

A Talk With Henry Ford

By HARRY M. NIMMO

SINCE the fifth day of January, nineteen fourteen, political economists and hod-carriers, bankers and reformers, manufacturers and admirers, socialists and hero-worshippers, statesmen and hoboes, journalists and janitors, have been trying to classify Henry Ford. It was on that day he astonished the industrial world with the announcement of a profit-sharing program involving the distribution of \$10,000,000 among his employees for the first year. As a matter of record he distributed all of that sum and increased his cash on hand from \$13,000,000 at the end of 1913 to \$27,000,000 at the end of 1914, not to mention another little increase of more than a million dollars in municipal bonds. In the same time he increased his surplus from \$28,000,000 to \$48,000,000. Incidentally, in the opinion of many shrewd and perhaps cynical experts in publicity, he picked up as a result of his extraordinary experiment further millions in free advertising throughout the civilized world. This fact, like the obvious increase in the efficiency of his employees, has not been overlooked by his critics. But inasmuch as we are not here primarily concerned with his critics, we may dismiss them with this practical and comprehensive suggestion of his, offered to the writer by way of economic argument:

"I would like to get all the college professors in the world, bar none, and put them out in that factory, and then see what they would do with it."

In any attempt to explain the particular manifestation of human consciousness and energy known as Henry Ford we must take some account of the spirit of our times; and we must keep clearly in mind the self-confidence of high talent translated into extraordinary success. How far the spirit of our times wrought upon him in the evolution of his tremendous industrial experiment, and how far it was the expression of his own inspirations, he himself will hardly undertake to say. But it was the spirit of our times that breathed into his soul the brotherhood of man, it was self-confidence born of high talent that sustained him through years of mechanical experimentation and struggle and endless labor and partial defeat.

He seems to have been sure of his mechanical talent from the beginning. That part of his life he explains very simply and modestly:

"Every man has some definite ability

for something. If he can only find out what it is before it is too late! I always liked machinery."

He liked machinery before he was seven years old. He was on the family farm then, a few miles from Detroit, the eldest of six children. His earliest recollection is a visit to a bird's nest with his father—something to be remembered

wanted Henry to be a farmer of substance and position. So he presented Henry with eighty acres of land in an adjoining township and regained his peace of mind when Henry accepted it.

But the passion for machinery was not assuaged. Ford, Jr., spent most of his summer setting up and repairing farm engines, instead of working in the fields, and installed a saw mill which he operated in the winter.

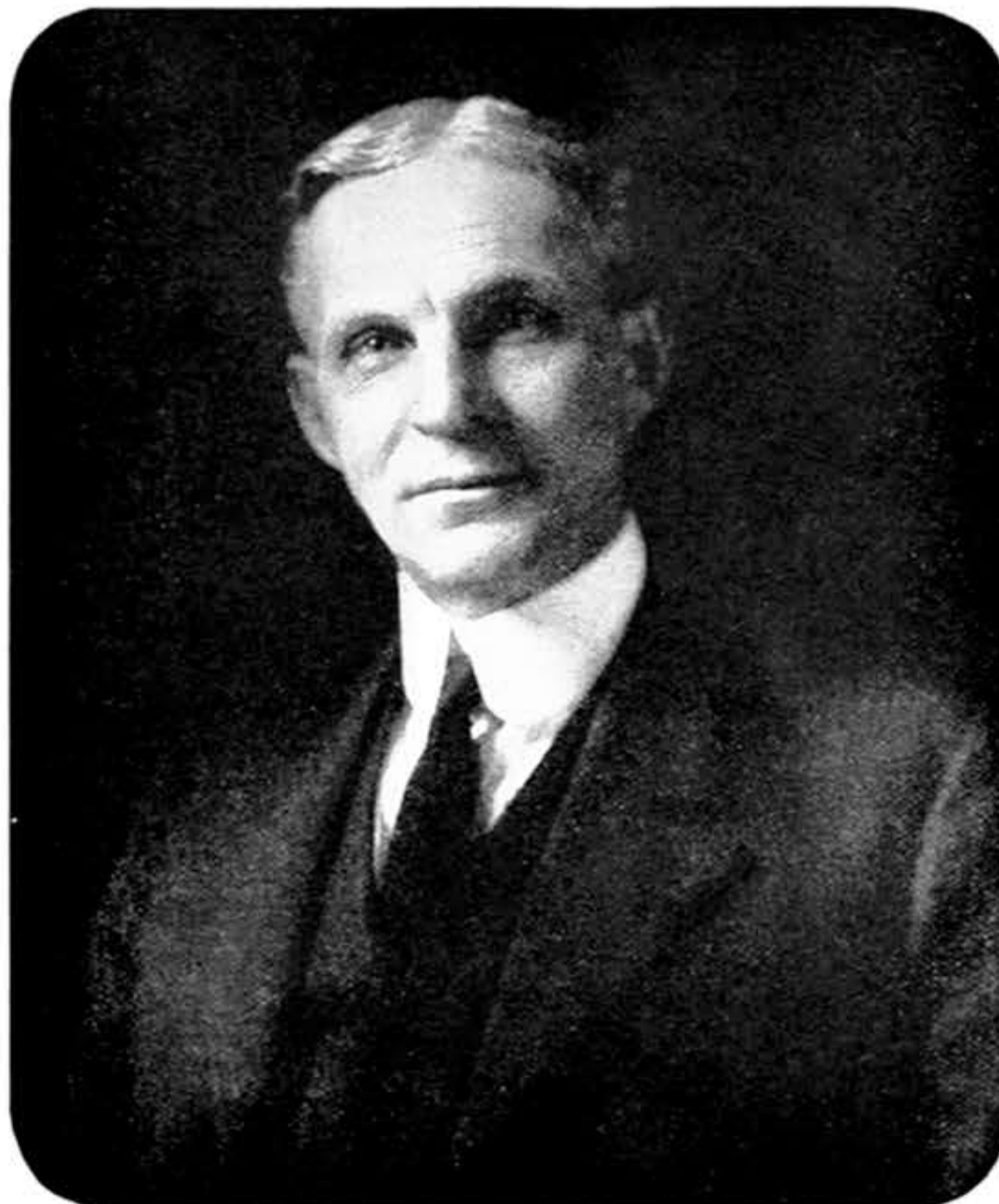
It was during this period that he married, and with his own hands built a home for his bride with lumber from his own saw mill. He also, he noted, at once moved his old machine shop from his father's place to his new home, and spent his leisure hours trying to make a steam road carriage. The thing would not work, and it was then that he banished forever his dream of adapting the steam engine to horse-drawn vehicles.

Two years after his marriage he again abandoned the farm to accept a position as night engineer with the Detroit Edison Illuminating Company. He moved into the city with his wife and infant son, and worked twelve hours a day for \$45 a month—a sum which his janitors now earn in nine days. But he did not altogether forget the country. If he is a machinist born he is also a born lover of

nature; and the old Dearborn township farm is again his and some 3000 acres besides. There he is building the home that is to shelter him in his old age. There he walks hatless through the open fields and woods, visiting with the men who make butter in his dairy and watching the birds at play.

The day that Henry Ford left the farm with his family he began his phenomenal march to success. It did not seem so to them. Seven years he must wait, Jacob-like, for his prize, but without the promise Jacob had that the prize would surely be his. Seven years of experimenting and constructing and rejecting and persisting were to come before he could actually drive the kind of self-propelling carriage he was dreaming of—years in which he spent his days in earning his daily bread, and his nights in wrestling with a gas engine in his barn, sleeping when he had nothing else to do. But this time he made the thing go, and in 1893 he turned out a four-wheel affair that could work out 25 or 30 miles an hour, barring numerous possibilities for accidents.

What a scene was enacted the hour



"The manifestation of human energy known as Henry Ford"

later in this story. His father, William Ford, was a native of Brandon, Ireland, though of English ancestry, and his mother, Mary Litegott, a native of Michigan. Neither of his parents belonging to families in any way distinguished for exceptional mechanical talent. But mechanics contained the one great interest for their eldest son. At twelve he had made a turbine engine; and he had improvised a little machine shop of his own and exploited many a mechanical fancy. He still preserves the first tool he ever made—a tiny screw-driver cut from one of his mother's knitting needles. At sixteen he became a machine apprentice in Detroit. For the next few years he found employment with manufacturers of steam engines, and during the idle months of two winters he was experimenting again in his old shop on the farm. He worked with electrical appliances and he tried to construct a farm locomotive.

Then Henry Ford's father stepped in. He had no liking for his son's penchant for mechanics and machinery. He was irritated to think his boy would fritter away his time on such things. He

that struck his victory! For two whole days he had fought without ceasing for full possession of the secret that science and nature had combined to hide from him year after year. On the night of the second day it was almost his. In the little house in Bagley Avenue his wife sat waiting eagerly for the news. A dismal rain fell on the dark roofs as she watched the flicker of her husband's light in the little workshop in the rear of the yard. At last he had won! At two o'clock in the morning she went out to meet him, a shawl about her head, and saw him drive his first self-propelled car up and down the alley. It is still a matter of pride with him that he built everything that went into that gig; and it is now a matter of history that he perfected the gas engine for vehicles at a time when it was still limited

to use in stationary appliances.

Having made the thing work he soon began to improve upon it, and in 1898 he left the Edison Company to organize the Detroit Automobile Company (later the Cadillac Motor Car Company), with \$50,000 capital and \$10,000 paid in. He himself retained a one-sixth interest and received a salary of \$100 a month as engineer. In 1910 he left this company, chiefly for the reason that he wanted to manufacture a single model of automobile in large quantities, while his colleagues did not agree with him. Here we catch another glimpse of the determination that he manifested so often in his earlier career. We see it again in his successful fight against the claims of the owners of the Selden patents, which he carried up to the supreme court of the United States. We see it now in his confidence in his profit-sharing plan: "We will make it work out; there is no doubt about that."

After leaving the Detroit Automobile Company, he bought an old machine shop, and went to work on another model. In 1903 the Ford Motor Company came into existence with \$100,000 capital stock and \$28,000 paid in. Mr. Ford retained 25½ per cent of the stock, and received \$2400 a year as chief engineer, running three shifts every 24 hours instead of two.

It is significant that in 1905 Mr. Ford secured control of the Ford Motor Company and has since increased his holdings to 58½ per cent. It is significant because it is another evidence of Mr. Ford's self-confidence. It should hardly require argument to prove that if Ford stock had exhibited any symptoms at that time of becoming highly profitable

Eldorado. But he was determined to make the kind of automobile he wanted in the way he wanted it, and for the price he wanted. He was determined to do the thing he liked best without interference.

"I couldn't always do things the way I ought to have done them," he says, referring to his experience as minority

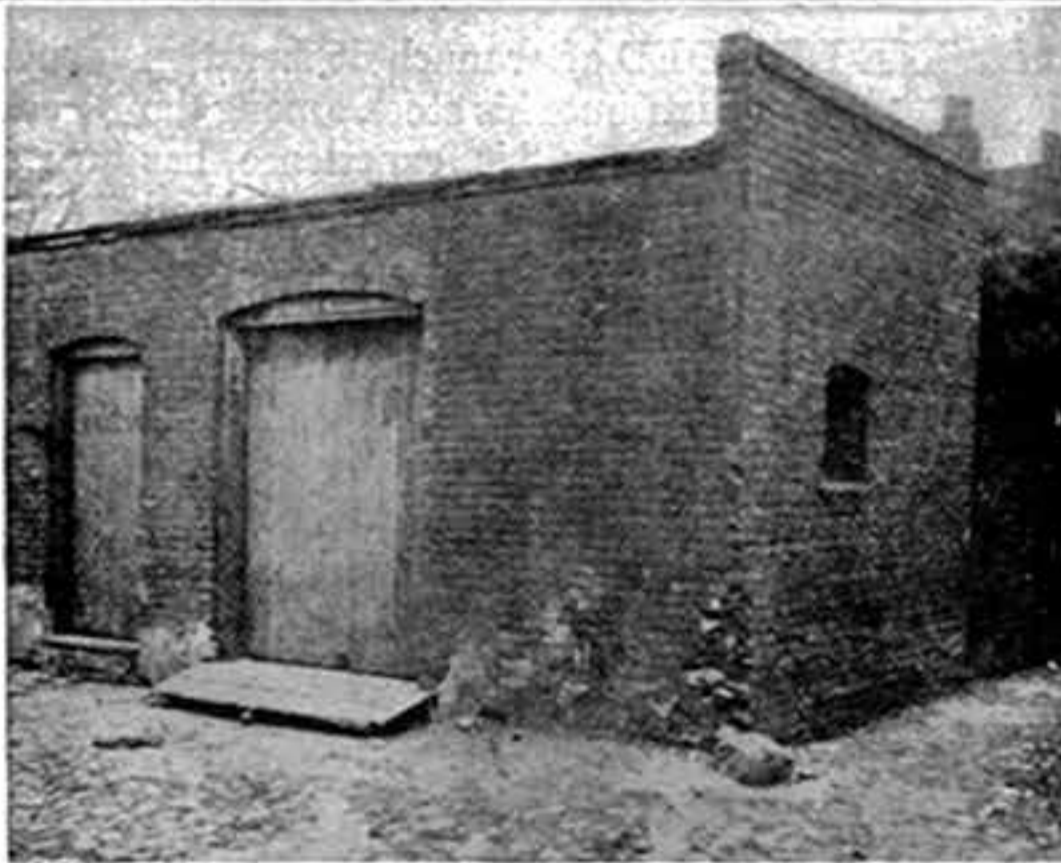
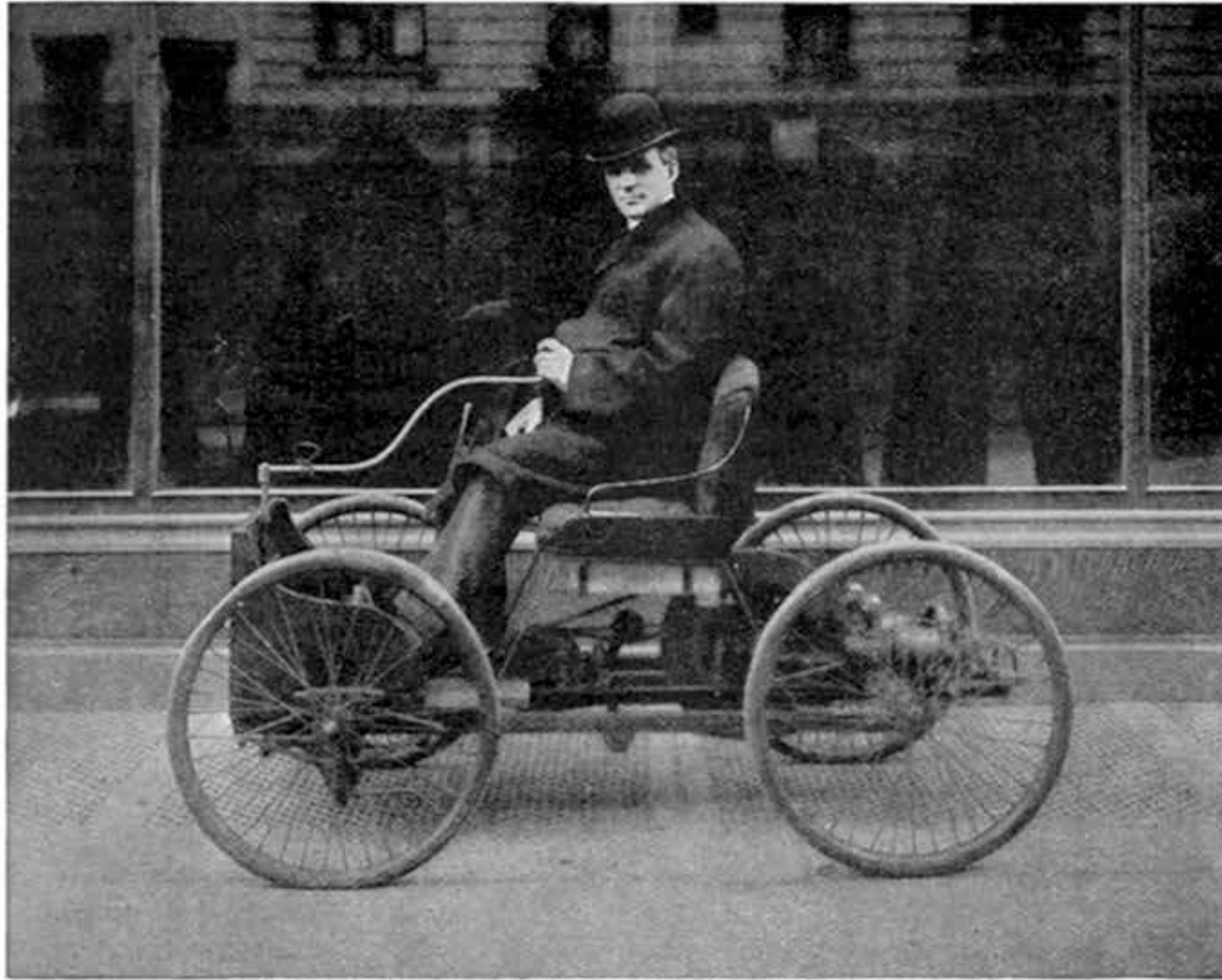
stockholder, "because everybody in the company had to be satisfied. You know we once made a thousand six-cylinder cars." And he smiled at the foolishness of it.

Whereupon we meet up with another cardinal element in the Ford character and the Ford success. It is not usual to find inventive talent combined with sound and prudent business methods. But Henry Ford has the combination. "What's the use of making something people don't want?" he

asks. "The thing to do is to make something most everybody wants at a price most everybody can pay. I once thought I would like to make watches. You know I worked at the watch business for a while in my younger days. I have the tools yet; and I can put a watch together today just as well as anybody. I figured out that I might be able to make a watch that would keep good time, and sell for 30 cents; but I couldn't make more than five cents on each watch, and one man couldn't make enough watches in one day to make it pay."

When he became rich, Henry Ford decided to share his wealth with his employees, because he likes his employees, because he regards them as partners in the business, and because he believes it will be good for them. The dimensions of his program may blind us for the time to that fact; but to ascribe to him any other motive is to exhibit unbounded ignorance of the man. He has done this thing in the same spirit in which he later assumed the responsibility of constructing and operating a general hospital in Detroit at

an expense of \$3,000,000 and upwards. "You have seen two fellows on a street corner," he suggests by way of elucidating his ideas of men and life. "Both of them are down and out; but one has



The first Ford automobile, product of a lifelong interest in mechanics. Ford's old workshop, a brick barn. Mr. and Mrs. Ford on the steps of their present residence

the owners would have been very slow to part with it. The owners, in fact, were quite skeptical at that time. Nor was Henry Ford himself at all convinced that he was on the threshold of a new

ten cents. With that he can buy a bun and a bed for himself. Or he can buy a bun for himself and a bun for his chum, and take chances on getting a bed. If he does that he is my kind of folks."

Reading has been a limited entertainment in the life of Henry Ford, and for obvious reasons. But he likes it, and he buys books when the spirit moves him. And what do you suppose was one of his favorites, later presented with his inscription to his rector, Dean Marquis of St. Paul's Protestant Episcopal cathedral of Detroit? Henry Drummond's *The Greatest Thing in the World*. "Now abideth Faith, Hope, Love, these three; but the greatest of these is Love."

Goodwill, he says, is all there is in the world that is worth while. Therefore if you have goodwill for the men who have worked with you, you will share with them the returns of your combined labor. This is no new feature in the Ford philosophy of business; though the fact seems to have been overlooked. It has always been his policy to pay the best possible wages, and since 1906 he has distributed annual bonuses among his executive officers and workmen ranging from \$60,000 in that year to nearly \$500,000 in 1913.

Mr. Ford is not much concerned about the effect of his present program on his competitors or on the industrial world in general. The fact is, that up to the time he made his announcement, he had given little or no thought to the broader economic aspects of his experiment. Even now he asks in a puzzled sort of way why there is so much talk about it. He was thinking mostly of his own employees when he announced that program, and thinking very much in their terms, as this excerpt from a letter of one of his machinists to a Detroit paper plainly indicates:

"The Ford workmen who benefit by this fair sporting division of winnings are not splitting any political economy hairs over the acceptance of whatever increase appears on the Ford pay checks." Or in other words: "We will take the money and let you folks on the outside do the talking."

"Every manufacturer does not have to share profits that he hasn't got in order to be good to his men," Mr. Ford argues. "Let him do the best he can for the men, and the men will be satisfied."

"But it has happened," I suggested, "that the men have not been satisfied under some profit-sharing schemes and have accused their employer of not making good."

"Then let the employer open the books to the men," was Mr. Ford's quick rejoinder. "The men will be content with whatever the business can pay them."

"But suppose the business is operated on a very narrow margin of profit, or with no profit at all?"

"The man who can't make a business profitable ought not to be in that business. If manufacturers would only try to find out the one thing they can make best and then make it, and stop meddling

with half a dozen things at the same time, and often relying on watered stock for their operating funds, they would have a lot less trouble. And the men won't demand any more than the employer can pay them, when they know he is on the square."

"Do you find that to be your experience with human nature?"

"Absolutely. You can trust your employees every time if you give them half a chance."

Faith in the everyday man, exalted faith, is an integral part of the Ford character. "I have been a workman myself," he says, "and I know." He employs men of more than fifty nationalities, and some who don't know whether they have a nationality or not. He gives them free legal advice, teaches them to read and write in English, encourages them to be clean and thrifty, in fact insists on their being acceptable citizens. He delights in giving the man who has "done time" another chance, and at this writing had put approximately a hundred ex-convicts to work, convinced that a good job and humane treatment is the best cure for the average criminal. "You get the best results when your men feel good," he says, "and the better they are fed and clothed and housed the better they feel." He insists that if his employees were left with the whole plant on their hands tomorrow, they would pick out the best man for leader and operate it much better than any outsiders could.

HE DECIDED after much deliberation not to distribute his stock among the employees, because his experience has shown him that there must be a head to the organization. "Everybody is boss in this plant," he says. "Everybody gets a hearing whenever he sees anything wrong; and we get all kinds of criticism from the boys; but there has got to be a judge if you are going to get things done. And that is my job. But he is convinced that in a pinch the boys could organize and pick their own "judge" and achieve a large degree of success.

And finally, he reveals his utter disinterest in great wealth, as well as his constitutional interest in the wage worker, through this declaration:

"I haven't as much money as people seem to think I have; and will have less before I get through. But whatever I leave behind I would rather leave to those boys out in the factory who have helped me make it than hand it out to a lot of relatives who never helped to earn a dollar of it."

Money-making, as you see, is only incidental to Henry Ford's work. It is not an end in itself. His work is the expression of his mechanical talent in a way that will supply one of humanity's needs. That work he follows with a passion approaching religious mysticism. Achievement is still his aim. He is planning with the aid of Thomas A. Edison, whom he calls "the greatest man on earth," to put on the market an electric automobile that will sell for less than \$700; and he hopes eventually to turn

the management of that branch of the business over to his only child, Edsel B. Ford, now twenty years of age. It is the hope of achievement that again lures him, as it has ever lured Edison himself. "Edison," says Ford in unstinted admiration of his friend, "never tried to make very much money. He is always happy when he is doing something for somebody else."

I said that Mr. Ford's earliest recollection of childhood was a visit with his father to a bird's nest. It was the home of a song sparrow, a ground-bird some used to call it, because it nested on the ground. He has been the friend of the song sparrow ever since, and of all other birds, and of squirrels and of rabbits and of deer and all manner of wild life. On his Dearborn farm you will find here and there a large pan of open water in the dead of winter. An electric current runs from the power house to the bottom of the pan, so that the water never freezes, and the birds that flock about there can dip and drink as they will. You will find in one spot some standing corn, and if you know why it was not cut you will find your answer in the empty cobs that lie strewn about the nearby woods where many well-fed squirrels play high jinks among the trees. Those rails thrown crosswise on the ground and covered with dead hay and grass are not an exposure of slovenly farming, but warrens where the rabbits may find a cozy winter home. The farm is Ford's only toy. He has never smoked, is a total abstainer, travels mostly on business and little for recreation, is no golfer, and finds small relaxation in the theatre, music and art. He has no desire to "round out his career" in political preferment, and quickly killed a movement to nominate him for governor of Michigan. But he loves nature. "Everybody loves nature," he thinks. But at any rate "everybody ought to study nature."

Nothing more truly reflects the taste and character of the man than his companionship during a vacation, in Florida or elsewhere—the companionship of Thomas A. Edison, the inventor, and John Burroughs, the naturalist.

At fifty-one—he was born July 30, 1863—Henry Ford is physically a bundle of nerves in a lithe, slim body, swift in motion, with hair fast turning gray, and with eyes that sparkle defiance to the crow's-feet creeping around them. The strain of past struggles and present burdens begins to tell upon him, but vitality and energy are still his. Those who knew him best before he had begun to win his battles find him today no less affable or kindly or accommodating. He faces the world as one who has chosen between God and Mammon; and is sure and happy in his choice. His mode of life and his method of business are not possible for everybody, but they bear incontrovertible testimony to the sincerity of his philanthropy and the glory of his self-reliance. "Cut your own wood" reads the proverb that will adorn the fireplace in his new Dearborn home, "and it will warm you twice."