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COLLECTING

How Ford Brought Power to the People

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DEARBORN, Mich.

THE Age of Speed turns 75 this year along with the Little Deuce Coupe that ushered it in, democratizing horsepower and providing the clay from which countless hot rods would be molded.



Lynn Stringer's '32 Ford V-8 Deluxe Roadster.

Three decades before the heyday of the muscle car, Henry Ford inadvertently invented the hot rod by bolting a 65-horsepower V-8 engine into a light, attractive body. His breakthrough cost \$460 in its most basic form, a two-door roadster, only \$50 more than the same car powered by a four-cylinder engine. Ford figured that even in the depths of the Depression, this was within reach of the working class.

Six million Americans flocked to Ford dealerships on the announcement day.

Yet the car, which is now seen as a 20th century icon and one of the industry's most significant models, was not a financial success. After an initial spurt of orders, harsh reality set in: most Americans couldn't afford lunch, let alone installment payments, so Ford's 1932 sales were barely half of the previous year's volume.

Over 10 months of production, 178,749 Ford Model 18 V-8s were manufactured, along with about 75,000 Model Bs that had the same body but a 4-cylinder engine. Both versions of the '32 Ford, each offered in 14 body styles, were lumped together under a common label: the Deuce.

After World War II, returning servicemen found that Deuces were cheap and plentiful used cars; that the flathead V-8 engine could be easily tweaked to produce more horsepower; and that the clean design lent itself to modification. Hot-rodders smitten by the combination made the Deuce the holy grail of home-built concoctions.

"The Deuce won the hot rodder's admiration because it was the first car that was both affordable and fast right out of the box," said Pete Chapouris, a hot-rodder for 50 years and the president of the SoCal Speed Shop in Pomona, Calif.

To check the vital signs of the seminal Deuce as it turns 75, I test-drove an original '32 Ford V-8 De Luxe Roadster owned by Lynn Stringer of Northville, Mich.

Motoring sedately along park roads near Mr. Stringer's home in suburban Detroit, the Deuce copes without the trappings now considered necessary. Climate control is achieved by tipping the windshield open to flush the cockpit's heat with a cool breeze. Video entertainment is a soothing sky and a cloud show reflected in the rear of a headlamp shell. The soundtrack is a V-8 murmur so subdued that conversation with my chaperone was not impeded. Mr. Stringer's Deuce roadster elicited so many smiles and thumbs-up salutes that we felt like Marines in a Memorial Day parade.

The '32 Ford was the most fruitful collaboration between Henry Ford, the homespun industrialist who put the world on wheels, and his son, Edsel, who was president of the Ford Motor Company from 1919 until his death in 1943.

By the late 1920s Chevrolet had passed Ford, whose Model T had lingered too long, in sales. Chevy countered Ford's new Model A of 1928 by introducing a "Six for the price of a Four" the

next year. The '32 V-8 was Ford's counterpunch: it cost only \$15 more than the Chevy Six and \$35 less than a four-cylinder Plymouth.

Henry Ford's other foe was the Great Depression, which drove the city of Detroit to bankruptcy, left half the local workforce unemployed and slashed car production to 15 percent of capacity. He hoped that an exciting new Ford might draw cash being hoarded under mattresses, driving the country out of the economic ditch.

Edsel Ford brought an eye for design to the project. Henry's son, more urbane than his father, borrowed visual touches from the company's luxury division to give the '32 the look of a baby Lincoln. A streamlined radiator shell, fluted bumpers and bright accents made the new model a standout.

While V-8s were available in several luxury models, no such engine had ever been offered in a car designed for the working class. Henry relished the challenge of inventing a V-8 for the masses. He integrated several components into a single engine-block casting to cut manufacturing steps; simplified fuel, lubrication and ignition systems also cut costs.

Six million Americans flocked to Ford dealerships on the Deuce's announcement day. After an initial spurt of orders, harsh reality set in: most Americans couldn't afford lunch, let alone installment payments, so Ford's 1932 sales were barely half of the previous year's volume. In desperation, Edsel rolled out a larger restyled car for 1933. Only 178,749 Deuce V-8s were manufactured during its 10-month production run. From 1931 through 1933, the three worst years of the Depression, Ford lost \$125 million.

But rushing the new V-8 to market proved a mistake, with engine failures attributed to fragile pistons, inadequate cooling and marginal lubrication. Once the bugs were ironed out, though, customers raved about the Deuce's speed.

Letters of appreciation came from the dark side. Clyde Barrow wrote, "For sustained speed and freedom from trouble, the Ford has got every other car skinned." A letter to Ford bearing John Dillinger's signature, of doubtful authenticity, bragged, "I can make any other car take a Ford's dust."

Hot-rodders soon discovered that 65 horsepower and a 75-mile-an-hour top speed were merely the start for the V-8. On dry lake beds, racers in California clocked nearly 130 m.p.h. before World War II. The flathead V-8 was also the engine of choice on dragstrips and oval tracks.

Mr. Stringer joined the movement in 1955 as a teenager in Steubenville, Ohio. "I started buying any car magazine containing '32 Ford photos or articles," he said. "While attending Purdue University, I drove a hot rod consisting of a Ford Model A body on a '32 frame with Chevy V-8 power. I finally got my first Deuce, a 5-window coupe, in 1959."

Mr. Stringer joined the Ford Motor Company in 1963 and spent most of his 35 years there as a truck engineer. By 1968, his tastes had shifted from hot rods to factory-original Deuces; he has owned and restored a dozen or so over the years.

"The '32 has always appealed to me because of its lines and smooth look," he said.

In 1978, Mr. Stringer purchased the roadster I drove for \$7,000. After an eight-year rebuild using still-available new parts and period-correct medium maroon paint, this car has won top honors at several prestigious shows, including ones organized by the Early Ford V-8 Club of America. With less than 50,000 miles and only 500 miles since restoration, it's the closest thing there is to a brand-new '32 Ford. Mr. Stringer estimates the value of his Deuce at \$125,000.

In contrast to most old cars, no putt-putt or wheezing emanates from under a Deuce V-8's hood. The engine starts quickly and chuckles contentedly after the press of a floor button. The tall shift lever pokes straight out of the floor with no boot to shroud its workings. Shifting is easy as long as you heed the wide horizontal gate of the H-pattern and don't hurry gear changes.

Of course, the driving dynamics are antiquated. The steering is either heavy (during parking) or in need of constant correction (to take up slack in the system while cruising). The brakes groan at low speeds and lack the stopping power for freeway driving. Bumps provoke a cacophony of squeaks and rattles despite the extensive rubber insulation added to the 1932 model. The rudimentary suspension reacts to big jolts with a few cycles of hobby-horse motion.

When motivated by a quick jab of throttle, the Deuce drives smartly away from the past. The V-8's surge forward is modest by today's standards, but on the 1930's thrill scale it probably rivaled rising hemlines, airplane rides and the end of Prohibition. The first-gear kick carries you to 25 miles an hour, and second is worth 40. At 75 years of age, the Deuce is still a driver's delight.