The Legacy Of Ford Motor Company Extends Far Beyond Cars

Ford also made tractors and planes, and changed how we work, get paid and live in its 100 years.

By Jim Mateja

Ford Motor Co. has had a hand in each — as well as tractors, trucks and even freighters.

And you thought of Ford only as the company that once made Model T's and now assembles Mustangs.

Henry Ford, founder of the company that celebrated its 100th anniversary Monday, didn't want to be known only for automobiles.

"Henry Ford believed he founded a transportation company, not a car company," according to Bob Kreipke, who, as company historian, has spent the year leading up to the centennial reliving 100 years of archived history.

Ford built and sold his first car, a Model A, to Chicago physician E. Pfennig in 1903, but he got involved in just about anything that moved people or things, and, in doing so, helped transform the United States into an industrial power.

"The world is a better place because of the positive contributions of Henry Ford and the positive force of Ford Motor Co., no question about it," said Dave Cole, director of the Center for Automotive Research in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Ford put the world on wheels, and brought rural and urban America together by allowing movement between the two.

"Cars were a huge factor in the development of society, and had a dramatic impact on the population," Cole said. "Ford provided the country with affordable mobility, fundamental to the way the country evolved. He brought the car to the masses, and, in doing so, made for the rapid emergence of the middle class. The foundation of the lifestyles we enjoy today goes back to what Henry Ford did.

"Give Henry Ford enormous credit. He lit the fuse, and what he put in place was emulated by others. It's impossible to say, but it's hard to tell if there would have been a General Motors and a Chrysler without a Ford," Cole said.

But "Henry Ford didn't invent anything. All of the technologies already existed, but what he did was to take the next step," said Nick Scheele, president and chief operating officer of Ford.

Kreipke takes slight issue with that, saying: "He didn't invent the first car, but he did invent mass production."

But even Ford's mass production borrowed upon technology in place. After visiting the Swift & Co. packing plant in Chicago, Ford decided that the conveyor system used to package meat would translate into an assembly line to produce cars. So he built a plant in Highland Park, Mich., with a railroad track in the middle so workers could add pieces as the car moved.

Another Ford creation was the $5-a-day wage at a time when the going rate for factory workers was $2.40 for a nine-hour day - without breaks. Ford not only instituted the $5-a-day wage for eight hours in 1914, but he also included breaks.

"The $5-a-day wage provided high-paying jobs to his employees and a value to society that is still true today," Cole said. "The average job at any automaker today generates $300,000 in contributions to the economy, 31/2 times the $79,500 average contribution to the economy of any other job."

Ford believed that the wage would allow those who built cars to buy cars and that eight hours would give workers more time with their families. But there was another benefit.

"Most people at the time worked on farms or in shops and weren't used to factories, which was stressful because workers felt cooped up. Since the environment was terrible, attendance was terrible, and workers would show up one day, but not the next. At $5 a day, they showed up for work," Kreipke said.

While $5 a day made Ford workers happy, "lots of businessmen were fuming mad," Kreipke said.

Even those who didn't work at Ford plants benefited from the newly created industries.

"Before 1900, gas was considered a cleaning solvent sold in paint cans. Early cars were gas guzzlers, and your journey was limited by how many cans of gas you risked carrying, so gas stations were formed, though because so many people smoked at the time, they had to learn to bury the tanks underground," Kreipke said.

The growth of the auto industry also spurred the growth of those who supplied glass, rubber and wood, the material commonly used in buggies.

The first Model T in 1908, for example, contained 250 board feet of wood that was used to produce floor boards, ribs to support the roof, the firewall between the engine and cabin, and as reinforcement for body panels.

Eventually, steel displaced wood.

The same year Ford sold his first car, Wilbur and Orville Wright made aviation history.

"Henry always enjoyed the fact that he sold his first car in 1903, the same year the Wright brothers flew the first plane," Kreipke said. "As a man concerned with all transportation, not just cars, he saw planes as the wave of the future."

Passionate about aviation, Henry and his son, Edsel, built a primitive plane in 1909 powered by a Model T engine. And in 1923 they invested in Stout Metal Airplane Co., formed to design and build the first commercial all-metal airplane in the United States. Before that, planes were made mostly from wood.

In 1925, Ford bought Stout, formed a plane division, and began freight service to carry parts between Detroit and Chicago, where Ford also was producing cars. As long as planes were flying that route, Ford instituted air-mail service between the two cities.

Ford is credited with such aviation feats as the first successful radio-guided flight in 1926, and the first paved runway, at Ford Airport in Dearborn, Mich., in 1928. Ford built a hotel adjacent to the airport in 1931 to serve travelers, the Dearborn Inn, which still operates today.

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