

# Henry Ford

Henry Ford was born in 1863 on his family's farm in what is now part of Dearborn. While he enjoyed the simplicity of rural life, he did not like farming. A talent for engineering and an astute business sense led him to become one of the great industrialists of his era.

As a young man, he moved to the east side of Detroit, joining a neighborhood full of men experimenting with small gasoline engines. Ford's tinkering eventually led to several successful automobile designs and the birth of the Ford Motor Company in 1903. Innovations in manufacturing and the success of the Model T made Ford the leading car manufacturer in the country.

Once he became a wealthy man, Ford dedicated himself to other equally ambitious pursuits. His activities included experiments with new technologies, social health programs for his employees, philanthropy and increased involvement in politics. He built a beautiful estate in Dearborn, as well as the treasured Edison Institute, comprising the Henry Ford Museum, and Greenfield Village, nearby. His death in 1947 was observed with a moment of silence throughout the City of Detroit and an estimated 100,000 mourners viewed his remains.



# Henry Ford's Detroit

As the 20th century dawned in Detroit, busy streets were paved with bricks or cobblestones. Pedestrians and bicyclists competed with horse-drawn buggies and delivery wagons for space. Wires that powered electric streetcars were strung above every major avenue, with trolleys and tracks creating unnatural boulevards.

The rapid introduction of automobiles complicated matters, but innovations helped everyone adapt. Speed limits and motoring laws were established. Concrete gradually replaced bricks. The first four-way, three-color traffic light was created by Detroit police officer William Potts in 1920. Horses and bicycles gradually disappeared, while gasoline stations and driveways appeared.

The growth of the automobile industry meant much to Detroit. Skyscrapers and new parks reflected the city's prosperity. Factories worked at capacity and the population pushed beyond the city limits into new suburbs. With increased prosperity and mobility, Detroiters enjoyed Sunday drives in the country and extended driving vacations during the summer and holidays.



# Hero?

Henry Ford was perhaps the most famous man in the world during the first half of the 20th century. He was greatly admired for bringing the Model T Ford to the masses and for providing good-paying jobs to immigrants and African-Americans. He was also an innovator in many areas outside of the automobile industry.

Many of Ford's innovations radically changed the lives of working class people. By developing mass-production methods at his Highland Park plant, Ford lowered the price of a Model T Ford and produced a "car for the multitude." His path-breaking \$5 a day pay (1914), which was double what factory workers earned at the time, enabled unskilled workers to enter the middle class.

In a revolutionary move, Ford offered jobs at his River Rouge plant in Dearborn to African-American workers in the 1920s, where they toiled side-by-side with white workers and received equal pay. Ford became the single largest employer of African-Americans in the United States.

Working with Detroit architect Albert Kahn, Ford revolutionized factory architecture at the Highland Park plant in the 1910s and at the Ford River Rouge plant in the 1920s. He was one of the earliest proponents of the soybean as a food source and developed a progressive system for providing medical services through Henry Ford Hospital.



# Villain?

Henry Ford was one of the most reviled men in Detroit and Michigan, mainly because of his treatment of his employees, his vehement opposition to labor unions, his political views and his abusive treatment of his top managers, including his son, Edsel. Ford ran his automobile company in an extremely rigid and autocratic manner, routinely firing subordinates with no warning or explanation.

In order for Ford's workers to receive his famous \$5-a-day pay rate, they had to prove themselves "worthy" to inspectors of the Ford Sociological Department, which gave Henry Ford paternalistic control over his employees. To prevent his employees from forming labor unions, Ford created the Ford Service Department, a small army of strong-armed thugs who used violence and intimidation to prevent unions from developing in Ford's factories.

Ford didn't shy away from making political statements. Through articles published in his newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*, Henry Ford made anti-Semitism "respectable" in the 1920s. In 91 consecutive issues, his paper blamed Jews for all of the world's ills, a barrage that exposed Ford's radical views and forever marked him as anti-Semitic. He also opposed American involvement in both World Wars, yet secured lucrative military contracts once war was declared, leading some to view him as opportunistic.

