
BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE AUTOMOBILE IN AMERICA

"Business is never as healthy as when, like a chicken, it must do a certain amount of scratching for what it gets," declared Henry Ford in **My Life and Work**, with Samuel Crowther (Doubleday, 1922; Arno, 1973). "Money chasing," he added, "is not business."

Such down-to-earth pronouncements, published over the years in newspapers and magazines, and aired on radio, made Ford an American folk hero.

As a result of the industry's stunning growth (General Motors passed the \$1 billion sales mark in 1926), Detroit and its entrepreneurs during the Jazz Age were to manufacturing what New York City, with its Yankees, Dodgers, and Giants, was to baseball.

Americans admired the automakers, and they loved their cars. In **Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, Nineteen Ten to Nineteen Forty-Five** (MIT, 1979), Warren J. Belasco quotes an early enthusiast: "He who runs by rail but makes an acquaintance; he who runs by road makes a friend—or sometimes an enemy; he at least gets intimate."

Despite his dark side (he dabbled in anti-Semitism), Ford, the visionary tinkerer who was wont to pick up a hitchhiker and give him a job, remains the most compelling automaker of them all. "It was useless to try to understand Henry Ford," wrote Charles E. ("Cast Iron Charlie") Sorensen in **My Forty Years with Ford** (Collier, 1962). "One had to *sense* him."

Like virtually all of Ford's colleagues and biographers, Sorensen did not recall him fondly. The inventor was autocratic, capricious, sometimes cruel, often vain. "After the name of Henry Ford became a household word," Sorensen recollected, "men in Ford Motor Company who might temporarily get more publicity than he did aroused his jealousy. One

by one they were purged."

Sorensen, ever dutiful, carried out many of the purges himself. For dirtier jobs—strikebreaking, intelligence-gathering, and all-around "fixing"—Ford employed the infamous Harry Bennett, notes Robert Lacey in his lively saga, **Ford: The Men and the Machine** (Little, Brown, 1986). Bennett, a gregarious, pistol-packing ex-sailor, directed Ford's so-called Service Department, a strong-arm force of 3,000 men.

The rise of William C. Durant, the soft-spoken salesman from Flint, Michigan, who parlayed a modest carriage business into General Motors, is chronicled by historian Bernard A. Weisberger in **The Dream Maker: William C. Durant, Founder of General Motors** (Little, Brown, 1979).

Ford and Durant were inspired men, but neither possessed much managerial talent. As their backyard creations grew into vast corporations, the early entrepreneurs were replaced by a new generation of "team players."

At GM, Durant was succeeded by Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., who was to become the ultimate "organization man."

Sloan realized, as he wrote in **Adventures of a White-Collar Man**, with Boyden Sparkes (Books for Libraries, 1941; Doubleday, 1970), that "in an institution as big as General Motors . . . any plan that involved too great a concentration of problems upon a limited number of executives would limit initiative, would involve delay, would increase expense, and would reduce efficiency." Sloan's solution: divide the corporation into dozens of subunits, each headed by a single executive. His greatest legacy may be the corporate organization chart.

Even so, Detroit has continued to produce colorful executives. Best known today is Chrysler's Lee Iacocca, whose rags-to-riches yarn, **Iacocca: An Auto-**

biography, with William Novak (Bantam, 1984, cloth; 1986, paper), became a phenomenal best seller.

J. Patrick Wright's **On a Clear Day You Can See General Motors** (Wright, 1979, cloth; Avon, 1980, paper) profiles John Z. DeLorean, the brilliant ex-GM executive who founded his own car company in 1975 and later ran afoul of the law. Scathingly critical of GM's bureaucracy, DeLorean argued that the company had abandoned Alfred P. Sloan's ideal of decentralization. All power flowed from the isolated 14th floor of GM's Detroit headquarters: "For the most part, a top executive by the time he works his way through the system is a carbon copy of his predecessors. If the men in place cannot do the job, there is no reason to believe that their handpicked successors can."

To executives on the 14th floor, the chief ogre was Walter P. Reuther, the tough-minded head of the United Auto Workers (UAW) between 1946 and 1970. An anti-Communist Social Democrat, he rarely missed a chance to rain scorn on "the bosses." Yet, he proved one of organized labor's most farsighted leaders, urging the Big Three to build small cars and cut prices during the late 1940s, and accepting the industry's need to introduce new technology on the assembly line. He is the central character in his brother Victor's memoir, **The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW** (Houghton, 1976).

The Company and the Union (Vintage, 1974) is journalist William Serrin's engaging history of the UAW's costly strike against GM in 1970. The two sides could have averted the walkout, says Serrin, but the UAW's leadership needed a strike to prove its zeal to the rank and file. Management and labor,

Serrin argues, "are victims of the relationship they have fashioned."

Distrust has not ended in Detroit. In **Car Wars: The Untold Story** (Dutton, 1984), one of the best recent books on Detroit's travails, historian Robert Sobel cites a 1983 survey of employee attitudes in several industrialized nations. More than their counterparts overseas (including those in Japan), U.S. factory hands professed a commitment to the work ethic. But only nine percent believed that their hard work would be rewarded with higher pay; in Japan, 93 percent of the employees did.

However, Sobel and most other scholars are reasonably hopeful about Detroit's prospects. Assessing the social and economic impact of **The Car Culture** (MIT, 1975), historian James J. Flink of the University of California, Irvine, disagrees. The wasteful "patterns of growth and development" spawned by the automobile and the cost of keeping gas tanks filled will doom "the age of automobility."

For another view of Detroit's future, see **The Reckoning** (Morrow, 1986), an artful collage that contrasts the industry and its leaders in the United States with Japan, by David Halberstam, the author of *The Best and the Brightest*. "In just 25 years," financier Felix Rohatyn told him, "we have gone from the American century to the American crisis." But one senior Chrysler executive added that the Japanese cost advantage could be eliminated if U.S. companies could "do a car right the first time."

Tokyo is worried, too. Already, the Japanese are looking over their shoulders—not at Detroit, but at such rising South Korean carmakers as Hyundai and Samsung. To the South Koreans, the Japanese are "the lazy Asians."