

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Eighty-Five

Henry Ford

LESSON IDEA

To show how Henry Ford used his own creative skills, and the principles of competitive free enterprise, to prosper himself while benefiting millions of others.

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THE ARMIES of the North and the South had barely finished burying their dead at Gettysburg, and John D. Rockefeller had hardly begun raking in profits from an oil refining business in Cleveland, when William and Mary Ford of Dearborn, Michigan, announced the arrival of their firstborn son. The date was July 30, 1863; and the infant, whose name was Henry, was destined to become one of the most famous millionaire manufacturers in America.

As the years rolled by, three more sons and two daughters were born to the Fords, and their fortunes increased with the number of their offspring. The forty acres they farmed grew to eighty, then to two hundred thirty. Their farm was known as one of the finest in the district; and in the opinion of William Ford, the best life in the world — the one he wished for each of his sons — was that of a farmer. But Henry had other ideas. In his biography he tells us: "My earliest recollection is that, considering the results, there was too much work on the place. That is the way I still feel about farming . . . There was too much hand labor on our own and all other farms of the time. Even when very young I suspected that much might somehow be done in a better way. That is what took me into mechanics — although my mother always said that I was a born mechanic."

Henry's penchant for fixing things or making things was noticeable when he was only six years old. He began collecting scraps of metal, such as old knife blades, clock springs, bolts, nuts, old files, and broken bits of farm machinery. He spent much of his spare time during his school years at the blacksmith's shop in Dearborn, learning to make tools. Eventually he built a forge and bellows in his farm workshop and found an anvil on which he could hammer hot metal into any shape he chose. As biographer Cy Caldwell writes: "He soon began to do the repairs on broken tools and farm machinery, not only on his father's farm but on the neighbors'. By the time he was twelve he was the unofficial — and usually unpaid — repairman for the entire neighborhood. He did it, not for profit, but because he loved the work. To repair something, to make it work again, was his chief delight. If anyone paid him, he used the money to buy more tools and materials . . .

"When he was thirteen, he began to build a small engine and finally constructed one that ran. And this feat, remarkable for any boy of his age, he accomplished with no materials other than pieces of scrap metal salvaged from the blacksmith shop and from broken farm machinery."

Henry's passion for mechanical work pulled him away from the farm and into the city soon after he finished grade school. His first job was as an apprentice machinist at James Flower and Company, one of the best machine shops in Detroit. Flower paid him \$2.50 a week and expected him to

report for work at six in the morning and stay until seven in the evening. But neither long hours or short pay mattered in the slightest to the young man who loved machinery and had come to the city to learn all there was to know about how things work.

TWELVE YEARS LATER, in 1892, Ford was still learning — now as a mechanical engineer at the Edison Illuminating Company in Detroit. It was the year that the first American automobile made its appearance; and like most mechanics of the day, Henry was fascinated by the mechanical wonder and determined to make one of his own.

Working in his spare time with tools that were crude and inadequate, the young mechanic finally put a working model together by trial and error in 1896. Biographer Keith Sward describes Ford's first automobile as a "gasoline 'quadricycle,' its chassis a buggy frame mounted on four bicycle wheels. Its air-cooled motor had two cylinders, which Ford had made by hand from the exhaust pipe of a steam engine. Having no reverse gear, the vehicle could move forward but not backward. The power from its motor was transmitted to the rear wheels by a revolving leather belt.

"From the standpoint of mechanics or design, the car had no novel features. It was like most of the other automotive models of the period . . . The significance of the Ford model of 1896 . . . is the fact that it worked and that it encouraged Ford to go ahead."

In the next several years, Ford brought out two more experimental cars; and by 1899 he was a recognized pioneer in the field. Farsighted businessmen and inventors, like Thomas Edison, were predicting a great future for the auto; but the American public still clung to its carriages and horse flesh and did all it could to discourage the enterprising automobileers. In San Rafael, California, for example, an ordinance was passed which required the driver of an automobile to come to a dead stop within three hundred feet of every passing horse. In Vermont it was mandatory for every motorist in motion to employ "a person of mature age" to walk one-eighth of a mile ahead of him, bearing a red flag in his hand. In 1902 the speed limit within such cities as Savannah, Cincinnati, and San Francisco was eight miles per hour; and most large cities

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The fascinating life of Henry Ford, complete with myths and legends, has been told by many authors. Three Ford books that we would recommend are: *The Wild Wheel* by Garet Garrett; *Henry Ford* by Cy Caldwell; and *The Legend Of Henry Ford* by Keith Sward. All three authors describe in detail the major Ford achievements as well as the peculiarly naive political thinking, pacifism, and anti-Semitism that Henry indulged in at one time or another. But it is not for his offbeat thinking that Ford should be remembered, but for the way he used competitive capitalism — and everyone profited.

forbade automobileers to use parkways, such as Chicago's Michigan Boulevard, because they were reserved for horse-drawn vehicles. The farmers of the nation bitterly denounced the "devil wagons" because they threw their teams into a panic.

This prejudice against motor cars was probably based on three things: The early models, built entirely by hand, were too expensive for most people to buy (oats were cheaper); the noisy horns and engines frightened both men and beasts; and the mechanical wonders were always breaking down at the side of a roadway, which made the owner the subject of snide remarks, jeers, and ridicule from passersby. The public was destined to cling to its horse and carriage until someone built a car that would run dependably, and one that most Americans could afford to buy. In other words, the new invention had to be translated into the realm of practical manufacturing before it would be accepted.

FORD'S EXPERIMENTAL models and his test runs through the streets of Detroit (a privilege for which he had a special permit to protect him from the violent acts of draymen and teamsters) attracted the attention of a group of local capitalists who wanted to go into the business of making and selling cars. In 1899, these financiers invited Ford to join them as part owner and chief engineer in a company called the Detroit Automobile Company. The same year another pioneer, Ransom E. Olds, as manager of the Olds Motor Works, began to produce an inexpensive and well-built car known as the "merry Oldsmobile." And while Olds did well in the business, Ford was a complete failure. The problem

