



MEN AND THEIR MACHINES: JOHN AND HORACE DODGE, RANSOM E. OLDS, WILLIAM DURANT AND HENRY FORD

Even though cars hadn't been invented yet, the decade of the 1860s would have a tremendous impact on the automotive industry. From 1861 to 1864, five men who would grow up to be pioneers in the invention and manufacturing of the "horseless carriage" were born: John and Horace Dodge, William Durant, Henry Ford and Ransom E. Olds. These men founded some of the most important automobile companies in the world and made terrific contributions to the American Industrial Revolution. Their lives were connected in many ways. Each of them brought his own talent and special set of skills to the automotive industry. If any one of them had not been born or had not lived in Michigan, our automobile heritage might have been very different.

John and Horace Dodge

Born in Niles, Michigan, during the 1860s, the Dodge brothers came from a poor, hardworking family. As they were growing up, John and his younger brother Horace worked in their father's foundry and machine shop. By 1886, the brothers had moved to the Detroit area, where they worked in several machine shops. In 1896, Horace invented and patented a new ball bearing for bicycles. The next year, they opened their own bicycle manufacturing factory. The business was a success. After a few years, Horace and John sold the bicycle factory to get the money for their own machine shop in Detroit.



The brothers' first experience with the automobile business came in 1901 when Ransom E. Olds hired them to make 2,000 engines for his new Curved Dash Olds. The next year, Henry Ford asked them to build parts for his new cars. Because he did not have enough money to pay them, Ford offered John and Horace stock in his new company called the Ford Motor Company. The Dodge brothers became 10 percent owners of Ford's company.

In 1914, John and Horace began building their own Dodge automobiles, but they still kept their stock in the Ford Motor Company. This turned out to be a great deal for them. In 1919, they sold their Ford stock back to Henry Ford for \$25 million. Both John and Horace died unexpectedly in 1920 after catching influenza at the International Automobile Show in New York. Their wives sold the company five years later. Today, the Dodge Brothers Motor Company is part of the DaimlerChrysler Corporation.

Ransom E. Olds



Life began for Ransom Eli Olds in Geneva, Ohio, in 1864. During the 1880s, the family moved to Lansing, Michigan, and started a machine shop called Olds and Son. This shop is where Ransom started learning about steam-powered engines. By 1887, he had his first invention, a three-wheeled, steam-powered vehicle that could travel up to 18 miles on level ground. In 1893, Ransom made a four-wheeled version of this car and sold it to a man who was living in India. Unfortunately, the boat that was carrying the car to India sank along the way, but Ransom E. Olds still earned the title of the first American automobile exporter.





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In 1897, Ransom opened the Olds Motor Vehicle Company. That year his company produced only four horseless carriages, but Ransom was not about to give up his dream. He moved to Detroit and started manufacturing gasoline engines at the Olds Motor Works. There, he produced his first gasoline-powered automobile. The car was called the Oldsmobile. Later, Ransom moved his company to Lansing after a big fire destroyed all of his vehicles except one. He made the "Curved Dash Olds" at the Lansing factory, and soon it became a very popular vehicle. He sold about 6,500 a year.

In 1904, Ransom E. Olds retired from his company and formed another company called REO Motor Car Company. This new company planned to build more expensive cars and trucks. Ransom remained the president of REO Motor Car Company until 1924, but he still hadn't run out of ideas. He started yet another company to manufacture and sell his latest invention, the power lawnmower. Ransom E. Olds died in 1950.

William "Billy" Durant

William Durant was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1861. As a young man, he moved to Flint, Michigan. Billy went to work for his grandfather in a lumberyard. He was very ambitious and, before long, he and a partner started the Coldwater Road Cart Company, which made horse-drawn carts, wagons and carriages. The company was very successful and, by 1890, it had 14 factories and was the nation's largest carriage manufacturer.



James Whiting of the Buick Company had heard about Durant's great success with his cart company. In 1904, Whiting asked Durant to become the president of Buick and to promote its automobile. By 1908, Durant had moved the Buick factory to Flint. The Buick soon became the best-selling vehicle in the country.

In 1908, the four top automobile producers in the United States were Buick (William Durant), REO (Ransom E. Olds), Maxwell-Briscoe (Benjamin and Frank Briscoe) and Ford (Henry Ford). Benjamin Briscoe thought the four companies should be combined into one large one that would be called the International Motor Car Company. Durant thought this was a good idea, but Ransom E. Olds and Henry Ford dropped out of the negotiations and the deal was never made. William Durant still believed in the idea, so he formed a new company called General Motors. He raised the money to buy Buick and the Olds Corporation. Durant also bought the Oakland Company, which would later be renamed Pontiac, and the Cadillac Motor Car Company.

General Motors quickly became a huge company, owning nearly 30 smaller car companies. By 1910, the company had spent so much money that the investors became nervous and William Durant was fired from his job as president. This bad luck did not stop him from starting a new company called the Chevrolet Motor Company with his partner, Louis Chevrolet. Durant used his profits from the new company to get control of General Motors again in 1915, but in 1920 he resigned under pressure from others in the company. However, these setbacks did not keep William Durant down for long. In 1921, he formed Durant Motors and produced his own cars for 10 more years.





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By the early 1930s, due to poor sales of his cars and the Great Depression, William Durant no longer had enough money to design and build cars. His career in the automotive business was over. Durant's next big idea was to promote bowling alleys as the next great American hobby. While this idea didn't catch on at the time, William Durant never quit trying to come up with new ideas for the quickly changing world. William Durant died in 1947, the same year as Henry Ford. Their passing marked the end of an amazing chapter in automotive history.

Henry Ford

Henry Ford's life began and ended in the same place, Dearborn, Michigan. Henry was born on the family farm in 1863. Early in his life it became clear that young Henry would not become a farmer. His father said he was a tinkerer, not a farmer. In 1879, Henry moved to nearby Detroit to get a job as a machinist. There he learned to operate and repair steam engines. In 1888, Henry got a job with the Detroit Edison Company. He soon became its chief engineer and was paid a fantastic salary for the time - \$1,000 a year.



When he wasn't working at Edison, Henry would tinker with machines in a shed in his back yard. In 1896, he designed and built his first quadricycle, a gasoline-powered vehicle that was steered with a tiller like a boat. That same year, Henry met Thomas Edison at a business convention and told him about his vehicle. Edison told Ford he had a good idea and encouraged him to keep working on the vehicle. Henry sold that vehicle for \$200 and soon started another one. In 1899, he quit his job at Detroit Edison and formed the Detroit Automobile Company. The new company went out of business after only nine months, but Ford did not give up. In 1903, he and 11 investors formed Ford Motor Company. Between 1903 and 1908, Ford and his engineers developed 19 different vehicles, naming them each for a letter of the alphabet. He wanted to produce a car that the average working person could afford. He did just that in 1908 with the production of the Model T. It was reliable, easy to drive, easy to repair, durable, and it was affordable.

The Model T was a very successful automobile. By 1918, nearly half of all the cars in America were Model T's. To meet the demand for the cars, Henry Ford built modern factories using advanced manufacturing techniques that he invented, like mass producing the cars on a moving assembly line. He also paid his workers \$5.00 a day, which was double what most other companies paid at the time. This helped Ford Motor Company have a very diverse, stable and loyal work force. Henry Ford's creative ideas about automobile manufacturing helped make Ford Motor Company one of the most important businesses in the world. Henry died in 1947 at the age of 83. Today, his great-grandson Bill Ford is the head of Ford Motor Company, and other members of Henry Ford's family are also very active in the running of Ford Motor Company.

