experience with a gas engine, accepting the challenge of repairing the engine that was unfamiliar technology to everyone in town. “That gave me a chance to study the new engine at first hand and in 1887 I built one on the Otto four-cycle model just to see if I understood the principles (Ford 28).” Ford soon decided to make his way back to the farm to experiment with his newfound technology, and in 1890 began working on his own two-cylinder engine. Not long into his work Ford decided to take a job with the Detroit Electric Company as an engineer and machinist, not being able to pass up the pay of 45 dollars a month. Still dedicated to working on his project every night after work, he finished up his gas engine in 1893 (Ford 30). “By 1896 he had completed his first horseless carriage, the “Quadricycle,” so called because the chassis of the four-horsepower vehicle was a buggy frame mounted on four bicycle wheels (Gelderman).”

Ford was later backed by investors, and in 1899 some of them helped to form the Detroit Automobile Company. All of his investors abandoned his cause though, as they were eager to release a car to the public. Ford,

however, wanted to hold off to make improvements until he felt his car was ready for customers (Gelderman). This shows just how dedicated Ford was in making an automobile that he felt was worthy for public use. He didn't show concern for making money by getting a vehicle out on the market as quick as possible. Not only that, he also lost serious investors in the name of perfection for the benefit of the public. In 1903, after leaving his first company, he started the Ford Motor Company and was ready to begin building his automobiles. "Ford was dedicated to the production of an efficient and reliable automobile that would be affordable for everyone; the result was the Model T, which made its debut in October 1908 ("Henry Ford")." While improvements were made along the way, the same Model T was still being produced until 1927. As was the case with all of Fords endeavors, this was done by design as he explains in his book. "The changes have been brought about through experience in the making and not through any change in the basic principle—which I take to be an important fact demonstrating that, given a good idea to start with, it is better to concentrate on perfecting it than to hunt around for a new idea. One idea at a time is about as much as anyone can handle (Ford 21, 22)."

When Ford Motor Company was first taking off, production relied heavily on skilled craftsman, which at one point consisted of two-thirds of the workforce. Ford factories weren't manufacturing parts, only assembling them. The manufacturing process was done by third party machine shops and the parts weren't exact, so skilled workers were needed to get the parts

to fit properly (Daniel S61). Ford started breaking production work up into repetitive, simple operations that any person was capable of learning, so skilled work become less and less relied on but lent to faster production speed. (Daniel S62). With more orders coming in for the Model T than what the factory could produce, Ford made a revolutionary move by installing a moving assembly line. What used to take 12 hours to build a car now only took two and a half. This resulted in the cost of the Model T dropping from 850 dollars in 1908 to 310 dollars by 1926 for a car that was continually improved from the first model (“Henry Ford Biography”). With the Model T being produced for 19 years, Ford counted 15,500,000 sold cars in the United States, nearly 1,000,000 sold in Canada, and Great Britain accounted for 250,000. With these numbers, Ford was credited with producing half of all automobiles sold on the world market by that time (Gelderman). “The motor age arrived owing mostly to Ford’s vision of the car as the ordinary man’s utility rather than as the rich man’s luxury. Once only the rich had travelled freely around the country; now millions could go wherever they pleased (Gelderman).”

Henry Ford was an interesting individual whose knowledge and vision bordered genius. At a young age he already had great plans for developing a machine to help his family and families across the country. No matter what was going on in his life, his central focus was how to devise a proper road car, and his passion for his work and ideas is what led him to the finish line. Nowhere in Fords story will you find that he was motivated by money of any

sort for developing his automobile, and in some cases he was willing to lose money and support to see his vision through. He looked to his philosophy of improving society to create one of the most successful companies and forever changed industries. Ford explains in his book, “I do not consider the machines which bear my name simply as machines. I take them as concrete evidence of the working out of a theory of business which I hope is something more than a theory of business – a theory that looks toward making this world a better place in which to live.”

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