

75 Years of the Deuce

Henry Ford could never have thank it



By **J.P. VETTRAINO**

It was light, sturdy and fast—top speed 85 mph—and it had great pickup. “Getaway,” they called it during the Great Depression. Perfect for a police car.

Now, those attributes that made the 1932 Ford V8 a solid tool of the law also were appreciated in the underworld. Outlaw John “Jackrabbit” Dillinger was known for his skills at the wheel of a Ford V8, even if his alleged letter to Henry Ford was proved a hoax.

From its launch in March 1932, the Ford V8 quickly became the car of choice for gangsters and bank robbers who dominated Depression-era headlines, and that was the least of its accomplishments. The “Deuce” pushed Ford closer to the brink of insolvency and raised the public’s expectations for a standard, reasonably priced automobile. It was half inspiration, half desperation, like so many of the moves that marked Henry Ford’s career.

Yet the 1932 Ford’s full impact would not be apparent for decades after the first one rolled from the Rouge complex in Dearborn—not until it had completed a figurative journey to California, became the basis for a subculture called hot rodding and built a foundation for the billion-dollar aftermarket speed-parts industry.

“It changed things so many ways,” recalls NHRA founder Wally Parks, who was editor of *Hot Rod* through the 1950s. “Foremost was the flathead V8—the dry-lake speed trials were its first test bed, and it took off from there.

“The Deuce was light. It had multiple features that made it easy to work on, and if you drove around town with your fenders off, you were someone cool.”

The 1932 model was for Ford what the minivan was for Chrysler in the mid-1980s: a Hail Mary pass, completed in

spectacular fashion for a touchdown as time was running out.

By 1931, four years into the Model A's run, Ford was losing steam. The Depression was only part of the problem. Sales fell 19 percent in 1930, then plunged another 50 percent in 1931, and it was increasingly clear the Model A was to blame. In a market where even the smallest edge made a crucial difference, the four-cylinder Model A couldn't keep pace with similarly priced Chevrolets and Plymouths. In early 1931, Henry Ford laid off 75,000 workers. Sometime that summer—some historians say on July 30, his 68th birthday—Ford settled on the idea he hoped would end the tailspin.

The first V8 engine had been built in 1900, and Rolls-Royce was using them by 1905. Lincolns had them in the late 1920s, yet Lincolns cost 10 times more than a Model A, and their V8s were hand-built. Few thought there was any other way. Henry Ford, however, had convinced himself that a low-priced, mass-produced V8 was possible. So he set three young engineers to building one in a secret workshop in Dearborn, Michigan.

By mid-1931, the new V8 was running, and Ford informed his closest associates. His son, Edsel, bought in and urged his father to let him design a new car for the V8. Charles Sorensen, Ford's production chief and longtime aide, insisted that trying to cast the V8 for mass production would ruin the company. Now losing millions per month, Henry Ford persisted.

Hundreds of attempts to cast the V8 blocks failed. The mold required 54 separate cores; they were repeatedly misaligned, and the blocks ended as scrap. Meanwhile, the company edged toward disaster. Many workers had been furloughed, cash flow had all but dried up. Ford was financing the new car from his personal fortune. Convinced that doom was impending, Sorensen took personal charge at the Rouge foundry. By early 1932, the V8 blocks began to emerge from their molds with acceptable tolerances.

Meantime, Edsel Ford and Joe Galamb worked nonstop on a car to carry the V8—a compact Ford styled in the spirit of elegant Lincolns. The first 1932 Ford was built March 10.

The 1932 Ford line was the first with two distinct models: Model B, powered by an improved Model A inline-four, and Model 18, which became known as the V8. The two were essentially identical—evolutions of the Model A, distinguished by engine and badges.

Both were offered in nine body styles. The radiators tapered in a slight V, with vertical bars and a curved tie-bar connecting the headlights. The designs having the biggest lasting impact were the two-place (plus rumble seat) roadster and two coupes. The more common "five-window" coupe had two door windows, two quarter-windows and the rear glass, while the "three-window" featured front-opening suicide doors.

Then there was that L-head V8. It displaced 221 cubic inches and made 65 hp, 15 more than the Model B four-cylinder and 5 more than Chevrolet's best engine. There were overheating problems and a rash of bearing failures and cracked blocks. Yet the Ford V8 started at \$460, or \$35 less than the cheapest Chevy, and quality improved fast (the 1933 model had 75 hp, mostly because of the aluminum cylinder heads). The public was smitten.

The V8 saved Ford Motor Company, but Henry Ford could not have known what his '32 model had launched. Beyond providing grist for the Southern California speed mill called Thunder Alley, the Ford V8 drove the most expansive automotive movement ever. It ingrained hot rods into American popular culture as indelibly as baseball or movies.

The phenomenon that would be hot rodding had taken root toward the end of the Depression, mostly with Model A's and the first used-up Ford V8s, fed by young men with an intuitive desire to go faster. Then came Pearl Harbor, and the motorheads grew up. The service honed their inclinations with technical training and exposure to advanced technologies. When World War II ended, they demobilized with a sense of what was possible.

The best started collecting along West Jefferson Boulevard in Culver City, California. The list of speed shops on Thunder Alley reads like a roster for the hot rodders Hall of Fame: Iskenderian, Edelbrock, Hilborn, Guldstrand, Traco, Falconer and more.

Into the 1950s, there were no street rods, drag cars or kustoms. Mechanized self-expression was known simply as a hot rod. Yet the purveyors and consumers of speed were molding their own subculture, with denim and black leather and graphic representation by Ed Roth and Von Dutch. There was no rockabilly, surf music or psychedelic, either—just the soundtrack an East Coast DJ had named rock 'n' roll.

Through it all, the Ford V8 remained the foundation. It made plentiful, relatively cheap raw material. It fit the essential parameters of light weight, horsepower

potential and easy modification, and there was that intangible that Wally Parks remembers: a look, maybe a feel, that

lent itself to pinched frames, channeled bodies, chopped tops and fat tires. Even when the flathead gave way to overhead-valve V8s (usually from General Motors), the coolest rods had Buick or Chevy engines crammed into Fords. By the late '60s, as originals grew increasingly rare and the aftermarket began providing complete bodies, they were invariably based on the Deuce.

Consider landmarks that introduced the credo to subsequent generations: Chili Catallo's Olds-powered Silver Sapphire, chosen to illustrate the Beach Boys' *Little Deuce Coupe* LP in 1963; Milner's piss-yellow (Chevy-powered) five-window coupe in George Lucas' 1973 classic, *American Graffiti*; ZZ Top's three-window Eliminator (actually a '33) on MTV

in the '80s. These 75 years later, we still marvel. Not bad for a Hail Mary car.

"In the height of the Depression, you put out a car with more horsepower and [in the most desirable hot-rod styles] less room than anything out there," says Larry Erickson, Ford's chief designer. "It made no sense as a business case. Yet here we are today, still celebrating this wildly impractical, wonderfully powerful car."

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