

The Model T

by Louise Albright Neyhart

People were astonished when the Model T Ford won the first transcontinental auto race by going from New York City to Seattle, Washington, in only twenty-two days. They had expected the car to fall apart.

It was June 1, 1909. For weeks the papers had been full of an exciting event that was to take place on that date. Before the New York City Hall, five "horseless carriages," an Acme, a Shawmut, an Itala, and two Model T Fords stood hub to hub. Mechanics were hurrying to make final adjustments. Then, from the White House, President Taft flashed the starting signal. America's first transcontinental auto race was under way.

West of St. Louis seven-day rains had turned the country roads into quagmires¹. Across the prairies and in Colorado average speeds were cut to ten miles an hour.

At Cheyenne, Wyoming, the big Itala quit the race. The others plowed on. Near the summit of the Cascades they fought their way against towering snowdrifts.

Days later, Ford Car Number 2, the winner, entered the gates of Seattle's Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition. It had crossed the continent in twenty-two days and fifty-five minutes, with New York air still in the two front tires!

As Colonel M. Robert Guggenheim awarded the cup, he said: "Mr. Ford's theory that a lightweight car, highly powered, can go places where heavier cars cannot go, and beat heavier cars costing five and six times as much on the steep hills or on bad roads has been proved. I believe Mr. Ford has the solution to the problem of the popular automobile."

The Model T had not shaken to pieces! Henry immediately announced that they would discontinue all their other models and concentrate on Model T. The Model T, mounted high over four wheels, with a little black box out front that hid, but in no way

silenced, a four-cylinder motor, made Henry famous and wealthy, and put America on wheels.

A farmer could jack up the right rear wheel of his Model T and belt a pulley to a buzz saw and begin cutting the winter's supply of logs. The next day he might use the Model T as a power plant to grind corn for his horses and his cows. And on Sunday he would take the Missus to church in that same Model T.

There were many jokes about the Model T, and Henry enjoyed each new one he heard. He thought they were good advertising. Even children loved the little jingles like these:

A little spark, a little coil,
A little gas, a little oil,
A piece of tin, a two-inch board—
Put them together and you have a Ford.

There was an old man
And he had a wooden leg;
A ride he couldn't steal,
A ride he couldn't beg.
So he got four spools
And an old tin can,
Build himself a Ford,
And the darn thing ran.

Learning to drive a Model T required no special genius. In front was a crank that either started the motor or broke your arm. It had a "planetary" transmission² with three pedals for your feet. To get it on its way, you pulled down the brass levers under the steering wheel, speeded up the motor, and stepped on the pedal to the left. Then

invisible wheels ground and ground, the motor complained, the body shook and hivered, and finally the Model T moved ahead.

When the car started, you let up on the pedal and jerked into high gear. The contraption leaped like a horse stung by a bee. To stop, you pushed hard on the pedal at the right. The one in the middle was the reverse pedal. Then you pulled on the hand lever, which threw the car into neutral.

You had neither lights nor horn unless the motor was running. There was no door on the left—only a panel that looked like a door. You either climbed over the side from the left or preceded your passenger in from the right.

Gasoline was fed by gravity to the carburetor from a tank that was under the front seat. To fill the tank everybody had to pile out of the car and the cushion had to be removed.

Carbon was a great nuisance too. The wearing of the sidewalls of the pistons or cylinders allowed the lubricating oil to get into the combustion chamber and build up a

sooty deposit known as carbon. When the motor carboned to a point where the knock was like the beat of a sledgehammer, the owner who was mechanically minded would unbolt the cylinder head, scrape off the carbon with his pocketknife, put the head back on, and be on his way.

When the connecting-rod bearings achieved more than a quarter of an inch play and the motor sounded like a boiler factory, the owner crawled underneath, took off the oil pan, and relined the bearing with whatever was at hand—a piece from an old tin can or old shoe leather.

Less than six months after the model was introduced, the entire output of the factory was spoken for—the Ford had outgrown another factory.

¹ **quagmires:** soft, muddy areas of ground that yield under the feet.

² **transmission:** part of an automobile that carries power from the engine to the drive shaft.

From *Henry Ford, Engineer*. Used by permission of the author.

1. Before the 1909 race, what did people believe about Fords?
 - A that they cost too much
 - B that they were not durable
 - C that they went through snow well
 - D that they would win the race easily

2. What was unusual about the start of the race?
 - A There were two Fords present.
 - B There were five cars in all.
 - C The man who started the race was not at the starting line.
 - D The event had been publicized for weeks.

3. How did Henry Ford react to the victory?
- A He discontinued all Ford models except the Model T.
 - B He wrote a song about the Model T for a sales campaign.
 - C He opened a new factory just for Model T production.
 - D He gave President Taft a ride in his Model T.

4. What did Henry Ford think about the jokes about the Model T?
- A that they were cruel
 - B that they were unnecessary
 - C that they were bad for business
 - D that they were good for business

5. What was it like learning to drive a Model T?
- A easy
 - B stressful
 - C physically demanding
 - D complicated

6. Over time, why did people grow to like the Model T?
- A It was heavy and highly powered.
 - B It resisted carbon deposits.
 - C It was easy to get in and out of.
 - D It could be used for several purposes.

7. What kind of knowledge would help the reader understand this passage better?
- A knowledge of United States geography
 - B knowledge of engine parts
 - C knowledge of car racing
 - D knowledge of manufacturing