

The People's Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century

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Henry Ford, a major architect of modern America, has lived on in the imagination of his fellow citizens as an enduring figure of fascination, an inimitable individual, a controversial personality, and a social visionary from the moment his Model T brought the automobile to the masses and triggered the consumer revolution. But never before has his outsized genius been brought to life so vividly as by Steven Watts in this major new biography. Watts, the author of the much acclaimed *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life*, has produced a superbly researched study of a man who was a bundle of contradictions.

Ford was the entrepreneur who first made the automobile affordable but who grew skeptical of consumerism's corrosive impact on moral values, an employer who insisted on a living wage for his workers but stridently opposed unions, who established the assembly line but worried about its effect on the work ethic, who welcomed African Americans to his company in the age of Jim Crow but was a rabid anti-Semite. He was the private man who had a warm, loving marriage while siring a son with a mistress; a father who drove his heir, Edsel, so relentlessly that it contributed to his early death; a folksy social philosopher and at one time, perhaps, the most popular figure in America, who treated his workers so harshly that they turned against him; creator of the largest, most sophisticated factory in the world who preferred spending time in his elaborate re-creation of a nineteenth-century village; and the greatest businessman of his age who haplessly lost control of his own company in his declining years.

Watts poignantly shows us how a Michigan farm boy from modest circumstances emerged as one of America's richest men and one of its first mass-culture celebrities, one who became a folk hero to millions of ordinary citizens because of his support of high wages and material abundance for everyday workers and yet also excited the admiration of figures as diverse as Vladimir Lenin and Adolf Hitler, John D. Rockefeller and Woodrow Wilson.

Disclosing the man behind the myth and situating his achievements and controversies firmly within the context of early twentieth-century America, Watts has given us a comprehensive, illuminating biography of an American icon.

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Farm Boy

By the early 1920s, Henry Ford may have been the most famous man in the world. His inexpensive, durable, and perky Model T had taken America by storm, and the pioneering industrialist had garnered enormous fame and wealth. The Ford visage seemed to appear everywhere, constantly. A torrent of interviews, newspaper stories, publicity handouts, advertisements, and popular biographies flooded into the public realm, carrying details of his life story and his comments on every imaginable topic. Often based on interviews with him, or legendary tales, these pieces told the story of Ford's life as he wanted it to be told.

They poured the events of Henry Ford's life into the mold of the American success story. This hoary genre dated back to Benjamin Franklin and his autobiography of the penniless, bright, and determined youth who had walked into colonial Philadelphia munching on bread rolls as the first step in his meteoric rise to distinction. Horatio Alger had updated it for the nineteenth century with popular novels such as *Struggling Upward* and *Mark the Match Boy*.

Now Ford sought to place himself squarely within this American mythology. His version of his life story could have been lifted from any one of Alger's cookie-cutter plots: the young man pursues his dream while others scoff, he undertakes a lonely journey from the country to the city in search of fulfillment, overcomes obstacles with a combination of pluck, determination, and talent, and finally rises to heights of achievement and prosperity. The Ford success story contained an additional element—the youthful hero had a stern father who was skeptical of the son's newfangled ambitions and sought to stymie his creativity.

The struggle against paternal authority, with its Oedipal overtones, became a key to Henry Ford's rendering of his own early life. His ghostwritten book, *My Life and Work* (1922), a runaway best-seller, particularly highlighted this theme. Designed by Ford to popularize his ideas and enhance his legend, the book related how his father, William, sought to discourage his interest in machines. "My father was not entirely in sympathy with my bent toward mechanics. He thought that I ought to be a farmer," Ford told readers. When he finally decided to leave the farm, "I was all but given up for lost." Ford added that his later experiments with the gasoline engine while he was an electrical engineer "were no more popular with the president of the company than my first mechanical leanings were with my father."

There was one problem, however, with this tale of triumph over overweening paternal domination: it was as much the product of Henry Ford's imagination as a picture of reality. The facts suggest a different story. Though tension between father and son certainly existed, its causes were more complex and its results much less melodramatic than the younger Ford related. In part, it resulted from clashing personalities and private needs. Henry Ford's oft-told tale of rebellion and triumph over his father reflected a fundamental trait in his personality: a deeply felt need to present himself as a self-reliant individual who fought to prevail against lesser opponents and skeptics.

But this embroidery also went beyond personal issues. It was rooted in far-reaching currents of historical change that were broadly social as well as narrowly personal. By the late nineteenth century, America's industrial revolution was expanding explosively and beginning to overwhelm the traditional rural republic. Ford's story of rebellion, flight, and triumph was told thousands of times over as hordes of young men fled the countryside and streamed into urban manufacturing centers. This tidal wave of change, of which young Ford was a part, produced the machine age. Its alien values and unfamiliar landscape exhilarated many younger men, but it unsettled, even frightened many older citizens.

The younger and elder Fords were caught up in this larger social dynamic of America in the late 1800s. As William Ford occasionally remarked, "Oh, Henry ain't much of a farmer.

He is more of a tinkerer." The son's tale of struggle with his father was destined to take shape in the stark, melodramatic terms of authority challenged, defied, and finally overturned. Even if it was as much imagined as real, Henry Ford's story not only revealed the young innovator's state of mind but resonated with the kinetic energy generated by the larger remaking of the United States in this era.

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In late July 1863, much of the United States still was abuzz with reports of unimaginable fighting and bloodshed seeping out from the small Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg, where, a few weeks before, Robert E. Lee's invasion of the North had been thwarted by the Union Army of the Potomac. Far away, in the hinterland of the fractured American republic, in the early-morning hours of July 30, a healthy son was born to William and Mary Ford in Greenfield township, near Dearborn, Michigan. They had married two years earlier, and their first child had died at birth in 1862. So this pregnancy had caused much anxiety, and the safe arrival of the infant was the source of much relief. The parents decided to name the boy Henry.

The child was born into a society barely emerged from the wilderness. Though Michigan had become a state in 1837, it remained predominantly a frontier area, sparsely settled with farmers who were beginning to hack their way through primeval forests of oak, elm, maple, ash, beech, basswood, and pine trees. By the 1840s and 1850s, the first signs of commercial endeavor had started to appear in the countryside. The Erie Canal had provided connections between the Great Lakes region and the Eastern port of New York City; later, the first primitive steamboats, turnpikes, and railroads moved into the interior of Michigan, carrying people and commercial goods. Detroit grew steadily, along with other trading towns such as Port Huron, Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, Benton Harbor, and Ypsilanti. Agriculture remained the backbone of the state's economy, but by the 1850s timber harvesting, the fishing industry, and the mining of copper and iron ore were contributing significant wealth.

By the onset of the Civil War, Michigan stood as the embodiment of the nineteenth-century rural republic. With a population of roughly 750,000-immigration of large numbers of Irish and Germans had added to the stream of New Yorkers and New Englanders bringing settlers over its borders-the state presented a proud rural culture populated by self-reliant landowners and fiercely independent citizens. In the 1850s, like most of the Old Northwest, Michigan was swept up in antislavery politics and became a bastion of the new Republican Party, with its ideology of "free soil, free labor, free men." Staunchly Unionist during the Civil War, Michigan contributed ninety thousand troops to the federal armies; some fifteen thousand of them died from battlefield wounds or disease.

Henry Ford's childhood, which began in the heart of this great civil conflagration, typified rural Midwestern life in the mid-nineteenth century. In the hundreds of towns, villages, and rural communities scattered throughout the area bounded by the Great Lakes in the north and the Ohio River to the south, and the Appalachians and Great Plains to the east and west, life was shaped by local influences. Several threads-extended family connections,

seasonal farm labor, community gatherings, church—came together in a tightly woven web of social experience. Young Henry, like any toddler on a busy farm, stayed close to his mother, but he could not avoid being immersed in nature, the seasonal rhythms of agricultural production, and the workaday calendar of providing shelter and sustenance. His first childhood memory invoked this rural quality of life:

The first thing that I remember in my life is my father taking my brother John and myself to see a bird's nest under a large oak log twenty rods east of our home and my birthplace. John was so young that he could not walk. Father carried him, [while] I being two years older could run along with them. This must have been about the year 1866 in June. I remember the nest with 4 eggs and also the bird and hearing it sing. I have always remembered the song and in later years found that it was a song sparrow.

As a boy, young Henry increasingly came into contact with the adult male world of farm work. William pursued the typical, varied activities of a self-sufficient farmer: growing wheat, corn, and hay; raising livestock and smoking meat; tending a fruit orchard; hunting and fishing; preserving vegetables in cellars over the winter; cutting firewood for domestic use and to sell in nearby Detroit for extra cash. Labor was long and hard, and, in the words of a Ford neighbor, farmers set off for their fields and "went to work from daylight to dark, and then went home and did their chores." Tagging along with his father, Henry lent a hand with planting and harvesting, caring for livestock, and doing various chores. Inevitably, contact with hard-bitten farmhands produced a comical initiation rite. At about age six, the youngster was resting with some of the laborers when one of them innocently offered him a plug of chewing tobacco. Ignorant of the proper procedure for leisurely mastication and spitting, he chewed up the potent concoction and then swallowed it. As the men laughed, the boy grew lightheaded and dizzy as he began walking woozily back toward the house. Sitting down by the creek near his home, he recalled much later, "I had the feeling that the water was flowing uphill." When he staggered in the door with his story, his mother burst into laughter but quickly reassured her son that he would be all right.

In January 1871, at age seven, Ford trooped off to the one-room Scotch Settlement School, about two miles from his house. He had been well ...

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