While working as an engineer for the Edison Illuminating Company in Detroit, Henry Ford (1863-1947) built his first gasoline-powered horseless carriage, the Quadricycle, in the shed behind his home. In 1903, he established the Ford Motor Company, and five years later the company rolled out the first Model T. In order to meet overwhelming demand for the revolutionary vehicle, Ford introduced revolutionary new mass-production methods, including large production plants, the use of standardized, interchangeable parts and, in 1913, the world's first moving assembly line for cars. Enormously influential in the industrial world, Ford was also outspoken in the political realm. Ford drew controversy for his pacifist stance during the early years of World War I and earned widespread criticism for his anti-Semitic views and writings.

Henry Ford: Early Life & Engineering Career
Born in 1863, Henry Ford was the first surviving son of William and Mary Ford, who owned a prosperous farm in Dearborn, Michigan. At 16, he left home for the nearby city of Detroit, where he found apprentice work as a machinist. He returned to Dearborn and worked on the family farm after three years, but continued to operate and service steam engines and work occasional stints in Detroit factories. In 1888, he married Clara Bryant, who had grown up on a nearby farm.

Did you know? The mass production techniques Henry Ford championed eventually allowed Ford Motor Company to turn out one Model T every 24 seconds.

In the first several years of their marriage, Ford supported himself and his new wife by running a sawmill. In 1891, he returned with Clara to Detroit, where he was hired as an engineer for the Edison Illuminating Company. Rising quickly through the ranks, he was promoted to chief engineer two years later. Around the same time, Clara gave birth to the couple’s only son, Edsel Bryant Ford. On call 24 hours a day for his job at Edison, Ford spent his irregular hours on his efforts to build a gasoline-powered horseless carriage, or automobile. In 1896, he completed what he called the “Quadricycle,” which consisted of a light metal frame fitted with four bicycle wheels and powered by a two-cylinder, four-horsepower gasoline engine.

Henry Ford: Birth of Ford Motor Company and the Model T

Determined to improve upon his prototype, Ford sold the Quadricycle in order to continue building other vehicles. He received backing from various investors over the next seven years, some of whom formed the Detroit Automobile Company (later the Henry Ford Company) in 1899. His partners, eager to put a passenger car on the market, grew frustrated with Ford’s constant need to improve, and Ford left his namesake company in 1902. (After his departure, it was reorganized as the Cadillac Motor Car Company.) The following year, Ford established the Ford Motor Company.

A month after the Ford Motor Company was established, the first Ford car—the two-cylinder, eight-horsepower Model A—was assembled at a plant on Mack Avenue in Detroit. At the time, only a few cars were assembled per day, and groups of two or three workers built them by hand from parts that were ordered from other companies. 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: Production & Labor Innovations
The “Tin Lizzie,” as the Model T was known, was an immediate success, and Ford soon had more orders than the company could satisfy. As a result, he put into practice techniques of mass production that would revolutionize American industry, including the use of large production plants; standardized, interchangeable parts; and the moving assembly line. Mass production significantly cut down on the time required to produce an automobile, which allowed costs to stay low. In 1914, Ford also increased the daily wage for an eight-hour day for his workers to $5 (up from $2.34 for nine hours), setting a standard for the industry.

Even as production went up, demand for the Tin Lizzie remained high, and by 1918, half of all cars in America were Model Ts. In 1919, Ford named his son Edsel as president of Ford Motor Company, but he retained full control of the company’s operations. After a court battle with his stockholders, led by brothers Horace and John Dodge, Henry Ford bought out all minority stockholders by 1920. In 1927, Ford moved production to a massive industrial complex he had built along the banks of the River Rouge in Dearborn, Michigan. The plant included a glass factory, steel mill, assembly line and all other necessary components of automotive production. That same year, Ford ceased production of the Model T, and introduced the new Model A, which featured better horsepower and brakes, among other improvements. By that time, the company had produced some 15 million Model Ts, and Ford Motor Company was the largest automotive manufacturer in the world. Ford opened plants and operations throughout the world.

**Henry Ford: Later Career & Controversial Views**

The Model A proved to be a relative disappointment, and was outsold by both Chevrolet (made by General Motors) and Plymouth (made by Chrysler); it was discontinued in 1931. In 1932, Ford introduced the first V-8 engine, but by 1936 the company had dropped to number three in sales in the automotive industry. Despite his progressive policies regarding the minimum wage, Ford waged a long battle against unionization of labor, refusing to come to terms with the United Automobile Workers (UAW) even after his competitors did so. In 1937, Ford security staff clashed with UAW organizers in the so-called “Battle of the Overpass,” at the Rouge plant, after which the National Labor Relations Board ordered Ford to stop interfering with union organization. Ford Motor Company signed its first contract with UAW in 1941, but not before Henry Ford considered shutting down the company to avoid it.

Ford’s political views earned him widespread criticism over the years, beginning with his campaign against U.S. involvement in World War I. He made a failed bid for a U.S. Senate seat in 1918, narrowly losing in a campaign marked by personal attacks from his opponent. In the Dearborn Independent, a local newspaper he bought in 1918, Ford published a number of anti-Semitic writings that were collected and published as a four volume set called The International Jew. Though he later renounced the writings and sold the paper, he expressed admiration for Adolf Hitler and Germany, and in 1938 accepted the Grand Cross of the German Eagle, the Nazi regime’s highest medal for a foreigner.
Edsel Ford died in 1943, and Henry Ford returned to the presidency of Ford Motor Company briefly before handing it over to his grandson, Henry Ford II, in 1945. He died two years later at his Dearborn home, at the age of 83.

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