

Kids InfoBits

Cars to the Masses

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Cobblestone, Jan 2010 v31 i1 p8(2)

Henry Ford. Poltrack, Kelly.

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We take for granted the ease with which we travel around the world today. But just 100 years ago, people stayed much closer to home. The most common forms of local transportation were horses and buggies, horse-drawn carriages, or bicycles.

All that changed with Henry Ford's dream to create an affordable, reliable car. After years of tinkering and testing--and working his way through the alphabet, beginning with the Model A--Ford introduced his Model T in 1908. Cars may be commonplace today, but in the early 1900s, Ford's innovative ideas made him a symbol of American ingenuity.

Before the Model T, cars were expensive and of little use to rural, working-class Americans, owing to the poor condition of most country roads. But with its improved traction and better clearance, the Model T could handle rough dirt roads. Ford's sturdy vehicles lightened the workload, too. They hauled tools and equipment, hay, and produce, and they began replacing draft horses on farms.

Determined to make his cars efficiently, Ford had his cars built on an assembly line, which moved a car under construction along a path while stationary workers added parts along the way. As the cost of making the Model T dropped, Ford's sales skyrocketed because more Americans could afford to buy his low-priced automobiles. Ford also raised the average wage of auto workers, introduced shifts that ultimately cut the workday, and gave workers a share in the company's profits. He considered these good business decisions. While other manufacturers initially scoffed at his innovations, eventually, they followed suit.

The Model T represented freedom. For the first time, Americans were not restricted to working close to their homes. They could run short errands. They could enjoy afternoon visits. Henry Ford's ideas about car production and the success of his Model T forever changed the way Americans lived, worked, and played by making travel safe, easy, and inexpensive.

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Assembly Line

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Cobblestone, May-June 2010 v31 i5 p28(1)

First flight. THE YEAR IS 1903 Henry Ford Kowalski, kathian M..

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Henry Ford put his future on the line in August 1913--the assembly line, that is. He pioneered a new way to mass produce automobiles. Before this time, a car under construction stayed in one spot on the factory floor. Workers took turns doing different jobs until it was finished. It was an expensive and time-consuming process. Determined to speed it up, Ford installed the industry's first moving assembly line at his specially built plant in Highland Park, Michigan. He used conveyor belts to bring the work to the workers, who were stationed along the line with tools and parts.

Ford's team followed four basic principles. First, they relied on standard, interchangeable parts. Second, work moved continuously, so one job flowed into the next. Third, they divided labor into a number of tasks performed by different workers. Fourth, they cut wasted time and effort.

Almost immediately, the assembly line greatly reduced the amount of time and money it took to make a car. Ford Motor Company's production grew while its costs fell. In less than a year, assembly time for each car dropped from slightly more than 12 hours to 93 minutes. The price of a new Model T dropped, too, going from \$850 in 1908 to \$390 in 1915, making them more affordable to average workers.

At first, Ford's decisions sent shock waves throughout the world. But his openness to fresh ideas encouraged others to push the boundaries of science and business. Manufacturers from England, Germany, and Russia studied and soon borrowed his methods. Sociologists began using the term "Fordism" to describe the cycle of mass production and mass consumption that took hold in the first quarter of the 20th century.

Some people criticized the dehumanizing of the workers on Ford's assembly lines, but the result--reliable cars at reasonable prices--won over the public. Ford also paid his workers good wages. And in 1926, Ford cut his employees' average workweek from six to five days. By instituting a five-day, 40-hour workweek, he indirectly helped create the modern weekend. Ford, his company, and the mass production of the famous Model T became symbols of American ingenuity and innovation and forever changed how people worked and played.