

By **LARRY EDSALL** *AutoWeek* | Updated: 08/14/07, 2:57 pm et

The '32 Ford began as an ordinary car but was transformed into the iconic American hot rod, not only because of its V8 engine but also because it had the right look. Even a modest four-cylinder four-door sedan is a handsome design that invites personalization.

Most likely, the first such souped-up and restyled vehicle of the genre was owned by Edsel Ford himself. The acclaimed book on American automotive design and designers, *A Century of Automotive Style: 100 Years of American Car Design* by automotive historian Michael Lamm and former General Motors designer Dave Hollis, includes a photograph of a modified Ford roadster that Bob Gregorie designed for his boss.

"After Ford's bodies for 1932 were all sketched out, Gregorie designed a special little cycle-fendered boattail speedster for Edsel, which [Lincoln body engineer Henry] Crecelilus' craftsmen built on the 1932 Ford V8 chassis," Lamm and Hollis report.

Gregorie was Ford Motor Company's first real in-house designer. Henry Ford had cobbled together the shape of the Model T and only reluctantly gave in to his son and allowed the T's replacement, the 1928 Model A, to carry some of the design themes Ford inherited when Edsel convinced his father to buy Lincoln.

Unlike his father, Edsel embraced the automobile's aesthetic appeal. Like so many boys of so many ensuing generations, Edsel grew up drawing dream cars. In fact, his appreciation of art involved much more than automobiles; he commissioned the Diego Rivera murals that still draw people to the Detroit Institute of Arts.

To begin competing with GM's Art & Colour Section led by Harley Earl (which originated in 1927), Edsel worked closely with Eugene T. "Bob" Gregorie and outside coachbuilders on the design of Ford vehicles. Gregorie was a 23-year-old New Yorker who moved to Detroit, working for coachbuilder Brewster and briefly for Earl before turning to yacht design. Though officially hired by Crecelilus, Gregorie worked directly with Edsel Ford. Their design partnership would reach its pinnacle with the 1941 Lincoln Continental.

Gregorie's first assignment for Ford was a 1932 model, though not the one that would beget so many hot rods. Instead, it was the 1932 Model Y that would be produced by Ford's British subsidiary. Just a year later, however, Gregorie's design, enlarged to a more American scale, returned stateside as a '33 Ford Model 40 roadster.

Though Gregorie was onboard early in 1931, design of the car that would launch Henry Ford's new "flathead" V8 engine was done primarily at Detroit bodybuilder Briggs by Ralph Roberts, who later designed the stunning dual-cowl 1941 Chrysler Newport concept car.

Still, it was Edsel Ford who closely supervised and guided the design process, and it was his vision that became the Deuce.

"It was an interesting mating of an engine and a design and a wonderful coming together of a father and a son," Edsel's grandson Edsel Ford II said in a televised interview earlier this year. "Henry wanted to do a V8; he was the engine promoter. But I think it was Edsel's design that really made the '32 Ford."

Edsel Ford II's grandfather's contributions to the '32 Ford were highlighted at a 75th anniversary celebration in California of what are considered to be the 75 most significant '32-based hot rods.

"Henry Ford was an innovator. He wanted something new that would surprise everyone and sell his next generation of cars," said Dave Szczupak, at the time Ford group vice president for manufacturing. "Edsel Ford's body designs were so beautifully matched with his father Henry's speedy V8 that 1932 models have become all-time American classics."

"The anniversary exhibit's telling of Edsel Ford's contributions is important," said Freeman Thomas, Ford's North American strategic design director and a former Volkswagen, Audi and Chrysler designer. "His impeccable taste was the deciding element in every Ford, Lincoln and Mercury built between the Model T and World War II.

"The Deuce is the hot rod 'gold standard' because of Henry's V8 and Edsel's design," Thomas added. "Seventy-five years later, there still is not a more youthful image in America than the hot rod. This is another testament to the genius of Edsel Ford."


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Edsel Ford drives the 15 millionth Ford vehicle with his father, Henry Ford, and C.E. Sorenson as passengers in 1927.



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Lineage of the
Lines

Edsel
Ford's
design
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shaped a
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