

The Historic Birthplace of Ford's Iconic '32



By JONATHAN WONG

As historic as the '32 Ford is, it's worth noting the equal significance of the Dearborn, Michigan,

facility it came out of: the Rouge plant. At its peak in the 1930s, it employed more than 100,000 workers and consisted of 93 separate structures with 15,767,708 square feet of ground area. The plant was Henry Ford's vision of vertical integration, where raw materials would be turned into finished vehicles, and it was the world's largest manufacturing facility throughout the 1920s and '30s.

The Rouge had its own power, engine casting, steel, glass and tire plants, so many of the parts needed to build cars were produced on-site under Ford control. And while many vital parts were self-produced, outside sources still played a key role in vehicle production, with 1200 suppliers in Detroit alone and an additional 300 throughout Michigan in 1932.

Not only is the site credited as the birthplace of the '32 Ford, but the original Thunderbird, numerous generations of Mustangs and today's best-selling F-150 pickup truck are all products of the Rouge. And production wasn't limited to automobiles. In times of war, the government tapped Ford to build boats, tanks, airplane engines and armor.

The following are key dates and facts in the history of Ford's industrial icon, with emphasis on the production of the '32 Ford as we celebrate its 75th anniversary.

July 1915: Henry Ford begins purchasing a 2000-acre strip of land along the Rouge River to construct his vertically integrated manufacturing facility.

April 1, 1917: Construction of an industrial facility and the Rouge dock begins.

Jan. 4, 1918: The first manufacturing building construction begins and opens later in the year.

March 1, 1918: An official government contract arrives for 112 Eagle 1 boats.

May 25, 1918: The 1700-foot-long and 350-foot-wide B building for boat construction is completed.

Dec. 23, 1920: The first casting at the foundry is poured.

1927: The final assembly line is transferred from the Highland Park plant to the Rouge. The Rouge produces Model A's from ore to assembly in a continuous, nonstop process. Building B becomes known as Dearborn Assembly.

May 1930: Engineers put together Ford's first V8 engine. Work continues on ways to reduce production costs.

April 14, 1931: The 20-millionth Ford vehicle is produced at the Rouge, a 1931 Model A Fordor Town [Sedan](#).

November 1931: Development of an improved Model A is stopped.

Dec. 1, 1931: Production of the 1932 bodies begins at the Rouge plant but is halted less than a week later, when Henry Ford announces intentions of producing a V8.

Dec. 7, 1931: After a meeting with his son, Edsel, Henry Ford decides to produce a low-priced V8 for 1932. Following that decision, 50,000 Rouge workers rip out old equipment and install hastily designed and manufactured machinery to build the flathead V8.

1932: For the first time, the Dearborn Assembly Plant in the Rouge complex uses both of its final assembly lines to produce '32 Ford models. Big changes come in the foundry process. With more complex one-piece engines, workers have to learn how to use gauges to meet greater tolerances than in the past. Some days yield 100 percent scrap without a single usable block. In the plant, changes are constant, with service bulletins to fix problems caused by the rush to market. Problems include overheating, fuel-pump issues, brake malfunctions and cracks in the chassis and bodies. Artist Diego Rivera tours the Rouge and will later depict it in his mural at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

March 9, 1932: The first production V8 Ford is built, a total of 38 on the first day.

March 31, 1932: The Ford V8 is officially introduced to the public.

April 18, 1932: The first Model B Ford is built.

June 1932: The foundry is casting 3000 engines a day.

Ford expenditures in 1932:

\$300 million for raw materials, manufactured parts, supplies, freight and labor

\$140 million on bodies from outside makers

\$86 million on railroads and shipping companies

\$52 million a month average on manufactured parts and raw materials

\$48 million for upholstery, leather, carpet, body trim material

\$47 million on steel purchased on the open market

\$20 million on tires

\$18 million for monthly payroll for 100,000 employees, 56,264 of whom are employed at the Rouge

\$10.1 million on glass

\$6.4 million for additional machinery

\$5 million on malleable castings

\$4.9 million on paint and lacquer

\$4.8 million for crude rubber

\$4.7 million on gray iron

\$4 million for lumber

\$3.5 million for copper

\$1.5 million for lead

Worker salaries in 1932:

\$6 a day for skilled workers

\$5 a day for semiskilled workers

\$4 a day for laborers

Sales totals for 1932: 256,867, including Model A in the early months.

Other locations of '32 production: The '32 was also built in Ford factories in England, France, Germany, Egypt, India, Japan, Peru, Puerto Rico, Romania and Canada.

May 27, 1937: Union supporters gather outside the Rouge plant to hand out pamphlets to workers. Conflict with a Ford serviceman ensues, and the event becomes known as the Battle of the Overpass.

September 1940: Ground is broken on an engine plant for B-26 Marauder bombers to aid in the war effort. Jeeps and tanks also are built at the Rouge.

April 29, 1959: The 50-millionth Ford vehicle is produced, a white Galaxie.

April 17, 1964: The first production Mustang rolls off the line, with the 1-millionth following less than two years later on March 2, 1966.

1979-1993: By this time, the aging Rouge suffers from sporadic production of the Mustang and is on the cusp of being shuttered. By 1989, the steel operation and shipping fleet are sold, ending the plant's vertically integrated operation. However, a handful of renovations, expansion of the engine plant and introduction of a new-generation Mustang for the 1994 model year keep the plant open. Of the original 2000 acres of land, Ford keeps 600.

Feb. 1, 1999: A boiler explosion at Powerhouse No. 1 claims the lives of six workers and injures more than 20 other employees.

May 3, 1999: Bill Ford Jr. announces plans for a \$2 billion green renovation of the Rouge complex, complete with the world's largest ecological roof, the planting of numerous plants to rid the soil of contaminants, solar cells and fuel cells for renewable energy and swales and paving filters to improve storm-water management.

May 10, 2004: The final car is produced at Dearborn Assembly, the 6,700,000th Mustang. Employees are transferred to the new Dearborn Truck Plant next door. A portion of the building is preserved.

The revitalization of the Rouge complex is complete. The return of the plant tours rekindles a tradition that dates back to the 1920s, with a museum experience, observation deck and tour of the Dearborn Truck Plant.

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