

HENRY FORD:

The Great Industrialist & Fateful Hunger March

By Greg Zyla

Q: Greg, I recall reading one of your articles on the history of cars a while back. In it, you mention how things were back at the beginning, especially when it comes to Henry Ford himself. I enjoy your columns and am wondering if you can comment on Henry Ford and the Hunger March incident? Charles L., Owego NY.

A: Charles, thanks for your letter and kind words. As for your specific question, Henry Ford was the amazing industrialist who to this day is the godfather of the perfected auto assembly line. Born July 30, 1863, Ford was a good natured individual who grew up on the family farm in Greenfield Township, MI. Ford was a person who loved gadgets more than farming with his family.

History paints Ford as a successful industrialist who always felt "every man for himself" was the secret to success. As a teenager, he became an accomplished watch repairman which he learned by taking apart and putting watches together again. He disliked school and became obsessed with automobiles after seeing a steam powered car in person.

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An advertisement for the Ford Model T, which ceased production in May of 1927 to make way for Ford's first Model A. (Compliments Ford Motor Company.)

Ford held several jobs at Westinghouse and later Edison Illumination before he developed an internal combustion engine as well as his first car known as the Ford Quadricycle—which was developed while working at Edison in 1896. From there, he received much corporate backing, notably from lumber baron William Murphy. As other investors joined in, Ford formed the Detroit Auto Company. It produced less than 25 cars that were rushed to market and did not meet the standard of quality Ford demanded, so it was dissolved in early 1901.

By the end of 1901, Ford developed a 26-horsepower automobile specifically for auto racing and went on to win races against some of the early racing champions. It was his best advertising play and then led to him forming his own Ford Motor Company thanks to a second try at allowing his company to be overseen by "impatient" investors.

Again, Ford left this company for the same reasons he had left the last. This particular company went on to be renamed the Cadillac Automobile Company and was ran by Henry Leland. Ford then got back into racing with another racecar that put out 96-horsepower which legendary Barney Oldfield drove to many victories. Ford again had the eye of investors thanks to his auto racing, and he entered into a third company with a coal baron named Alexander Malcolmson.

This is when the Dodge Brothers entered the picture and provided all of the parts needed to build Ford's initial cars. In June of 1903, the company was now officially The Ford Motor Company, and Henry had complete control and happy investors. Barney Oldfield also toured the country in a Ford race car that could do over 90mph.

By 1908, the first Model T was built and Ford concentrated on his moving assembly line idea of mass production where workers concentrated on one aspect of the car build as it moved slowly along. It worked so well the initial price of the Model T dropped from \$895 to \$595 thanks to the quick production, and Ford sold nearly half of the cars built in that era. His only problem was worker turnover, as many quit due to the monotony of an assembly line job.

Then, Ford made a move that corrected the worker turnover by offering what he called "The Living Wage." Specifically, in 1914 he announced he was going to pay his assembly line workers \$5.00 a day, double what other companies offered. Everything went along fine right on through the 1920s, and Ford employees were thrilled with the company.



Henry Ford's assembly line in full production of the Model T. (Compliments Ford Motor Company.)

By the later 1920s, workers were making 6,000 Fords a day and now making \$7.00 a day. But with the 1929 stock market crash just ahead, no one anticipated how bad things would be.

Ford's personal problems also caught up to him. Even though by 1927 he was a huge success, a newspaper he owned and printed called "The Ford International Weekly" (also known as "The Dearborn Independent") was utilized for editorials that were clearly non-union and many times anti-Semitic. Mr. Ford felt that everyone in America should not only buy his cars, they should also agree with his conservative views and ideals, and all Ford dealers actually sold subscriptions to his newspaper.

After apologizing for his anti-Jewish articles, and undergoing personal isolation during this time, Ford regrouped, realigned and then debuted the new Model A in 1928, which at the time was called the greatest comeback of the industrial revolution. Ford endured his anti-Semitic article reputation with the full power of the Great Depression just around the corner, and some 500,000 people put down payments on Ford's new 1930 Model A without ever seeing one in person. It seemed Ford was back and bigger than ever.

But by 1931, a third of Ford dealers were out of business as the depression worsened. Then, on August of 1931, 60,000 Ford workers were out of work as Ford shut down his plant because of the depression and over production. It stayed shuttered for six months.

To make a long story short, that aforementioned Great Depression coupled with Ford's complete control of his non-union workers and factory plant shutdown led to a march of 3,000 unemployed auto workers on March 7, 1932 against Ford (known nationally as the Ford Hunger March or Ford Massacre). It took place at one of his biggest assembly plants called River Rouge in Dearborn.

After police shot tear gas on the protesters, everything escalated and four protesters died when police, and allegedly Ford security guards, opened

fire with live rounds. Then three months later, a fifth protester died from his injuries. Overall, 28 others were treated for gunshot wounds.

The march was organized by the Unemployed Councils, a division of the Communist Party USA. It kicked off the unionization of the auto workers at other manufacturers, although Ford still did not unionize. Then on April 11, 1941, a full nine years later, thousands of Ford workers took part in a 10-day, three shift, sit down strike, which ended when Henry Ford finally signed a collective bargaining agreement with the United Auto Workers union.

I wish I had more space, but to me Henry Ford will always be remembered not for the fateful Hunger March, but more so for his industrial abilities, all the great vehicles, industrial genius, and his

building of thousands of airplanes for the World War II effort. It is clear he did more to build America than almost anyone else, and so did his close friend, Thomas Edison. Ford died on April 7, 1947, had one son Edsel, who died in 1943, and a wife Clara, who passed in 1950.

I highly recommend a visit to the Ford Museum of American Innovation and Greenfield Village in Dearborn for many more positives about this man of vision and creativity. See www.thehenryford.org for information.

Greg Zyla, Auto Round-Up Publications' contributing writer and go to guy for all of your collector car and auto nostalgia concerns and inquiries. If you have questions, he's got answers! For more articles check out www.autoroundup.com. Any inquiries email greg@gregzyla.com.



Henry Ford on his first car, the Ford Quadricycle, developed in 1896 when he worked for Thomas Edison. (Compliments Ford Motor Company.)