



Tin Lizzie Dreams: Henry Ford and Antimodern American Culture, 1919-1942

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Tin Lizzie Dreams: Henry Ford and Antimodern American Culture, 1919-1942

Abstract

“Tin Lizzie Dreams: Henry Ford and Antimodern American Culture, 1919-1942” is an interdisciplinary cultural history combining close analyses of print and broadcast media, music and dance, technology, and built environments to argue that Henry Ford, one of the most popular modernizers in American history, actually espoused and popularized a personal philosophy that was distinctly antimodern. “Tin Lizzie Dreams” shows how Henry Ford’s cultural projects, most often discussed as a side item or supplement to his career as an automaker and industrialist, were in fact indicative of an essential antipathy and even resistance toward the modernity he was helping to create through the rise of the Ford Motor Company and Model T. With projects such as the renovation of the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts, and the practice of holding weekly “old fashioned dances” in Dearborn, Ford created a working antimodern philosophy related to that which T.J. Jackson Lears first traced among East Coast elites at the turn of the twentieth century. Ford then brought his anti-intellectual slant on antimodernism to a mass audience with the creation of the popular Edison Institute museum and Greenfield Village, opened in 1929, and the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* radio show, which reached 10 million listeners a week at the height of its 1934-1942 broadcast run. The wider argument of “Tin Lizzie Dreams” is that antimodernism, as an American cultural phenomenon, was not only the purview of Gilded Age elites but also enjoyed broad popular appeal until the outbreak of World War II.

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anything I can achieve, I love you so very much and live for your smiles. Maggie and Ellie, this is for you.

We used to say around Dearborn that if Henry Ford saw three blackbirds in the morning, all birds were black that day.

—Fred L. Black

Introduction.

John Booth's Body: Henry Ford and American History

In the autumn of 1916, Henry Ford was presented with an intriguing possibility. Perhaps John Wilkes Booth had *not* actually been killed at the end of the manhunt following his assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Ford was spending a great deal more time thinking about American history since being lambasted in the press for a statement he made in a May 25 interview: “history is more or less bunk.”¹ According to Ford’s personal secretary, Ernest Liebold, an idea was floating around Ford’s offices at the Dearborn Engineering Laboratory—home of the infamously anti-Semitic *Dearborn Independent*—that Booth had actually been operating at the behest of a shadowy cabal of “international bankers” based in Montreal attempting to prevent the issuance of greenback currency.² This alternative story of Booth’s life ended not in a barn in Virginia, but at the Grand Hotel in Enid, Oklahoma, where John Wilkes Booth (a.k.a. John St. Helen and David George) purportedly committed suicide on January 14, 1903. And the author of this revisionist history had just offered to add Booth’s body to Ford’s historical collections.³

The central source for this theory was a book by Finis L. Bates entitled *The Escape and Suicide of John Wilkes Booth*.⁴ Interested but not convinced by the account, Ford ordered secretary Fred Black (the future Secretary-Treasurer of the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village) to scour the country

¹ The exchange is reproduced in “Legendary Mr. Ford,” *New York Times*, August 30, 1918, 10. For a fuller discussion of the quotation and its context, see Ch. 3.

² “The Reminiscences of E. G. Liebold,” 451-52, Acc. 65, Owen W. Bombard Interviews Series, Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford (cited hereafter as Ford Reminiscences), <http://cdm15889.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15889coll2/id/11506/rec/27> and <http://cdm15889.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15889coll2/id/12361/rec/28> (accessed March 11, 2015).

³ “The Reminiscences of Fred L. Black,” Ford Reminiscences, <http://cdm15889.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15889coll2/id/2473/rec/24> (accessed February 25, 2015).

⁴ Finis L. Bates, *The Escape and Suicide of John Wilkes Booth* (Naperville, IL: J.L. Nichols & Co., 1907).

in an effort to confirm or refute Bates's claims. Black pursued his research, off and on, until the publication of a series of stories on the matter in the *Dearborn Independent* in 1925. Ford's interest came at a particularly opportune time for Bates. Bates's law practice in Memphis was not doing well, and he was seeking money to pay off the \$8,000 mortgage on his home. In exchange for a loan in that amount, Bates offered Henry Ford collateral which would help substantiate his historical claims: the mummified body of John Wilkes Booth, which he had stored in his garage in Memphis.⁵ Ford expressed interest in bringing the body to Dearborn, but his staff wisely dissuaded him. Black's years of research turned up no evidence other than that which would support the dominant history of Booth's death by gunshot in 1865, and Ford and his staff eventually set the issue aside.⁶

Henry Ford's near-acquisition of the alleged mummy of John Wilkes Booth was remarkable not only for its absurdity but also for the matter-of-fact manner in which Ford's staff approached the issue at the time and discussed it in a series of Ford Motor Company oral history interviews four decades later. Black approached Ford's request to chase down the John Wilkes Booth story with the same businesslike air as if he was reporting on that quarter's automobile sales. He read Bates's book twice the night it was given to him and in the morning told Ford simply that he "found it very interesting but that there were some weak spots in it. If they could be cleared up, there might be something to it."⁷ Fred Black would have had no set job description—Henry Ford resisted the notion of a firm hierarchy at the Ford Motor Company beyond the essential fact that he was at the

⁵ "The Reminiscences of Fred L. Black," 10-11.

⁶ The reader will note that this explanation, thus far, leaves Finis L. Bates with an unidentified dead body in his garage. Liebold later told the story of the body as he'd learned it: a painter named George had the misfortune of dying of a morphine overdose in a hotel, compounded by the misfortune of having his body acquired by an undertaker hoping to display a new type of embalming fluid at a Los Angeles convention. When the L.A. powers-that-be balked at the presence of a cadaver in their convention center, George's body was removed and it somehow passed into Bates's care, who decided that George (at least in his expired state) bore a workable resemblance to John Wilkes Booth. After a time on the carnival and sideshow circuit, George was stored in Bates's garage. The book, it seems, was an effort on Bates's part to create popular interest around his morbid acquisition. "The Reminiscences of Fred L. Black," 10-11; "The Reminiscences of E. G. Liebold," 453-55.

⁷ "The Reminiscences of Fred L. Black," 9.

top of it. But spending years researching a rumor regarding 19th century U.S. history was well within the realm of what one of Ford's more trusted employees might be asked to do, with increasing frequency, in the 1920s or '30s. As Black put it, "Mr. Ford's interest in American history increased as the years passed."⁸ Ford's interest in the American past would be one of the major shaping factors in his career, and drive major projects such as the renovation of the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts and the creation of the Edison Institute museum and Greenfield Village historical park.

Ford's many historians and biographers have tended to set these projects aside, more or less, as side pursuits adjacent to the central popular narrative of the life of Henry Ford: that of the innovator and industrialist who helped to create the American middle class by inaugurating the Five Dollar Day and put the country on the road with the 1908 Ford Model T.⁹ Meanwhile, the dissonance between Henry Ford's image as one of the consummate modernizers in American history and his obsessive interest in and promotion of a pre-industrial past generally falls as one item upon a laundry list of contradictions in Ford's life and personality. Here it sits among other apparent incongruities and negations—on workers' welfare, for example, Ford's famous 1914 profit sharing plan runs up against his vehement and even violent opposition to unionization. As historian Douglas Brinkley put it, "all things considered, Henry Ford was a contradiction in virtually every term imaginable."¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁹ eg. Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge, 1915-1933* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), Ch. 19: "Projects and Personalities;" David L. Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford: An American Folk Hero and His Company* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976), Ch. 17: "Henry's Hobbies." Steven Watts, by comparison, places more emphasis on the relevance of Henry Ford's historical pursuits to his cultural legacy: "Thus, Henry Ford became an American folk hero because he appreciated *both* the aspirations and the apprehensions of the American people as they struggled to enter the modern age." Steven Watts, *The People's Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), xiii, emphasis original.

¹⁰ Douglas Brinkley, *Wheels for the World: Henry Ford, His Company, and a Century of Progress, 1903-2003* (New York: Viking, 2003), xxii.

And yet, despite the contradictions and complications in Ford's narrative, despite his infamously virulent and prolific anti-Semitism, and the hardships faced by his workers, and the fraught legacy of 20th century industrial capitalism and automobility for which Ford bore so much responsibility, he has remained one of the most lauded businessmen in American history. When *Fortune* magazine declared Henry Ford "the businessman of the century" in 1999, beating out a slate including Alfred P. Sloan, Tom Watson, Jr., and Bill Gates, the authors listed all these faults and others en route to the finale of their tribute:

The Businessman of the Century was the builder of an industry that transformed the very land we live on, the first to create a mass market as well as the means to satisfy it, as great an entrepreneur as we've ever seen. He was a provincial and a curmudgeon; a man with all the prejudices of his time, who had as well the kind of genius that endures. He is Henry Ford.¹¹

A decade and a half later, in the relatively dire economic circumstances of 2015, Henry Ford remains a go-to figure for commentators calling for innovation and wage reform. Regarding the gathering of the world's business and political elites at the 2015 World Economic Forum, *Reuters* columnist Rob Cox argued that leaders should encourage higher wages as a strategy in thwarting the rise in economic inequality. "Davos," wrote Cox, "badly needs a Henry Ford moment."¹²

The impetus for this dissertation was a research trip to the Benson Ford Research Center at The Henry Ford in the service of a project examining the history of the automobile radio and its impact on American culture. There, I found a wealth of documents and resources related to the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* radio show, a program of symphonic music interspersed with speeches by Ford spokesman William J. Cameron which ran from 1934 to 1942 (with a brief reprise in 1946). The

¹¹ Thomas A. Stewart et al., "The Businessman of the Century: Henry Ford, Alfred P. Sloan, Tom Watson Jr., Bill Gates," *Fortune*, November 22, 1999, http://archive.fortune.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/1999/11/22/269067/index.htm (accessed January 26, 2015).

¹² Rob Cox, "Davos Badly Needs a Henry Ford Moment," *Reuters Breakingviews*, January 21, 2015, <http://blogs.reuters.com/breakingviews/2015/01/21/rob-cox-davos-badly-needs-a-henry-ford-moment/> (accessed January 26, 2015).

more I read about the *Sunday Evening Hour*, the more I was struck by the conservatism of both the musical programming and the content of Cameron's speeches. Chrysler, one of Ford's chief competitors, was trouncing Ford in the radio ratings with the *Major Bowes Amateur Hour* variety show, and the *Sunday Evening Hour* was met with a critical response that seemed to range from lukewarm to indifferent.¹³ Why, I wondered, would a company that was supposed to be a harbinger of mobility and a bulwark of the modern American middle class persist in broadcasting such a markedly backward-looking product?

My question, I soon realized, was misguided. Setting aside the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* as backward-looking, a curiosity, a contradiction—as has happened with so many of Ford's activities—would have missed the crucial point that the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* was stubbornly, enduringly popular, even if it chronically underperformed its rivals. At the height of its popularity, the program reached over 10 million listeners every week.¹⁴ Meanwhile, by the 1935 over 300,000 visitors per year were visiting Ford's beloved Edison Institute and Greenfield Village.¹⁵ By this point in the 1930s, Henry Ford's name had already been put forward as a candidate for the U.S. Senate (1918) and the Presidency (1920).¹⁶ Clearly, Henry Ford's status as a "folk hero," as historian David Lewis called him, drew on activities and appeal beyond just his role as a manufacturer of automobiles.¹⁷ And Ford's particular mode of regarding the present through the lens of an imagined past—what I call his antimodern vision—shaped even his most modern and transformative projects.

¹³ See Ch. 3.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, "Creating a Favorable Business Climate: Corporations and Radio Broadcasting, 1934 to 1954," *The Business History Review* 73, no. 2 (Summer 1999), 228.

¹⁵ Jessica Swigger, "'History is Bunk': Historical Memories at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2008), 77, figure 1.9.

¹⁶ Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 226-27, 238.

¹⁷ Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 11.

This is not another biography of Henry Ford. The aim herein is to draw together these disparate and contradictory strands into a model which explains how Henry Ford could be both a modernizer and ambivalent or even oppositional toward modernity, a seminal figure in the rise of American automobility and yet a tireless proponent of the moral and social virtues of a pre-automobile past, and the head of one of the most important corporations in the United States who maintained a lifelong disdain for those who worked under what he saw as sheer profit motive.¹⁸ For more than a century, Henry Ford has been one of the most potent figures in American culture. And at the outset of the 21st century, as scholars rush to offer insight into the history and precedent informing current debates regarding the shape and limits of what may be called “American,” the political marshaling of the past, and the cultural power wielded by economic elites, we need a better, more unified, and more useful understanding of Henry Ford.

Antimodernism, as a concept, owes its origin to the work of T.J. Jackson Lears. In 1981, Lears confronted a similarly pervasive contradiction besetting old-guard New England elites at the turn of the 20th century. Among those who would ostensibly benefit most from the rise of “modernity” in the form of 20th century American capitalist society, Lears found deep-seated ambivalence and anxiety. As an explanation, Lears developed his concept of *antimodernism*, a “condition” which encompassed this ambivalence in both its implicit longings and explicit expressions. Sharpening Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony with a pointed analysis of the Freudian unconscious urges of his actors, Lears showed how the doubts, whims, and therapeutic pursuits of the likes of Henry Adams, Theodore Roosevelt, and Van Wyck

¹⁸ Henry Ford with Samuel Crowther, *My Life and Work* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1922), 19-20, 40-41.

Brooks could be culturally and historically impactful. Ambivalence and contradiction, in Lears's model, could have real cultural power.¹⁹

Antimodernism as I use the term in "Tin Lizzie Dreams" differs from that of Lears's elites in two key ways. The most major departure is that Ford, as a rule, was uninterested in prolonged intellectual inquiry or self-reflection. Though we have his writings and preserved statements, it is often more useful to take Ford's lead and evaluate him through his works and activities. We might call this a functional antimodernism—one that Ford worked out by replacing the floor in an 18th century inn when a more genteel antimodernist might have been writing a novel.

The other departure from the antimodernism of Gilded Age New England elites, related to Ford's anti-intellectualism, is that Ford never bothered to consider the incompatibility of his notions of modernity and pre-modernity. In other words, Ford would have seen no contradiction inherent in the fact that he, the world's foremost automaker, insisted that the materials for the reproduction 19th century gristmill he constructed at the Wayside Inn be dragged there by teams of oxen.²⁰ Unlike his more educated peers, Ford left us no fervent declension narratives or expressions of naval gazing anxiety partially because he imagined that his antimodern vision mapped directly and unproblematically onto the world around him. Harboring what historian Greg Grandin called "a self-regard bordering on the Promethean," Henry Ford truly believed that he could remake the American present in the image of his own imagined past.²¹ The projects I examine here, from the historically-focused Edison Institute to the transformative Model T, must be seen as Ford's attempts to do so.

¹⁹ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), xv-xx.

²⁰ Brian E. Plumb, *A History of Longfellow's Wayside Inn* (Charleston: The History Press, 2011), Ch. 9, Kindle.

²¹ Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 41.

As an interpretive model, “Tin Lizzie Dreams” departs from *No Place of Grace* on the treatment of the wider American public under a condition of cultural hegemony. Because of Ford’s popularity and the efficient organization around him, we benefit from a large body of evidence both anecdotal (letters) and quantifiable (radio ratings and visitor numbers) to show how Americans responded to finding themselves on the receiving end of Ford’s antimodern vision. This dissertation will show that while Ford indeed wielded a deeply coercive level of cultural and economic power, many Americans appeared to willfully adopt his vision, finding it in turns reasonable, comforting, even seductive. As I said before, Ford’s antimodern projects were massively popular—and, in the case of Greenfield Village, continue to be so. As we will see, antimodernism in Ford’s hands found a broad and enthusiastic audience well into the 1920s and ‘30s. As one Greenfield Village visitor wrote to Ford in 1938, “Thank you, Mr. Ford, more than I can say for the bigness, and the beauty, and the knowledge of my countrymen and my land that you have brought into my life and my experience.”²² Conversely, others, especially the more vocal critics of the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*, found Ford’s vision easy to resist and ridicule (see Ch. 3).

In 1995, John Fiske argued that popular culture exists in the antagonistic relationship between mass culture—capitalist production—and the people’s interpretation, use, consumption, or rejection of it. Popular culture, in this vein, is the “completed” cultural object, viewed as a whole through production, dissemination, reception, and acceptance or rejection.²³ Along these lines, “Tin Lizzie Dreams” presents what we might call a popular antimodernism, from the beliefs and logic underlying its expression by Henry Ford, to its realization in the disparate cultural forms—built environments, object collections, periodicals, radio waves—contained herein, to its interpretation

²² Fay to Ford, Apr. 10, 1938. Acc. 1, Fair Lane Papers, Box 128, Folder 2, Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford (cited hereafter as Fair Lane Papers).

²³ John Fiske, “Popular Culture,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 2nd ed., ed. by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 321-35.

and evaluation by the American public. Though Henry Ford sits at the center of the dissertation, I want to emphasize that Ford's audience, in this reading, maintains true critical and cultural power of their own.

This dissertation joins a large body of literature on the life, history, and legacy of Henry Ford, including the efforts of Ford himself. Henry Ford, with the assistance of Samuel Crowther, took pains to shape his own literary legacy with a series of three pseudo-autobiographies: *My Life and Work* (1922), *Today and Tomorrow* (1926), and *Moving Forward* (1930).²⁴ "Tell-all" memoirs included Ford Motor Company (FMC) Sociology Department head Samuel Simpson Marquis's *Henry Ford: An Interpretation* (1923), *Dearborn Independent* editor E.G. Pipp's *The Real Henry Ford* (1922), and FMC production chief Charles E. Sorensen's *My Forty Years with Ford* (1956).²⁵ To these subsequent authors have added a plethora of popular biographies and profiles both building up and chipping away at the mythology of Henry Ford.²⁶

But based on the unusual wealth of material housed at the Benson Ford Research Center at The Henry Ford in Dearborn, a well-supported and generally consistent body of historical literature has arisen on Ford and the Ford Motor Company since Ford's death in 1947. Columbia University historian Allan Nevins, with the support of Frank Ernest Hill, wrote a comprehensive three-volume history of Ford and his company in the late 1950s and early '60s that has remained the foundational

²⁴ I add the "pseudo" qualifier because Ford and Crowther took occasional liberties with historical fact in the service of maintaining a favorable narrative, and portions of the books run closer to philosophical treatises or lists of aphorisms than life histories. Ford and Crowther, *My Life and Work*; Henry Ford with Samuel Crowther, *Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1926); Henry Ford with Samuel Crowther, *Moving Forward* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1931).

²⁵ Samuel Simpson Marquis, *Henry Ford: An Interpretation* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1923); E.G. Pipp, *The Real Henry Ford* (Detroit: Pipp's Weekly, 1922); Charles E. Sorensen with Samuel T. Williamson, *My Forty Years with Ford* (New York: Norton, 1956).

²⁶ eg. James Miller Martin, *The Amazing Story of Henry Ford: The Ideal American and the World's Most Famous Private Citizen* (Chicago: M.A. Donohue, 1922); Ralph H. Graves, *The Triumph of an Idea: The Story of Henry Ford* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1934); William Adams Simonds, *Henry Ford: His Life, His Work, His Genius* (Los Angeles: F. Clymer, 1946); Roger Burlingame, *Henry Ford: A Great Life in Brief* (New York: Knopf, 1955); etc.

source on Ford history.²⁷ One of the great strengths in Nevins and Hill's history is their use of firsthand oral accounts from the men and women who lived and worked alongside Ford. The Owen W. Bombard Interviews Series at the Benson Ford Research Center makes over 200 oral histories from Ford's associates, employees, and friends available to researchers, and is so indispensable to Ford historians (and so often cited) as to deserve a place of honor in the any historiography on Henry Ford.²⁸

The two contemporary biographies joining Nevins and Hill as necessary Ford sources are Douglas Brinkley's exhaustively researched *Wheels For the World* (2003) and Steven Watt's more popularly-minded *The People's Tycoon* (2005). Both follow Nevins and Hill in presenting Henry Ford as a flawed, contradictory figure possessed by an enduring purpose toward mobilizing the country, a particular mechanical brilliance, and an aptitude for surrounding himself with an unusually talented and effective team.²⁹ To these, any researcher interested in Ford's cultural impact during his own lifetime must add David L. Lewis's *The Public Image of Henry Ford* (1976), which traces both the press and popular response to Henry Ford throughout his career and Ford's (the man's and the company's) efforts to shape Ford as a public figure.³⁰

Recently, historians have begun broadening and nuancing our understanding of the impact of Henry Ford by examining his activities in regard to both race and international trade. Notable works in this vein include Beth Tompkins Bates's *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford*

²⁷ Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954); Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge*; Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth, 1933-1962* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963).

²⁸ Owen W. Bombard Interviews Series, Acc. 65, Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford. In recent years, the Benson Ford Research Center has made many of these transcripts available online, which even further enhances their value to researchers: <http://cdm15889.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/search/order/subject> (accessed January 26, 2015).

²⁹ Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*.

³⁰ Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*.

(2012), which set Ford's progressive hiring practices at the Ford Motor Company against his patently regressive relationship with labor and unionization as an influential force in the makeup and political aims of Detroit's African American community; Greg Grandin's *Fordlandia* (2009), tracing Ford's effort to create a utopian rubber producing community in the Brazilian Amazon; and Stefan Link's "Transnational Fordism" (2012), which explained how the concept of Fordism was adaptable enough to function not only as an aspect of Americanism—in another Gramscian formulation—but also as a facet of Nazism and Soviet communism.³¹

"Tin Lizzie Dreams" is the first work to present a conceptual model which demonstrates how Henry Ford's most backward-looking personal projects and his work at the head of the Ford Motor Company were both part and parcel of a singular antimodern vision. Chapter 1, "Henry Ford's Usable Past," sets Ford's relationship to the New England elites more commonly associated with antimodernism by showing how the "usable past" Van Wyck Brooks famously sought in his 1918 essay was not entirely unlike the usable past Henry Ford built for himself at the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts beginning in 1923. In Chapter 2, "'Restorative Nostalgia' and Ford's Historical Ideal: The Edison Institute and Greenfield Village," I demonstrate how Ford's historical ideals reached their fullest—and most popular—expression in the imagined past of the Edison Institute museum and Greenfield Village historical park. Here, Svetlana Boym's concept of "restorative nostalgia" helps to bridge the gap between Ford's personal nostalgia and antimodern urges on the one hand, and nostalgia as an important and impactful 20th century cultural

³¹ Beth Tompkins Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Grandin, *Fordlandia*; Stefan Link, "Transnational Fordism: Ford Motor Company, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union in the Interwar Years" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012).

phenomenon on the other.³² At the Edison Insitute and Greenfield Village, Henry Ford's antimodernism took public form.

Chapters 3 and 4 take a broader view, focusing on Ford's actions at the head of the Ford Motor Company. In "Mr. Ford's Symphony: The *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* and Antimodern Cultural Messaging, 1934-1942," I show how Henry Ford's most regressive cultural views, including his infamous anti-Semitism, combined with symphonic music and the newly powerful radio medium to bring Ford's antimodern vision directly into the homes of over 10 million Americans per week—how antimodernism, in other words, could function in the guise of mass culture. And Chapter 4, "Tin Lizzie Dreams: The Model T as Antimodern Icon," returns to Henry Ford's single most modernizing contribution to American history. There, I demonstrate how Ford's focus on and beliefs regarding the relationship between the past and present were not contradictory or at odds with his work as an automaker. The Model T, I argue, must be understood as a product of the same antimodern views that produced the Wayside Inn and Greenfield Village. Henry Ford did, in fact, help transform the world with the Model T. But Ford could never have envisioned the full scope and effect of what he had wrought.

The story of John Wilkes Booth's false mummy is unorthodox, but not wholly unusual in the career of Henry Ford. By 1919, the Model T had been a market mainstay for eleven years running. American auto sales were booming, and Henry Ford was nearing the height of his power. And yet, Ford was amassing a collection of antiques. He was beginning renovations on his boyhood home. He was considering having the purported body of a presidential assassin shipped to Dearborn. Henry Ford was too obviously ambivalent about the condition of modernity to only be called a modernizer. He was too dismissive of formal movements, organizations, and –isms to be

³² Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia and its Discontents," *The Hedgehog Review* 9, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 7-18; Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

reliably Populist or Progressive.³³ But putting these complications at the center of the narrative, rather than pushing them aside, shows that they were in fact key to Ford's success and his contemporary and subsequent popularity. In Ford's mind, the body of John Wilkes Booth and the Model T were both tools in the service of a moralizing historical end. His project was one not of modernizing transformation, but of radical preservation.

³³ Ford shared certain ideological sympathies with the Populists, especially an anti-Wall Street and often anti-Semitic conspiratorial worldview and an enduring belief in the farmer as the center of American virtue. But Ford was too staunchly anti-union and supportive of the consolidation of industrial interests (especially his own) to take on a populist mantle. As for the Progressives, Ford was certainly a proponent of coercive social reform and causes such as conservationism. But unlike both Progressives and Populists, Ford was largely disinterested in the shaping or reform of government—he preferred to pursue his moralizing and historical ends on his own, supported by the wealth (and, he preferred, the unfettered power) of his corporation. My understanding of both movements is shaped primarily by Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage, 1955); Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Daniel T. Rodgers, “In Search of Progressivism,” *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (December 1982): 113-32; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

I.

Henry Ford's Usable Past: Antimodernism at the Wayside Inn

Built in 1861, a handsome white clapboard farmhouse stood on a generous plot of land in Springwells Township, Michigan. Its two-window façade downplayed its size, and successive renovations and additions had stretched out, rather modestly, from the rear of the house. But the large farmhouse, solidly-built barn, and striking white windmill nonetheless displayed the success of their owner: William Ford had done well for himself and his family.¹

Henry Ford was born and raised on this family farm outside Dearborn, and a desire to maintain the world of his boyhood launched his interest in historical renovation. In 1919, the path of a planned extension of Greenfield Road had it cutting directly through the old homestead, and rather than abandon the house and outbuildings to the bulldozers, Ford instead elected to have them moved some 200 feet to the east. In the course of rebuilding the house, Ford enlisted company employees to search regional antiques shops for furnishings that would restore his home to its appearance in 1876, the year of his mother's death. Edward J. Cutler, a Ford Motor Company draftsman who drew up plans for a replica of the family's 19th century windmill, became the key architect for the entirety of the homestead renovation and, during the 1920s, the comparatively mammoth Greenfield Village project. Cutler and his coworkers spared no effort toward accuracy. Pseudo-archaeological digs at the original home site turned up fragments of the family china which were used to commission reproductions, and even a pair of Ford's old skates.²

Henry Ford met the intelligent and attractive Clara Bryant in 1885. The two shared a similar upbringing as part of prosperous Dearborn-area farming families. Clara was witty and popular and

¹ Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 3-7.

² Geoffrey Upward, *A Home for Our Heritage: The Building and Growth of Greenfield Village and Henry Ford Museum, 1929-1979* (Dearborn, MI: Henry Ford Museum Press, 1979), 8.

reportedly had no small list of suitors. But by all accounts, Clara distinguished herself by her pragmatism and sensibility—traits which quickly endeared her to Henry. Clara and Henry shared a love of country dances, sleigh rides, and a deep nostalgia for their country homes. In Henry, Clara recognized ambition and potential, as well as a sober-mindedness that complimented her own. By the time they married in 1888, Clara was absolutely devoted to Henry Ford. But until his death, Henry relied absolutely on Clara’s reasoned council, support, and approval.³

Now in 1919, Henry and Clara Ford had a means of revisiting that beloved past, and they were loath to let the newly restored Ford homestead sit empty. The Fords began using the property as a site for nostalgic recreations of their youth, inviting their friends to don “old-fashioned” clothes and drive out into the country for parties and dances in the old house. Surrounded by curated antiques and acting within a decidedly wholesome environment (Ford was, famously, vegetarian and a teetotaler), the Fords and their guests engaged in a sort of group fictionalizing of a preindustrial, farm-based American past. This was, of course, problematic for many reasons. It is a rich irony that it was the widening of the Greenfield Road—ostensibly to accommodate increased automobile traffic in the same area where Ford was producing said automobiles—that forced Ford into action to preserve his notion of a pre-automotive lifestyle.⁴ Ford's homestead also benefited from electric power and the engineering insights of some of the best draftsmen early-20th century industry had to offer. And the United States of 1876 was hardly the edenic paradise that the Fords were making it out to be less than a half-century later. For the Fords, American history started on the farm. Virtuous forefathers worked the land, literally reaped the fruits of their own labor, and filled their leisure time with religion and cultural practice—Protestant theology, folk dance, restrictive mores—drawn from the English, German, and Scandinavian stock that emigrated West out of New York

³ Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 15-17; Nevins and Hill, *Ford: The Times, the Man, The Company*, 104-10.

⁴ One historian wrote, “The ironies are almost too rich at the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village.” Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 152.

and Pennsylvania to settle what would become the American Midwest. Nevermind that the historical face of the Detroit and Rouge River watersheds had been Ottawa, Powatomi, and French far longer than it had ever been northern European, that Ford's country dances were more play-acting than a recreation of mid-19th century life, or that, most importantly, Ford himself was one of the primary movers in the modernizing forces that had made obsolete the lifestyle for which he yearned.

Historical preservation was, for Ford, a means to a moralizing end.

Henry Ford's ambitions grew in tandem with his success. When he restored the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts during the next decade, Ford had the dance floor in the new ballroom suspended on automotive leaf springs—he and his friends did “old-fashioned” dances literally atop the output of the Ford Motor Company. This chapter examines Ford's Wayside Inn renovation project as an illustration of Henry Ford's antimodern ideals: how Ford, so often regarded as the great modernizer, approached and made incarnate his vision of American history. Taking Van Wyck Brooks's idea of the usable past as an entry point, I position Ford in relation to antimodernism as developed by T.J. Jackson Lears. With this background, I argue that Ford's activities at the Wayside Inn, including the founding of the Wayside Inn Boys School and the beginning of Ford's old-fashioned dancing project, display Ford's antimodernism in practice. At the Wayside Inn, Henry Ford leveraged his industrial successes to build his own particular version of the past in the service of his aspirations for the American present. He was, in effect, creating a usable past.

The year before Ford began the renovation of his family homestead, *The Dial* published a forceful essay by literary critic Van Wyck Brooks entitled “On Creating a Usable Past.”⁵ A decade out of his undergraduate study at Harvard and deeply dissatisfied with the state of American literary history, Brooks lambasted “the professors of American literature” who “offer very little to the

⁵ Van Wyck Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past,” *The Dial*, April 11, 1918, 337-41.

creators of it.”⁶ “We have had no cumulative culture,” stated Brooks, and so the young critic argued for a dynamic, utilitarian, and uniquely American reading of the country’s literary history. The heroes of Brooks’s narrative were the exceptions to “a literature of exploitation, the counterpart of our American life.” “Irving and Longfellow and Cooper and Bryant” had “‘succeeded’ in this commercial democracy of ours” by mere reflection—showing the country, in effect, what it wanted to see of itself. But “Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman;” these were the men (for they were all men) who had “enough pioneer instinct to pay their way among their contemporaries.”⁷

Per historian James Hoopes, Brooks was “a cultural reformer,” a member of a “reformist generation.”⁸ Brooks’s professoriate was marked by their conservatism—they “had an interest,” in Hoopes’s words, “in the established fact which the new mood, with its anti-business bias, wished to destroy.”⁹ In other words, from an ideological standpoint Van Wyck Brooks could hardly be more removed from Henry Ford, who (whether or not he saw himself as such) would have represented for Brooks a very embodiment of the business-minded establishment. But Brooks and Ford connect at a singular point: the nationalistic sense of a “usable past”—a vision of the country and its traditions that would exclude foreign influence and bear an indelible (if narrowly defined) mark of Americanism, useful toward their own divergent ends.¹⁰

⁶ Ibid., 337.

⁷ Ibid., 338.

⁸ James Hoopes, *Van Wyck Brooks: In Search of American Culture* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), xii.

⁹ Ibid., 127.

¹⁰ As historian Victoria Grieve has shown, Van Wyck Brooks was part of a broader early-20th century movement of artists, critics, and intellectuals arguing for a uniquely American art tradition. This new tradition would reject both the rampant commercialism of the age and the genteel European tradition that had cast its long shadow over American culture. The search for that which was essentially American led Brooks and the like-minded toward the “colonial” and the “folk,” though the effect—as expressed, for example, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 1924 opening of its American Wing—presented a vision of Americanness that was distinctly middle- and upper-class and Western European in origin. Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 37-44.

Brooks's high-minded literary critique of professors and narrow-minded authors ran far afield from Ford's anti-intellectual ideal of history. But Brooks's answer to the dilemma of American literature—"a usable past"—gives voice to the same utility Henry Ford was seeking from his own historical narrative near the close of the first World War:

We want bold ideas, and we have nuances. We want courage, and we have universal fear. We want individuality, and we have idiosyncrasy. We want vitality, and we have intellectualism. We want emblems of desire, and we have Niagaras of emotionality. We want expansion of soul, and we have an elephantiasis of the vocal organs...

The present is a void, and the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value...

The past is an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals; it opens of itself at the touch of desire; it yields up, now this treasure, now that, to anyone who comes to it armed with a capacity for personal choices. If then, we cannot use the past our professors offer us, is there any reason why we should not create others of our own?¹¹

The history of "our professors," in other words, was bunk. And the past Brooks wished to create—an "emblem of desire" in itself, really—was a corrective not only for literary minds but for the country on the whole. Brooks's fight was not just for the makeup of his bookshelf, but for the identification of a singular American cultural identity. He and Ford both, from their widely different vantage points had embarked upon a project of national definition.

According to T.J. Jackson Lears, this project was for Brooks as much personal as it was cultural and national. As an illustrative protagonist in Lears's *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, Van Wyck Brooks's lifelong struggle between the "feminine" virtues of decadence and timelessness and the "masculine" pursuits of rationalization and activism was indicative of what Lears calls Brooks's antimodern ambivalence.¹² In short, Brooks's "usable past" was as much an ordering principle for his own psyche as for America; "in the Makers and Finders series," his late career collection of works built upon this theme, "Brooks

¹¹ Ibid., 339.

¹² Lears, *No Place of Grace*.

invented a native literary tradition, rooted in the doctrines of free will, progress, and the natural goodness of man.” As Lears puts it, “He set about the creation of a usable past, less for the inspiration of contemporary writers than for the preservation of his mental stability.”¹³ This aligns perfectly with Lears's reading of the phenomenon of cultural hegemony upon which his antimodernism thesis is based. Lears cautions against a “mechanistic” reading of cultural hegemony, arguing instead that the elites in *No Place of Grace* were not necessarily aware of their hegemonic role, nor does Lears wish to imply a conscious conspiracy among the upper classes to determine the shape of American culture:

Confronting moral and psychic dilemmas in a modernizing society, they joined in creating the doctrines of modern culture for largely personal reasons. Yet their private struggles had unintended public consequences. They led to the formation of values and beliefs which gave meaning and purpose not only to individuals but to the dominant bourgeoisie as a whole—and which also inspired trust and allegiance from much of the rest of American society.¹⁴

But all of this puts the theoretical cart before the antimodern horse. Understanding Henry Ford's particular slant on antimodernism requires a thorough backing in Lears's use of the term. Clarifying and restating his thesis for the second edition of *No Place of Grace* in 1994, Lears discussed the work that led up to his formulation of antimodernism. Far from the triumphalism with which American history traditionally imbued the coming of the second industrial revolution, in his readings Lears found an American elite profoundly ambivalent about the shape and progress of modern life. Instead of awash in material fulfillment, these elites instead expressed themselves as beset by “longings for regeneration at once physical, moral, and spiritual.” “Some of these longings,” Lears wrote, “led backward, imaginatively invoking the intense experiences of the medieval craftsman, warrior, or saint. But I soon discovered that these apparently backward-looking impulses overlapped with more up-to-date agenda for revitalization: the cult of the strenuous life preached by Theodore

¹³ Ibid., 256-57.

¹⁴ Ibid., 10.

Roosevelt, the emergent popular therapies which promised self-regeneration through self-manipulation.”¹⁵ Lears’s antimodernism was the sum total of these impulses, an ordering principle for the grand contradiction shaping the turn-of-the-century American cultural ether: that the same people who stood to benefit most by the explosive productivity of the period also harbored dissent about the new modernity ranging from naval-gazing ambivalence to evangelizing denouncement. It is a problem not unlike that which beset Ford with the Greenfield Road and the family farm: “how people like antimodern dissenters could half-consciously help to create a sleeker modern culture they neither understood nor desired.”¹⁶

The expressions of antimodernism Lears chronicled were of a certain kind. The Northeastern elites who fell into this antimodern impulse committed themselves to relatively high-minded pursuits: “Aesthetes and reformers sought to recover the hard but satisfying life of the medieval craftsman; militarists urged the rekindling of archaic martial vigor; religious doubters yearned for the fierce convictions of the peasant and the ecstasies of the mystic.”¹⁷ They wrote books, launched periodicals, created social interest clubs, and waxed poetic in their reliably preserved personal writings. Henry Ford, born in 1863, was of the same generation as many among Lears’s *dramatis personae*, including Ralph Adams Cram (1863-1942), George Santayana (1863-1952), and Edith Wharton (1862-1937), but socially Ford spent his life well outside, as Lears described the focus of his study, “the better educated strata of the old-stock ruling class.”¹⁸ Instead Ford and, more precisely, the Ford Motor Company, were more likely to be the object of antimodern scorn

¹⁵ Ibid., xii.

¹⁶ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁷ Ibid., xv.

¹⁸ Ibid., 313.

than members of its peerage. The American corporation, coming into its modern-day form, was a major factor in the modernity to which antimodernism took exception:

The rationalization of economic life—the drive for maximum profits through the adoption of the most efficient forms of organization—was moving into high gear, especially in the United States. Instead of the small workshop, the dominant mode of economic organization was becoming the monopolistic corporation—organized in accordance with precisely calculable and strictly functional procedures, managed by a hierarchical bureaucracy of salaried executives, geared to dominate an ever-larger share of an emerging national market. In matters of organization technical “rationality” was becoming the dominant mode; the older local enterprises, run by the boss's whims or rules of thumb, were settling into the interstices of the economy.¹⁹

Henry Ford and the Ford organization, occupying a dominant position in American corporate industry by the close of Lears's time period, thus represent the kind of mechanization and standardization which inspired a flurry of antimodern activity ranging from Arts and Crafts collecting to neo-medieval spiritualism.

Henry Adams, Lears's quintessential antimodern, famously explored the encounter between spiritual man and machine—a conflict central to the life of Henry Ford—in *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907).²⁰ In a brief scene set at the Great Exhibition of 1900 in Paris, Adams considered “The Dynamo and the Virgin” as a controlling metaphor for two of the preeminent objects of veneration—“forces,” as Adams would have it—in human history: Christianity/spirituality, taken as medieval, gendered female, embodied in the Virgin, the cross, Venus, the cathedral at Amiens; and the Machine, displayed as modern, gendered male, in the form of the massive steam powered generators displayed in the Gallery of Machines at the Paris Exhibition.²¹ Adams's meditation on the Dynamo and the Virgin rests upon a fluid definition of *force* and *power*.

¹⁹ Ibid., 9.

²⁰ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: Library of America, 2010).

²¹ Incidentally, Ford's area of industry receives mention at the outset of Adams's chapter: “[Langley] taught Adams the astonishing complexities of the new Daimler motor, and of the automobile, which, since 1893, had become a night-mare at a hundred kilometres an hour, almost as destructive as the electric tram which was only ten years older; and

Power, in the sense of electrical impulse created by mechanical rotation within the dynamo, seemed to Adams to translate into historical and world-shaping force; as a later scholar put it, Adams was working with “the 18th and 19th century truism, based on harsh experience...that machine-power created machine-like life.”²² Adams wrote, “the dynamo became a symbol of infinity. As he [Adams] grew accustomed to the great gallery of machines, he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross.” And then he drew the metaphor even further: “Before the end, one began to pray to it; inherited instinct taught the natural expression of man before silent and infinite force.”²³ The prose is shot through with the erudite anxiety of the classically educated scion of one of America's foremost families who, confronted with a great inhuman mass of steel, had begun to feel that the world was turning around him—somehow apart from him. With the same ordering principles that would drive Brook's literary criticism, Adams's thoughts turned to history and his impulse to understand human events as ordered and sequenced, but that, too, bowed before the dynamo:

Satisfied that the sequence of men led to nothing and that the sequence of time was artificial, and the sequence of thought was a chaos, he turned at last to the sequence of force; and thus it happened that, after ten years' pursuit, he found himself lying in the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exposition of 1900, with his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of force totally new.²⁴

Melodrama aside, Adams's struggle here lays bare the fundamental problem driving antimodern thought: that modern life is driven by forces not so much immoral as amoral, inhuman, with the power to upset the very fabric of human history. It is a pervasive sense, in other words, of a total

threatening to become as terrible as the locomotive steam-engine itself, which was almost exactly Adams's own age.” Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, 353.

²² Paul J. Hamill, Jr., “The Future as Virgin: A Latter-Day Look at the Dynamo and the Virgin of Henry Adams,” *Modern Language Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 9.

²³ Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, 353.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 355.

loss of control, made all the more potent by its spread among a class of people whose social experience had been characterized by massive social and economic power. For Adams, he could take a shallow comfort in the notion that “all the steam in the world could not, like the Virgin, build Chartres.”²⁵ Moral tradition seemed to endure in its importance, even if subsumed by mechanistic power. But *antimodernism*, at its core, was driven by a search for control by those who felt themselves in the wheelhouse, wrestling mightily with the helm of modernity. And it is here that we find Henry Ford.

Ford, first of all, dismissed out of hand many of the facets of corporate structure that his more elite and educated fellows found so troubling. He bristled at the notion of a “hierarchical bureaucracy of salaried executives”—Lears's summary of the corporation-as-machine—because it conflicted with his ideal of work as direct, productive, *moral* labor. “For the day's work is a great thing,” he wrote with Samuel Crowther in 1923, “a very great thing! It is at the very foundation of the world; it is the basis of our self-respect.”²⁶ “[A business] is a collection of people who are brought together to do work and not to write letters to one another... And so the Ford factories and enterprises have no organization, no specific duties attaching to any position, no line of succession or of authority, very few titles, and no conferences.”²⁷ This is not, of course, to say that others did not have to take up the organizational slack to account for Ford's dislike of organizational management. By the early 1920s, when the Ford Motor Company was turning out half the total automobiles produced in the United States supported by a worldwide supply, manufacturing, and sales network, the company depended on a wealth of business talent to stay afloat. Organizational minds like Edsel Ford, who took over presidency of the company in 1919, Vice President Ernest

²⁵ Ibid., 360.

²⁶ Ford and Crowther, *My Life and Work*, 120.

²⁷ Ibid., 91-92.

Kanzler, Henry's secretary Ernest Liebold, and production head Charles Sorenson were responsible for keeping the massive enterprise running.²⁸ But Henry Ford still reigned supreme; his ideal was “a plant in which officials subordinated themselves to a single will, carrying on in accordance with the leader's known ideas, and in emergencies turning to him for solutions.”²⁹ Thus Lears's formulation of “the older local enterprises, run by the boss's whims or rules of thumb,” was not too dissimilar from the underlying principle of the Ford empire in the 1920s and '30s. Henry Ford's whims did, in fact, run the company, and not always to its benefit.

Second, Henry Ford, had he been more literarily inclined, would have bristled at any notion that his work should be viewed on the dynamo side of Henry Adams's metaphysical equation. The amoral machine of industry was as vulgar to Ford as it was spiritually unsettling to Adams. This ideological twist had two parts. On the business side, Ford saw himself as totally divorced from sheer profit motive. “I determined absolutely that never would I join a company in which finance came before the work or in which bankers and financiers had a part,” Ford argued, “for the only foundation of real business is service.”³⁰ This first notion is related directly to his privileging of productive labor, which grew into his particular view of the aim of manufacture: “Manufacturing is not buying low and selling high. It is the process of buying materials fairly and, with the smallest possible addition of cost, transforming those materials into a consumable product and giving it to the consumer. Gambling, speculating, and sharp dealing, tend only to clog this progression.”³¹ And as for Ford's automotive product, which Adams called “threatening” and “a night-mare,” the

²⁸ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge*, 264.

²⁹ Ibid., 270.

³⁰ Ford and Crowther, *My Life and Work*, 40-41.

³¹ Ibid., 19-20.

industrialist settled on the view that he was not so much producing a machine as he was performing an essential service:

I do not consider the machines which bear my name simply as machines. If that was all there was to it I would do something else. I take them as concrete evidence of the working out of a theory of business which I hope is something more than a theory of business—a theory that looks toward making this world a better place in which to live. The fact that the commercial success of the Ford Motor Company has been most unusual is important only because it serves to demonstrate, in a way which no one can fail to understand, that the theory to date is right.³²

For Henry Ford, the value of the ubiquitous and transformative Model T (1908-1927) was as a tool. He thought of it in much the same utilitarian terms as he regarded the Fordson tractor, which shared his focus with the Model T through WWI and after. As he explained the development of the production process of each, “the automobile is designed to carry; the tractor is designed to pull—to climb.”³³ The automobile as American myth and symbol was made possible by the Model T, but that followed Ford's thinking rather than shaping it (Ch. 4). Ford was, in his eyes, providing a simple and reliable tool to facilitate the same kind of productive work he believed to be the foundation of a moral and well-spent life.

As scholar Gib Prettyman has pointed out, Ford's rhetoric was shaped by a sort of “philosophical pragmatism;” his truths and aphorisms are learned *a posteriori* based upon the “fundamental fact' of the world as it currently is.”³⁴ Ford's notion of this “fundamental fact,” as Prettyman has it, was inextricably rooted in the same imagined past that informed the renovation of his family farm in 1919. For Ford, the moral truths that characterized his own childhood in rural Michigan were the same truths that determined the shape his business should take and, by extension, the truths that should shape all business and American culture on the whole. Like all of Lears's

³² Ibid., 2.

³³ Ibid., 201.

³⁴ Gib Prettyman, “Criticism, Business, and the Problem of Complicity: The Case of Henry Ford,” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2000): 59.

antimoderns, Henry Ford was a product of his social and historical position. But unencumbered by the intellectual heft and naval-gazing anxiety that characterized the work of the Brookses and Adamses of the early 20th century, Ford was free to imagine that his personal philosophy, self-serving as it was, mapped directly and unproblematically onto the world around him.³⁵ Ford was antimodern in the sense that he pointed his reformer's zeal directly at a modernity he had helped to create, based on an assumedly authentic, truthful, and largely imagined past. The crucial difference is that Ford never bothered to see modernity and premodernity as fundamentally opposed or incompatible. To him, Ford Motor Company's River Rouge plant was a 16 million square foot workshop, churning out tools for an honest day's labor, by an honest day's labor, utilizing the same principles he imagined had been the shaping force throughout human history. In this light, Ford's historical projects at places like the Wayside Inn and Greenfield Village were monuments to that selective history, in the service of these personal truths. Henry Adams looked to the cathedral at Chartres as a site for his antimodern ideals. Henry Ford built his own.

On July 10, 1923, the *Worcester* (Massachusetts) *Telegram* ran a massive three-line headline: "FORD BUYS FAMOUS WAYSIDE INN AT SUDBURY; MAY MAINTAIN IT FOR PUBLIC AS HISTORICAL MUSEUM." Adjoining a photo of the Inn and a portrait of the industrialist, the paper went on to speculate excitedly as to the value of the antique collections therein and Ford's plans for the tavern that had played host, in its day, to George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette. "Under a plan not yet announced to the public," the writers claimed, Ford would maintain the Inn as a museum open to the public, and was moving as well toward the purchase of hundreds

³⁵ That Ford's philosophy is important and informative despite or even due to its obvious service to capitalism and consumption is the main thrust of Prettyman's argument in "Criticism, Business, and the Problem of Complexity."

of adjoining acres. The sellers of both the Inn and the adjoining farms had remained mum.³⁶ The *Boston Herald* ran with a rather cautious “Rumor Says Ford Buys Wayside Inn: Owner and Neighbors Are Non-Committal About It” the next day.³⁷ As it happens, the *Telegram*'s uncredited scoop was correct, and Henry and Clara Ford had, in fact, purchased the Inn and 60 acres from the Lemon family at a cost of \$60,000. In taking over the Wayside Inn, Ford was fulfilling the hopes of a number of prominent Bostonians including Charles W. Eliot and Henry Cabot Lodge who had begun, in preceding years, to solicit shareholders for the Wayside Inn Trust to maintain the property as a nonprofit attraction. The secrecy was necessary due simply to Ford's involvement. As the most-publicized industrialist in the world at the time, the mere mention of his name was enough to upend the local property market. Notwithstanding the publicity that followed Ford's July meetings in Boston and Sudbury, his agents were able to secure options on some 1,300 surrounding acres, and the deed for the Wayside Inn passed to Henry and Clara Ford on August 9, 1923.³⁸

By the time the Fords purchased the Inn, it had already been in (more or less) continuous operation for over two centuries. It opened as a tavern in 1716 under license to David How, in whose family it remained until 1861. In 1863, the publication of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Tales of a Wayside Inn* lent a great deal of notoriety to the place, and by the turn of the century the Inn (alternately named the Red Horse Tavern) was officially known as Longfellow's Wayside Inn.³⁹ Sitting on an attractive, gently rolling tract on the Boston Post Road roughly halfway between Boston and Worcester, the Wayside Inn was ideally located for its purpose, and Edward Rivers Lemon realized as much when he purchased the property in 1897 with the intention of turning it

³⁶ “Henry Ford Buys Famous Wayside Inn at Sudbury,” *Worcester Telegram*, July 10, 1923, 1-2, Series IV, Box 17, Folder 1, The Wayside Inn Archives, Sudbury, Mass.

³⁷ “Rumor Says Ford Buys Wayside Inn,” *Boston Herald*, July 11, 1923, Series IV, Box 17, Folder 1, The Wayside Inn Archives, Sudbury, Mass.

³⁸ Plumb, *A History of Longfellow's Wayside Inn*, Ch. 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Introduction.

into a sort of literary and historical resort. This he accomplished by restoring the building, furnishing it with a notable collection of art and antiques, and promoting its connection to Longfellow. By all accounts, the business was successful through the time of E.R. Lemon's death in 1919, when his wife, Cora, took over the estate. She maintained the Inn into her old age until 1923, when Henry Ford learned of the efforts underway to preserve the Wayside Inn for posterity, and decided to step in.⁴⁰



Figure 1. Longfellow's Wayside Inn in 2009.

Source: John Phelan, "Wayside Inn, Sudbury, MA," November 29, 2009, Wikimedia Commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wayside_Inn,_Sudbury_MA.jpg (accessed March 10, 2015). Creative Commons License.

With the purchase of the Inn finalized, Ford continued purchasing the surrounding homes and farms to preserve its idyllic setting. By 1945, when the Ford family gave over ownership to the

⁴⁰ Ibid., Ch. 8.

newly-created Wayside Inn Trust, the Fords owned 2,822.58 contiguous acres surrounding the Inn.⁴¹ Ford's most publicly notable act of preservation came in 1926, when he constructed a short bypass for the Boston Post Road, now Route 20, at the comparatively massive expense of \$288,000 before deeding the new road to the Commonwealth for \$1 so that the Inn could remain undisturbed by the noise and vibration of vehicle traffic.⁴² With the Inn secure and the property sufficiently removed from the rumble of automobility, Ford was free to begin his historical project in earnest.

In the April, 1925 issue of *Country Life*, Henry Ford and Samuel Crowther (cowriter of his autobiographies) penned a rich rationale for the automaker's activities in Sudbury.⁴³ Ford's purported aims seem straightforward enough: "I deeply admire the men who founded this country," he stated, "and I think we ought to know more about them and how they lived and the force and courage they had." Here, Ford indirectly addressed his infamous "history is bunk" comment:

Of course, we can read about them, but even if the account we are reading happens to be true, and often it is not, it cannot call up the full picture. The only way to show how our forefathers lived and to bring to mind what kind of people they were is to reconstruct, as nearly as possible, the exact conditions under which they lived.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ibid., Ch. 9.

⁴² Plumb, *A History of Longfellow's Wayside Inn*, Ch. 9. Others, including Lewis, report the figure at \$280,000. Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 225. See also "Road to Be Shifted at Ford's Expense—Fiddlers to Play at Sudbury for Auto King and Party," *Boston Traveler*, January 8, 1926, Series IV, Box 17, Folder 4, The Wayside Inn Archives, Sudbury, Mass.

⁴³ It should be noted that we have no major work direct and unadulterated from the pen of Henry Ford. As uninterested in longform writing as he was in extended discussion or metaphysical thought, Ford instead expressed himself through a series of unofficial "interpreters" such as Ernest Liebold, who frequently sat in on interviews to clarify his boss's remarks, Crowther, "co"-author of *My Life and Work* and *Today and Tomorrow*, and William J. Cameron, who ghostwrote extensively for Ford both before and after his tenure as speaker for the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* (see Ch. 3). Naturally, this raises some question of authenticity, but I find that the sum total of Ford's "work," no matter its artistic vessel, is remarkably unified both in style and philosophical intent—differences in who Ford spoke through seem to have had little essential impact on what he said. Furthermore, Prettyman has noted cursorily, "as Gramsci suggests...authenticity (or lack of authenticity) has little to do with this intellectual function of modern industrialists." Prettyman, "Criticism, Business, and the Problem of Complexity" 64nn7. Ford, interestingly, might have agreed with the Italian Marxist on that point. Therefore, throughout the dissertation, I take those remarks purported to be Ford's as Ford's, while keeping an analytical eye on whose hand from whence they flowed.

⁴⁴ Henry Ford and Samuel Crowther, "Henry Ford: Why I Bought the Wayside Inn, An Interview with Samuel Crowther," *Country Life*, April, 1925, 44.

“Exact conditions,” of course, was not really the goal of Ford at the Wayside Inn. Instead, he undertook his historical preservation project as a synthesis between his historical and technical interests. For example, Allegra Thorpe, a Longfellow descendant, complained to Ford that the newly rebuilt and reinforced dance floor in the Wayside Inn ballroom was not as “springy” as she remembered it. Rather than revert to historical building methods, Ford instead ordered that springs be put under the floor to give an approximation of the old natural bounce.⁴⁵ This instance is also indicative of the degree of personal interest that Ford, then still responsible for the world's largest automobile manufacturer, took in minute details of his Wayside Inn project. The Wayside Inn archives contain myriad documents expressing Ford's particular and exacting opinions. One such memo from Ford agent Frank Campsall in Dearborn to manager E.J. Boyer in Sudbury regarding the maple flooring for the ballroom instructed the Sudbury manager to take note of “proper location of screws and pegs” in the sample sent from the floor at Ford's Botsford Inn (another renovation project in Michigan). “This sample has slip Tongue but believe Mr Ford would prefer tongue and groove instead.”⁴⁶

As a part of the greater Ford organization, the Wayside Inn also benefited from the full modern might of the Ford Motor Company and its associated enterprises. In *Country Life*, Ford touted the sawmills and grist mills he was having either refurbished on or moved to the property. As for the grist mill, Ford claimed, “we are putting back into the exact condition it was in during the Revolution.”⁴⁷ But the 18th century technology was supplanted by the work of Ford's own laboratories in Dearborn, who performed an analysis of the makeup and usefulness of the water on

⁴⁵ Ibid., 44-45.

⁴⁶ F. Campsall to E.J. Boyer, Feb. 13, 1926, Series IV, Box 13, Folder 8, The Wayside Inn Archives, Sudbury, Mass.

⁴⁷ Ford and Crowther, “Why I Bought the Wayside Inn,” 45.

the property, deeming it “remarkably clear.”⁴⁸ The Inn was put under the care not of a historian or preservationist, but of Ford accountant and manager Earl Boyer, who had worked for Ford at the Highland Park plant and in the business department of the Henry Ford Hospital.⁴⁹ Under Boyer, the Wayside Inn remained in many ways an offshoot of Henry Ford's personal office. Plans for the revamping of the Inn's kitchen were undertaken with the John Van Range Company of Cincinnati, who had been involved with the Henry Ford Hospital and elsewhere at the Ford company.⁵⁰ Ford's office announced guests of note to either Ford or his company ahead of time to Boyer, who was expected to extend special courtesies. In 1928, these included Dearborn Superintendent of Schools Ray H. Adams (introduced by H.M. Cordell as a “friend of Mr. Ford's and a member of his special old-fashioned dance circle, and so forth”), Harold F. Blanchard of *Motor* magazine (per Frank Black, “‘Motor’ is one of the Hearst group of magazines and Mr Blanchard has been very decent to us in the matter of publicity”), and Vachal Lindsey (according to William Cameron, “one of America's three greatest poets—a little odd in some of his ways, but a thoroughly good man”).⁵¹

To furnish the Wayside Inn, Ford turned to a Boston antiques dealer named Israel Sack. In an interesting detail, the Benson Ford Research Center introduction to Sack's “Reminiscences” states, “Mr. Sack finally decided to go into business for himself, first in the repair of antiques and

⁴⁸ Ford Motor Company Laboratory Report, “Water – Wayside Inn,” Dec. 27, 1923, Series IV, Box 13, Folder 8, The Wayside Inn Archives, Sudbury, Mass.

⁴⁹ Ford R. Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 45. Boyer's son Robert, a boy when the family moved to Sudbury, would become closely acquainted with Ford and, as a chemical engineer in the Ford company, would go on to do a great deal of research into soy fibers (soybeans being a latent interest of Henry Ford's) and to build a plastic-bodied car at the industrialist's behest in 1941. Ibid., 46-51.

⁵⁰ The John Van Range Co. to E.G. Boyer, Oct. 31, 1927, Series IV, Box 13, Folder 8, The Wayside Inn Archives, Sudbury, Mass.

⁵¹ H.M. Cordell to E.J. Boyer, Feb. 23, 1928; F.L. Black to E.J. Boyer, Oct. 30, 1928; W.J. Cameron to E.J. Boyer, Nov. 13, 1928, Series IV, Box 14, Folder 4, The Wayside Inn Archives, Sudbury, Mass.

eventually as a dealer in *genuine* antiques for the American market.”⁵² Sack, it turns out, got his start less as a repairer of antiques and more as a producer of skillful forgeries. Bringing to bear his considerable talents as a cabinetmaker, Sack learned to imitate antique dovetailing and inlays using old wood and ammonia to create pieces which could be passed off to area dealers.⁵³ By the time he accepted Ford’s commission to furnish the Inn, Sack was an important and prolific dealer in his own right. But Sack’s somewhat casual relationship with historical authenticity made him a useful facilitator for Ford’s activities in Sudbury. According to Sack, the deal began with a straightforward pitch:

I said, ‘Mr. Ford, I love the Wayside Inn. I always liked it. I knew Mr. Lemon [the former owner], and Lemon loved the inn, and he would have loved to furnish it with the kind of things that inn required because of the period. He was a poor man, and he could not afford to do it. Now that you own it, Mr. Ford, everybody knows you can afford to buy the best. If you give me the job, you shall have the best.’ It was all over in two seconds. ‘Go ahead!’⁵⁴

Sack, first and foremost, was an excellent salesman. And he drew an immediate bead on Henry Ford’s personal taste in a way that few of his contemporaries were able to do. As Sack remembered:

It was just as plain as day to me. He wanted the early American with a history. You see, he didn’t have to study history. He came right into it. You get a Longfellow collection and you look at the bed and you look at the desk where Longfellow slept and worked; you’ve got Longfellow in your home already. He wanted something with a background. You can buy the story, but it doesn’t get the item. *You can attach a story to anything. You can make up a story.*⁵⁵

⁵² “The Reminiscences of Mr. Israel Sack,” Ford Reminiscences, <http://cdm15889.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15889coll2/id/14622/rec/2> (accessed February 26, 2015), emphasis mine.

⁵³ “The Reminiscences of Mr. Israel Sack,” 17-18.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 30, emphasis mine.

And so, Sack recalls that he “furnished the Wayside Inn with some furniture that was in keeping and contemporary with the inn. I put it inn and sent Henry Ford a bill, and he sent me a check.”⁵⁶ And thus Ford furnished his historical property.

If one regards the Wayside Inn as what we might now call a historic preservation project, Israel Sack’s remarks are striking in their disregard for research or documentation. But notice that Sack seems to have approached the project as he might any large-scale commission to furnish a personal home. “Early American with a history” in this sense functioned the same as “updated Victorian” or “shabby chic with a modern twist.” To Sack, Henry Ford was not building a museum, he was outfitting a gentleman’s retreat in eastern Massachusetts. And indeed, Ford sometimes seemed to use the Wayside Inn as a large vacation home. He housed friends and associates who were in town, he entertained his family on holidays, and he used the ample grounds as a venue for his various hobbies.

This gets at a problem which will become even more pronounced when the discussion moves to the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village in Michigan: to what extent was Ford actually performing a service to the country, as he seemed to believe, versus simply creating a historical playground for himself? Naturally, the answer lies between the two extremes. And it is important to note that this is another one of the many contradictions which Henry Ford seems never to have thought through on his own. Some later observers have diagnosed Ford with a sort of patriotic megalomania in which Ford presumed what he thought best was in fact best for all Americans, so Ford could construct his own historical ideal and believe that he had created *the* American ideal, a service to everyone. As we saw with Samuel Crowther’s work in *Country Life*, Ford’s publicity machine tended to play up this idea of Ford as the quintessential American public servant while

⁵⁶ Ibid., 28.

downplaying the self-aggrandizement necessary to set oneself atop that pedestal. As Ford assistant secretary Harold Cordell later recalled, Henry Ford's inner circle also did little to deconstruct Ford's activities in Sudbury: "He must have realized he was idealizing the inns, but he never went into the picture at all. No one disagreed with him because, after all, it was his hobby, and he was having a lot of fun doing it, so everybody went along with him."⁵⁷ As with Lears's Northeastern antimoderns, the formula of personal pursuits with public consequences required sufficient power to compel others to follow along.

When Sack was finished, the Wayside Inn was an attractive, if not necessarily historically rigorous, reproduction of an early-19th century inn. Sixteen fireplaces had been closed off, and Ford had them reopened. Workers also removed Victorian-era wallpapers and flooring, and replaced the electric lighting with more historic-looking fixtures (with input from Thomas Edison). Edison also got his own bedroom, complete with furnishings reminiscent of Edison's Ohio childhood.⁵⁸ In the 19th century, the Wayside Inn parlor had boasted the first pianoforte in Sudbury, Massachusetts; Ford agents secured the instrument from an estate sale in Weston, refurbished it in Dearborn, and replaced it in the Inn.⁵⁹ Ford also built a new wing with a large new ballroom above a dining room. While there's some question whether or not he actually had springs added to the floor of the *old* dance hall, as suggested by Longfellow's concerned relative, this new ballroom included a floor suspended upon automobile leaf springs. Ford and his compatriots literally danced atop the products of his business.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ "The Reminiscences of Mr. Harold M. Cordell," 52, Ford Reminiscences, <http://cdm15889.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15889coll2/id/3996/rec/1> (accessed February 26, 2015). Also, nobody who wished to remain within the Ford organization would likely have openly questioned Ford's judgment in any case. "The secret of survival was to be a yes man, absolutely." Ibid., 33.

⁵⁸ Plumb, *A History of Longfellow's Wayside Inn*, Ch. 9.

⁵⁹ Ibid., Ch. 12.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

It is more helpful to look at the Wayside Inn as a sort of sandbox where Ford, in keeping with his personal style, worked through these antimodern contradictions in the physical space of the Inn rather than pondering the problem from a degree of intellectual removal. And Ford managed to find a tenuous but workable balance between the modern and the historical in his activities at the Wayside Inn. A photo in the collection of the Sudbury Historical Society shows workers in the process of building a new gristmill for the property. Builders used an oxcart and wheelbarrows to do as much work as possible, but behind the building there was a hidden Model T truck for heavy labor.⁶¹ The project stretched on from 1925 to 1929 largely due to Ford's insistence that workers hand-lay the stones for its construction. The stones were dragged by oxen from Nobscot hill, over a mile to the southeast of the site.⁶² Some evidence exists that Ford eventually hoped to produce a sort of neo-17th or 18th century village on the land surrounding the Inn, with a full range of pre-Revolutionary industries standing as a lesson to modern development. Wayside Inn historian Brian Plumb noted that, in many ways, Ford was successful in his plans:

While the full plan (if it even was a true plan) never materialized, Ford did establish a vast working farm on the property that included dairy, produce, food processing and food storage, with a goal to provide all the food that would be consumed at the inn. He created milling operations, a blacksmith and carpentry shop, a farm stand (store) [a special interest of Clara's] and educational and social programs (schools, a church, outings, dances)... The fields and woodlots were being fully utilized. This was his utopian vision of the "good life."⁶³

At times unwieldy and with a casual relationship to historical authenticity, the Wayside Inn at the height of Ford's activities was the fullest illustration to date of the automaker's notion of usable

⁶¹ Photo reproduced in Sudbury Historical Society, Inc., *Images of America: Sudbury* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2012), 112.

⁶² Pepperidge Farm used the mill to grind flour for whole wheat breads between 1952 and 1967. Plumb, *A History of Longfellow's Wayside Inn*, Ch. 9.

⁶³ Ibid., Ch. 9.

history, and others were quick to take notice. Plumb reports that John D. Rockefeller Jr. visited Ford at the Inn in 1930 to discuss the renovation of the Raleigh Tavern at Williamsburg.⁶⁴

More directly in line with Ford's view of the Wayside Inn as a teaching tool was the founding of the Wayside Inn Boys School (WIBS) in 1928. This was not Ford's first educational venture; while he had financed schools around the country, his largest project had been the establishment of the Henry Ford Trade School in Dearborn in 1916, where students worked part-time to secure both their room and board and a small wage. The average annual production of Ford's self-supporting school concept, by one rather optimistic account, was \$18,000,000 by the mid-1920s. Ford described the aims of the Trade School in 1926:

From the beginning we have held to three cardinal principles: first, that the boy was to be kept a boy and not changed into a premature working-man; second, that the academic training was to go hand in hand with the industrial instruction; third, that the boy was to be given a sense of pride and responsibility in his work by being trained on the articles which were to be used. He works on objects of recognized industrial worth.⁶⁵

To these ends, the course of instruction was focused on practical application of academic concepts: mathematics, chemistry, and physics were taught on the shop floor, and subjects like accounting and geography arose in output and shipping reports. A portion of the boys' earnings was required to go into savings. Irreconcilable interpersonal disputes, according to Ford, were to be solved with boxing gloves. And at the end of their instruction, the Ford Motor Company benefited from a body of Ford's ideal employees. "They have earned their own way and are under obligations to no one," Ford wrote. "There is no charity. The place pays for itself."⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid. Victoria Grive describes Williamsburg as relatively historically rigorous: "Rockefeller was meticulous; he hired craft experts and historians to achieve accuracy in every detail, from architecture and building placement to costume design and textile and craft production." Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture*, 55.

⁶⁵ Ford and Crowther, *My Life and Work*, 211.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 211-14.

In Sudbury, industrial education as in the Trade School was supplanted by instruction in the various village industries of the Wayside Inn estate:

Boys learned not only metallurgy and how to repair cars in the shop, but dairy and poultry farming, the care of orchards, raising vegetables and fruit, animal husbandry, restaurant management, running a small shop to sell local produce and several other jobs.⁶⁷

But Ford's educational venture at the WIBS was not limited to academics or industry. Ford hoped to mold whole persons in the image of his philosophies. The school was designed to accommodate 30 students, all wards of the state at either 14 or 15 years old, personally selected from their foster homes by Richard K. Conant of the State Commission of Public Welfare.⁶⁸ At the WIBS, the boys would live not only under Ford's curricular ideals, but also in accordance with his strict opinions regarding diet, exercise, and discipline. The *New York Times Magazine* reported on the school in 1930, calling the enterprise "Spartan," and recording the extent of the oversight of each pupil's being. "Once a month," reported the *Times*, the resident master "gives each boy a physical exam and records his weight and criticizes his posture." "Not every boy, it has been found, can be educated in its Spartan confines. The artist, the poet, the individualist, do not fit in."⁶⁹ Still, many of the students took it as a point of honor to have gained acceptance to the school and excelled within its strict regulations. As 85-year-old alumnus Bill Quinn recalled in the lead-up to a Sudbury Historical Society retrospective on the school in 2003, "those years were the most wonderful years of my life. Somebody cared about me."⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Curtis F. Garfield and Alison R. Ridley, *Henry Ford's Boys: The Story of the Wayside Inn Boys School* (Sudbury, MA: Porcupine Enterprises, 1998), 6.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-9.

⁶⁹ Eunice Fuller Barnard, "Henry Ford Invents a School," *New York Times Magazine*, April 13, 1930, 19, quoted in Garfield and Ridley, *Henry Ford's Boys*, 16.

⁷⁰ Carole LaMond, "Henry Ford's 'boys' talk," *Sudbury (Mass.) Town Crier*, October 16, 2003. 4.

The Wayside Inn also provided an opportunity for Ford to educate himself and his close friends and business associates. In August, 1924, soon after Ford purchased the Inn, he and Clara met the Benjamin and Charlotte Lovett. Benjamin Lovett was a Massachusetts dancing instructor with an interest in what Ford called “old-fashioned dancing,” social dances in the English country dance tradition. Henry and Clara Ford were avid dancers, and they, along with the Edisons and Harvey Firestone, danced away the evening of August 16, 1924 with the Lovetts in the old ballroom of the Wayside Inn—the beginning of Ford’s famous old-fashioned dances. Ford brought the Lovetts to Dearborn that October, and Lovett held his first old-fashioned dance class under Ford on November 3.⁷¹ From that point, a hobby of social dances the Fords had started with the renovation of their old home became a fixture of the Dearborn and Ford Motor Company social scene. Ford’s and Lovett’s “old-fashioned” dance projects culminated in a program of dance instruction in the Dearborn public schools, the dedication of a dance hall in Lovett’s name on the Edison Institute grounds, and the publication of a dance guide: *Good Morning: After a Sleep of Twenty-five Years Old-Fashioned Dancing is Being Revived by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford*.⁷²

From the sheet music collected at Fair Lane, the Fords’ estate in Dearborn, we know that the Fords were lovers of patriotic tunes, religious music, American folk songs, and dances.⁷³ J.D. Thompson, the butler at Fair Lane, later recalled the Fords’ musical tastes: “In music, the Fords just liked the folk songs. They didn’t go in for classical music. Stephen Foster was Mr. Ford’s favorite.” Henry Ford particularly enjoyed “I’ll Take You Home Again, Kathleen,” a favorite of Thomas

⁷¹ Benjamin Lovett, “Some Reminiscences by Benj. B. Lovett,” c. February 13, 1940, 6, Fair Lane Papers, Box 134, Folder 8.

⁷² *Good Morning: After a Sleep of Twenty-five Years Old-Fashioned Dancing is Being Revived by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford* (Dearborn: Dearborn Publishing Company, 1926).

⁷³ See Fair Lane Papers, Box 115.

Edison's.⁷⁴ Admirers hoping to gain the ear of the industrialist sent him (and Clara) copies of songs honoring the name Henry Ford, such as a march by Edison Institute employee Harold Grimoldby entitled "The Empire Builder," Ira F. Gay's "The Little Ford Rambled Right Along," and a jaunty little oom-pah song from 1916 touting Ford for President: "The Man of the Day."⁷⁵ Its chorus: "Roosevelt was out of sight, Taft was as good as good could be, Wilson sure has done alright, Ford, Henry Ford is the man for me."⁷⁶ But Henry Ford saved his greatest enthusiasm for dance bands like he had known in his youth, centered on a fiddler and a caller to instruct the dancers in the steps. Ford's favorite fiddler was an elderly character from Maine named Jep Bisbee. Ford secretary Harold Cordell recalled an "old-fashioned dance" (as Ford called them) at the Ford homestead for which Bisbee provided as much authentic flavor as Mrs. Ford's historically-themed costumes:

One time [Ford] had an old-fashioned dance at his hold home on Ford Road, and that was the occasion when he employed Jep Bisbee, the Maine fiddler. He was quite a fiddler, and his wife accompanied him on the organ, and they were always heckling each other while they were playing. His wife would yell something at Jep, and Jep would answer back, with his false teeth clacking away.⁷⁷

From Cordell's description of Bisbee's performance we see that "old-fashioned" was as much a social marker as it was a historical or stylistic designation. Lovett later recalled the performance practice of the fiddlers:

The old-time fiddler was usually a prosperous farmer or tradesman who was looked upon with respect and as a man of high character. In his playing he always used a stiff arm, holding the bow about six inches from the end, rarely using the entire length, but almost wholly the tip end of the bow. The fiddlers played in simple keys of one or two flats or two

⁷⁴ "The Reminiscences of Miss Rosa Buhler and Mr. J.D. Thompson," Ford Reminiscences, <http://cdm15889.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15889coll2/id/3542/rec/1> (accessed February 26, 2015), 16.

⁷⁵ Grimoldby to C. Ford, September 7, 1948, Fair Lane Papers, Box 115, Folder 3; Gay to C. Ford, May 27, 1914, Fair Lane Papers, Box 115, Folder 3; "The Man of the Day" by Elizabeth McFadden (Woodlawn, OH: The Composer, 1916), Fair Lane Papers, Box 115, Folder 5.

⁷⁶ McFadden, "The Man of the Day," 5.

⁷⁷ "The Reminiscences of Mr. Harold M. Cordell," 76.

or three sharps, mostly in first position. They did a great deal of slurring, and triplets and trills were used continually in their own interpretation of the number played.⁷⁸

Notice the emphasis Lovett places on social position and moral character as part and parcel of the fiddler's artistic identity. Lovett, like Ford, saw these old-fashioned dances and musical performances as a moral alternative to modern cultural pursuits, especially for the young.

Referencing the dancing classes in the Dearborn schools, Lovett was especially proud of what he calls "the beneficial effects of social training on the youthful mind," especially "smart alecs," bullies, and "sour and surly" children.⁷⁹ "In my capacity of Dancing Master," wrote Lovett, "I believe I am, in a practical sense, a builder of character."⁸⁰

As historian Daniel Walkowitz has shown, Henry Ford and Benjamin Lovett were joining a revival of English Country Dance as a progressive era project for cultural uplift. The promotion of these dances among urban elites in both England and the United States served to support a particularly white and native-born vision of Englishness and Americanness. This premodern image of the "folk"—genteel community recreation, town greens, agrarian society—stood in opposition to the specter of modern urban dance halls and moral degeneracy.⁸¹ Dance "revivalists," according to Walkowitz, "on both sides of the Atlantic, paternalistically patrolled popular culture as part of [a] political project to assimilate the immigrant working class."⁸² Ford's old-fashioned dances, then, were not just healthful and nostalgic recreation, but a powerful vision for social reform.

⁷⁸ Lovett, "Some Reminiscences," 4.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 8-11.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁸¹ Daniel J. Walkowitz, *City Folk: English Country Dance and the Politics of the Folk in Modern America* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 3-7.

⁸² Ibid., 7.

The image of Ford old-fashioned dances as a program of social reform was, more or less, borne out in the correspondence retained at Ford's home. Though not all of Benjamin Lovett's contemporaries in the business of dance instruction were as optimistic of the ability of old-fashioned dancing to win over modern dance students, there is a general trend among commentators toward viewing old-fashioned dance, as did Lovett and Ford, as a benefit to modern manners. Old-fashioned dance made it possible to go "back," in other words, to an imagined and more moral past—a vision of morality characterized by a decidedly Anglo-Saxon and rural setting. In Dayton, Ohio, several dance teachers told the *Dayton Daily News* that they expected the old time dances would primarily attract the old and be ignored by the young. Though, trotting out a perennially popular concern, some teachers nonetheless wished for a return to the older styles for they were "tired of the 'necking exhibitions' that are found at every dance."⁸³ Joy Elmer Morgan, Editor for the National Education Association, was more laudatory and called Ford's old-fashioned dancing project "one of the most significant educational enterprises ever undertaken in this country. To have one wholesome recreational activity that would unite every one regardless of age...would be worth untold millions to the health and well-being of our people."⁸⁴ And the Principal of the International Association Masters of Dancing, Edward S. Hurst, wrote to Ford, "I personally will always feel obligated to you and Mr. Lovett in the stand you are taking to bring this pastime which is a healthful recreation and almost a Social necessity to its highest level of refinement and grace."⁸⁵

The praise of these organizational reformers highlights, yet again, an important difference in Ford's particular strain of antimodernism: Henry Ford was not one to join associations and organizations, or (with the possible exception of his 1916 Peace Ship expedition) to align himself

⁸³ Annette McMahon, "Ford Plea for Return of Old Dances to Be Ignored, Dayton Instructors Fear," *Dayton Daily News*, July 19, 1925, Fair Lane Papers, Box 134, Folder 1.

⁸⁴ Morgan to Ford, October 10, 1925, Fair Lane Papers, Box 134, Folder 1.

⁸⁵ Hurst to Ford, August 22, 1925, Fair Lane Papers, Box 134, Folder 1.

with one particular reform movement versus another. This is also an important consideration in deciding whether or not to label Ford a “progressive.” Some progressive commentators, including Ida Tarbell, certainly found much to praise in Ford programs that emphasized thrift, moral righteousness, and temperance.⁸⁶ Most notable was the Ford Motor Company’s coercive Sociological Department which policed the homes and lives of FMC workers to determine their eligibility for the profit-sharing program popularized as the Five-Dollar Day beginning in 1914 (see Ch. 3).⁸⁷ “To be eligible for the \$5.00 rate,” wrote Watts, “the employee needed to demonstrate that he did not drink alcohol or physically mistreat his family or have boarders in his home, and that he regularly deposited money in a savings account, maintained a clean home, and had a good moral character.”⁸⁸ But Ford was also adamant that his efforts not be viewed as employer paternalism. As Ford spokesman William J. Cameron argued in 1936, employers’ social programs—“if you provide bathhouses and clubhouses, and organize picnics and give turkeys at Christmas”—were linked to the “perilous propensity in human nature to manage other people’s lives, which is the beginning of tyranny.”⁸⁹ The Sociological Department was effectively shuttered in 1921, two years after Ford began renovating his homestead and four years before he met Benjamin Lovett.⁹⁰ Though Ford aligned with certain progressive ideals at the Wayside Inn and in his old-fashioned dancing programs—strong moralism, high regard for an imagined past, belief in the necessity to correct the excesses of modern civilization—this sort of ideological flirtation occurred throughout Ford’s

⁸⁶ Watts, *The People’s Tycoon*, 221-23.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 199-205.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 200-01.

⁸⁹ W. J. Cameron, *The Ford Sunday Evening Hour Talks*, First and Second Series, 1934-1936 (Dearborn, MI: 1936), Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School, 47; Watts, *The People’s Tycoon*, 224.

⁹⁰ Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 275-79.

career, and should not be overstated in order to align Ford with one movement or another. Henry Ford was much more reliably antimodern than he was progressive.

The uniqueness of what Henry Ford did with the Wayside Inn is even clearer in contrast to preservation projects at other historic New England sites during the same time period. The Yankee elites who poured money into the preservation of colonial-era New England buildings through organizations such as the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) in the first decades of the 20th century also displayed tenets of a more conservative progressivism. They preserved houses and meeting places that told a particular version of New England history privileging white males of English stock and long-established family names; they espoused a past, in other words, that mirrored their present. The hope was that these accessible sites would bring this particular history to life, as a moral bastion against a present shaped by industry and the immigrants it drew. And so, bolstered by well-educated experts and a growing interest in “scientific” preservation, groups and their donors set about monumentalizing the past. This exclusive and imagined past, in turn, was to be a tool for reforming the present and future.⁹¹

The breaking point was the haphazard way in which Ford set about his renovation project. Historian James Lindgren has found that the founder of the SPNEA, William Sumner Appleton, Jr., convinced Henry Ford to join the Society as a vice-president for Michigan in 1924, but the arrangement was not nearly as productive as Appleton hoped. There was apparently little love between the industrialist and wealthy Boston preservationists, and Ford kept his money for his own projects. Ford further offended Appleton’s ideal of “in situ, archaeologically minded preservation” by remaking the Wayside Inn site and furnishing the building largely according to his own whims. A

⁹¹ James M. Lindgren, *Preserving Historic New England: Preservation, Progressivism, and the Remaking of Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3-13.

short distance from the Inn, Ford even included the little red schoolhouse supposedly immortalized in the nursery rhyme, “Mary had a little lamb.”⁹²

In his writings on architect Joseph Everett Chandler’s 1908-1910 renovation of the House of the Seven Gables in Salem, Massachusetts, William Appleton showed the degree of difference between the kind of preservation work he and his associates believed in on the one hand, and an approach like Ford’s on the other. The house contained both 17th and 18th century architectural elements as well as a number of features to conform to later fictional accounts, such as a secret staircase given to it in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1851 novel, *The House of the Seven Gables*. Appleton fretted over this blending of disparate details right down to the assembly of the window sills and the age of the brick used to recreate missing gables, striving to ensure that the building’s past, even when fictional, would be faithfully and scientifically represented. On a different project, Appleton stipulated that reproductions of historical furnishings should bear some conspicuous stamp or mark to avoid their being mistaken for authentic artifacts—Ford and his agents would surely have balked at such a suggestion.⁹³

The difference between Henry Ford and a preservationist like William Appleton, in other words, was in the object of their fidelity. Where Appleton and his ilk strove to develop scientific (i.e. methodically determined and agreed-upon) principles of preservation to be applied in the service of broadly-held reformist ideals, Ford answered only to his own singular vision. The Wayside Inn was not a product of Henry Ford’s scientific principles, it was a product of his imagination. In the extended introduction to “Why I Bought the Wayside Inn,” Ford ghostwriter Samuel Crowther painted Ford as almost premodern himself, quite apart from the speed and bustle of modern

⁹² Ibid., 62, 167.

⁹³ Ibid., 142-44.

industry. I quote him here, at length, as this is the most extensive statement Ford's (auto)biographer made regarding the industrialist's position between history and modernity:

Why is he doing all this? He is supposed not to be interested in history, or in fact in anything that has not to do with the present or the future. He is the apostle of progress and it seems quite impossible that one man should be buying immense stretches of coal land in Kentucky, there to erect tremendous steam-electric plants which with all their appurtenances and processes will take more out of coal than it seems reasonable to suppose that the Lord ever put into coal, and at the same time be buying placid hills and valleys and taking their inns and houses as far back into time as he is taking his mechanical ventures forward. It all seems to be a crying contradiction, and yet it is not in the least.

The explanation is that Mr. Ford is not materialistic. The Ford car is not to him a material thing. It is a method of transportation—a way of making life on the farm easier. He is a man of action when action is required, but otherwise he is a contemplative man, much given to taking long walks and rides alone. His own tastes are simple and he carries the principle of simplicity through everything he does. It is a baffling simplicity, especially for one who insists on looking for complexity. And above all, he reveres the pioneer spirit—he believes that nothing can stop this country, so long as the pioneer spirit remains alive.⁹⁴

It is a rich coincidence that, to illustrate Ford as a champion of progress, Crowther chose to cite his “tremendous steam-electric plants”—built around large dynamos—in Kentucky. As I said earlier, Ford (and here Crowther) never saw the premodern and the modern as fundamentally incompatible. The point, to Ford, was that the same fundamental values demonstrated in the work of his stone masons in Sudbury should be the same as those adhered to by engineers in the coal fields. What Crowther calls “simplicity” on Ford's part reads more like a stubborn unwillingness to see that the literary world of Longfellow could not map directly onto the modern world of the Model T. His years of work and millions of dollars notwithstanding, Ford's Wayside Inn failed to become a model for the country. It did, however, provide an important model for his subsequent and far more ambitious work at Greenfield Village.

Finally, Crowther's edifying nationalism at the close of the above passage points to the Wayside Inn's usefulness as a conservative symbol in the politically volatile climate of the interwar

⁹⁴ Ford and Crowther, “Why I Bought the Wayside Inn,” 43-44.

period. William Chauncy Langdon, an Historical Librarian for AT&T, wrote to a Miss Littlefield at the Inn in 1927:

Mr. Ford has certainly done a fine piece of historical work in the preservation of the Wayside Inn and done it in what I would call a truly scholarly way. I think every American ought to go there and get a glimpse of American life as it was 100 years ago and more when the fathers were starting our national development out along the right lines.⁹⁵

A teacher named Gertrude Mae Copp wrote more forcefully to Henry Ford following her visit and signed her letter “A New Englander who loves her country”:

After my return I had to tell the students all about it and what you are doing. There are many rabid socialists here [in Milwaukee] so I try at every turn to counteract their views and this was a major opportunity. When men of wealth do just such things we can do our bit by calling it to mind and interpreting it to them. This is a feeble expression of my joy but please accept it from the heart nonetheless.⁹⁶

Ford’s preservation and presentation of the Wayside Inn received highest praise not for its strict fidelity to the historical record, but rather to its approachable presentation of Ford’s particular read on history. Clearly, both to us and to his contemporaries, Ford had taken some liberties. The Wayside Inn had never before, in its history, had a bedroom full of midwestern antiques named for Thomas Edison. But the Inn functioned admirably as a symbol of Ford’s and these visitors’ aspirational vision of the United States: free of “rabid socialists,” begun “along the right lines;” in other words, native-born, morally upright, and politically conservative. The Wayside Inn functioned as a usable past.

In this light, what could be mistaken for a simple renovation project is actually striking in its ambition. Henry Ford did not simply open an old Inn to the public as a passive model of the nation’s history. He provided an active Americanizing project. Students learned lessons in line with those Ford himself remembered from his days in Michigan country schoolhouses. Guests slept in

⁹⁵ William Chauncy Langdon to Miss Littlefield, Aug. 25, 1927, Series IV, Box 14, Folder 4, The Wayside Inn Archives, Sudbury, Mass.

⁹⁶ Gertrude Mae Copp to Henry Ford, n.d., Series IV, Box 14, Folder 4, The Wayside Inn Archives, Sudbury, Mass.

bedrooms named after their heroes, both past and present. Weekend attendees danced “old fashioned” dances to the sound of fiddles and banjos. The Wayside Inn’s usable past was not simply presented, it was produced. And Henry Ford’s ideal of *productive* history would reach its fullest form a short time later, back in Michigan, at Greenfield Village.

II.

“Restorative Nostalgia” and Ford’s Historical Ideal: The Edison Institute and Greenfield Village

There is one story that inevitably arises in discussions of Henry Ford's relationship to American history. In the summer of 1916, the *Chicago Tribune* declared “Ford is an Anarchist,” after a Ford Motor Company treasurer mistakenly commented that Ford would refuse monetary support to workers mobilized to repel an attack along the Mexican border. After Ford demanded a retraction, and the *Tribune's* editor refused, Ford filed a libel suit. At the trial, Ford unwittingly placed himself directly in the crosshairs of *Tribune* defense attorney Elliott Stevenson's untiring character attacks. Stevenson subjected the industrialist to a barrage of questions designed to display Ford's academic ignorance, and in so doing to substantiate the *Tribune's* charge that Henry Ford was an “ignorant idealist.” Ford failed on nearly every count. He identified Benedict Arnold as “a writer.” He could not offer a date for the founding of the United States, and ventured a guess that the Revolutionary War had been fought in 1812. He had only a vague sense that the *Maine* had been sunk in Havana in 1898 (when he was 35). Over a period of several days, Ford displayed not only a pervasive ignorance of historical fact, but also a generally dismissive attitude toward the expectation that he be able to recite any of these points.¹

Ford's most widely reproduced quotation from that summer was his statement in a *Chicago Tribune* interview from May 25, “History is more or less bunk.”² This offhanded statement became not only a touchstone of the suit that “played an important part in molding the image which the public held of the manufacturer during the last two-and-a-half decades of his career,” as Ford historian David Lewis put it, but also a convenient straw man for subsequent generations of

¹ Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 104-08; Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 244-48.

² The exchange is reproduced in “Legendary Mr. Ford,” *New York Times*, August 30, 1918, 10.

American historians and historical enthusiasts.³ The Museum Editor of Greenfield Village felt compelled to contend with and qualify the statement in the museum's 50th anniversary commemorative volume in 1979.⁴ Today, it even serves as the title for one historian's private blog (HistoryIsBunk.com). Ford had hit a nerve.

As quickly as Ford's critics jumped at the chance to make hay of “history is bunk” in the press—the actual statement having been shortened a bit in its retellings—supporters rose to his defense and continue to do so, a century after the fact. The most direct objection was that Ford's comment had been maliciously taken out of context. His full statement was a somewhat more moderate evaluation of the moral value of history:

I don't know anything about history and wouldn't give a nickel for all the history in the world. The only history worth while is the history we are making day by day. History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker's dam [*sic*] is the history we make today.⁵

The jury for the *Tribune* libel trial, made up of local farmers and workingmen, sympathized with Ford's academic dismissiveness as did many individuals and papers around the country. In Cleveland, the *Plain Dealer* concluded simply, “what he thinks about history does not matter so long as he confines himself to the manufacture of hardy little vehicles.”⁶ But as one contemporary blogger has pointed out, the strongest challenge to a literal reading of “history is bunk” is the obvious esteem with which Henry Ford regarded the American past.⁷ Ford clarified his statement in 1932:

³ Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 104.

⁴ Upward, *A Home for Our Heritage*, 2-3.

⁵ “Legendary Mr. Ford,” 10.

⁶ *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, August 24, 1919, quoted in Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 107.

⁷ Karen De Coster, “Henry Ford's 'History is Bunk' is Bunk,” November 23, 2005, www.karendecoster.com/henry-fords-history-is-bunk-is-bunk.html (accessed Oct. 17, 2014).

When I went to our American history books to learn how our forefathers harrowed the land, I discovered that the historians knew nothing about harrows. Yet our country has depended more on harrows than on guns or speeches. I thought that a history that excluded harrows and all the rest of daily life is bunk and I think so yet.⁸

Company lore has it that the *Tribune* trial directly spurred Ford's interest in rectifying the omissions of the historical profession, as Ford allegedly told secretary Ernest Liebold:

We're going to start something. I'm going to start up a museum and give people a true picture of the development of the country. That's the only history that is worth observing, that you can preserve in itself. We're going to build a museum that's going to show industrial history, and it won't be bunk! We'll show the people what actually existed in years gone by and we'll show the actual development of American industry from the early days, from the earliest days we can recollect up to the present day.⁹

Though Liebold was quoting from memory, this statement is the clearest reference we have to Henry Ford's intentions in the construction of the Edison Institute museum and Greenfield Village.

When Ford's museum and village opened in 1928, he had already made his antimodern ideals incarnate at the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts (Ch. 1). But the Wayside Inn project did not go far enough to suit Ford's aims. Where the Wayside Inn displayed Ford's ambivalence toward modern life, the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village presented a fuller alternative narrative of both the historical past and the modern present. In the 1930s, Ford's (both the man's and the company's) power was dwindling, and the aging industrialist found himself in an America that no longer seemed as pliable to his whims as it did in preceding decades. Using Svetlana Boym's conceptualization of nostalgia, this chapter argues that the museum and village provided a venue for Henry Ford to build a vision of America in line with his own remembered past.¹⁰ And, more importantly, it offered Ford's hundreds of thousands of visitors (as they numbered by the 1930s) a chance to do the same: a "flexible past," as Jessica Swigger has put it, in which visitors could imagine

⁸ Upward, *A Home for Our Heritage*, 2.

⁹ "The Reminiscences of E. G. Liebold," 890; cf. Upward, *A Home for Our Heritage*, 3.

¹⁰ Boym, "Nostalgia and its Discontents;" Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

their own nostalgic escape from a contested present.¹¹ In Chapter 1, I likened Ford's renovation of the Wayside Inn to a "usable past," borrowing Van Wyck Brook's phrase, which allowed Ford to shape a version of history to meet the moral necessities of his day. The difference inherent in the model of a "flexible past" is that, in building his museum and village as public attractions, Ford's antimodern vision met with the needs, beliefs, and interpretations of his many visitors. Ford was broadening his scope.

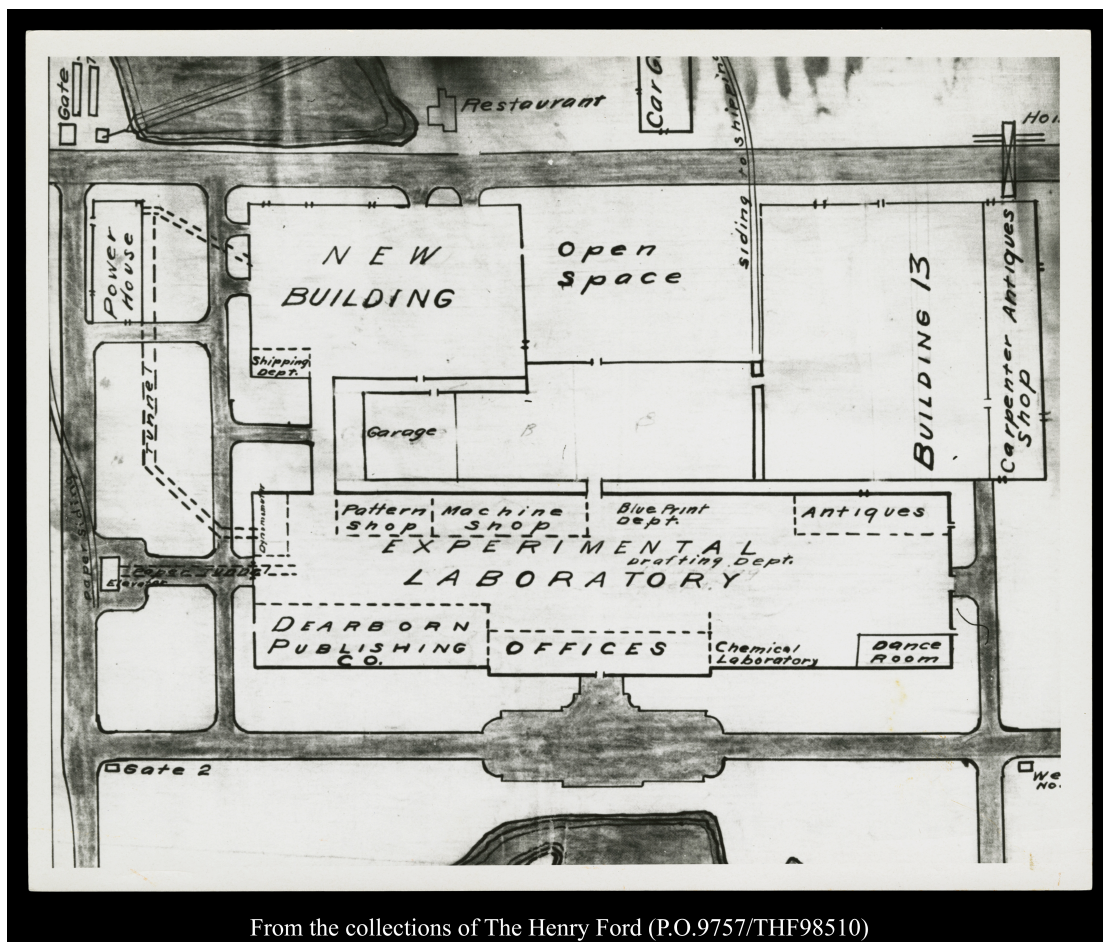
At the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village, Henry Ford took his antimodern vision beyond mere ambivalence toward modernity and, in fact, sought to shape a modern reality that mirrored his own antiquated values.¹² Blessed with unusual social power and massive wealth, Henry Ford built a historical fantasy that simply wrote cultural struggles like labor organization, racial violence, and even warfare out of the American past even as his company violently resisted unionization, his hometown systematically excluded African Americans, and the country reeled in a Depression from which it would only emerge in the upheaval of a world war. While insisting on his tribute to the common man, Henry Ford—America's most famous industrialist—instead created a vision of the United States in his own image.

Henry Ford rebuilt and refashioned his own birthplace in 1919 (Ch. 1), which provided a launching point for what would become the Edison Institute's collection of artifacts. In the years following Ford's renovation of his family home, the industrialist continued collecting and receiving American antiques of every possible type and value. When Fordson tractor operations moved out of

¹¹ Swigger, "History is Bunk," 86-88. Visitor count: *ibid.*, 77, figure 1.9. For a more recent edition of Swigger's work (which post-dated the completion of this chapter), see Jessie Swigger, *"History is Bunk": Assembling the Past at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).

¹² The Edison Institute was so-named out of Ford's devotion to and friendship with Thomas Edison, whom he regarded as his greatest hero. Edison provided a young Henry Ford with a treasured bit of encouragement toward his combustion engine design during an 1896 dinner, which launched a friendship that endured until Edison's death in 1931. Ford held Edison's character, intellect, and work ethic in the highest regard, and adopted him wholeheartedly as a role model. Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 41-45; Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 24-26, 376-77, 388-89.

the Oakwood Boulevard facility where Henry Ford kept his office in Dearborn, he remained and took over Building 13—a large storage facility—to house his growing collections. “By 1923,” reported Geoffrey Upward, “Ford was the primary collector of Americana in the world.”¹³ Secretary Frank Campsall, who served as a point person in the Ford office for activities at the Wayside Inn, was also responsible for assisting Ford in deciding which items to accept into his collection, and Edward Cutler (the draftsman who had designed Ford’s windmill) was given space “among the artifacts” so he could act as an ersatz conservation specialist for the collection.¹⁴



From the collections of The Henry Ford (P.O.9757/THF98510)

Figure 2. Ford Engineering Laboratory layout, Dearborn, Michigan, circa 1924.

Source: P.O.9757/THF98510. From the collections of The Henry Ford. Reproduced in Upward, *A Home for our Heritage*, 12.

¹³ Upward, *A Home for Our Heritage*, 3, 11.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11-12.

A circa 1924 floor plan of the Dearborn Engineering Laboratory, built in and around the remains of the old tractor plant, gives a sense of Henry Ford's world in the mid-1920s into the 1930s in which he had centralized his disparate and wide-ranging projects (Fig. 2). In one facility, Ford could keep tabs on his collection of Americana and preservation efforts in Building 13, laboratories for Ford Motor Company engineers and draftsmen in the main building, a room for his beloved old-time dances in one corner, and opposite, the offices and press of the Dearborn Publishing Company, which would be responsible for the *Dearborn Independent* and various other publications, including *Good Morning*, Henry and Clara Ford's dance manual. For the sexagenarian automaker, so focused on keeping a firm hand in his cultural pursuits, the setup must have been ideal. By his 70th birthday, much of the time Ford spent "at work" was spent in the Engineering Laboratory complex and ambling through the Village.¹⁵ According to David Lewis, Greenfield Village was, among all Ford's projects, "closest to his heart."¹⁶

Ford needed this ample space. In the early 1920s, Henry Ford's antiques collecting was a positively massive undertaking. Ford agents scoured the country purchasing all manner of furniture, home and farm implements, musical instruments, furnishings, tools, and curiosities of all kinds—both expensive pieces and items that might otherwise have been dismissed as junk. Ford himself enjoyed visiting small-town antiques dealers and buying out their entire stock, as much charity for these struggling shopkeepers as a collecting method. Ford's buying agents generally had to keep Henry Ford's name as far as possible from their deals lest savvy sellers inflate their prices in the hope the industrialist would pay.¹⁷ According to Israel Sack, the dealer who had furnished the

¹⁵ Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 277-78.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹⁷ "The Reminiscences of Mr. Harold M. Cordell," 57-58.

Wayside Inn, Henry Ford and H.F. du Pont were the two most prolific purchasers of American antiques during the 1920s, at opposite ends of the market. Sack explained:

Mr. DuPont purchased the most expensive and the rarest, and Mr. Ford bought a lot of good furniture, and along with it every time he made a trip to the country, he bought anything and everything. I figured he wanted to help a great many small dealers and he did. He got a lot of pleasure out of doing it. It gave a great many people a lot of work and ready cash.¹⁸

A simple shortage of room in Building 13 would serve as a push toward the building of a dedicated museum building. Henry Ford needed yet more space for his artifacts.

Word of Henry Ford's interest in Americana spread quickly, and the Ford organization was forced to assign secretaries and develop a system for responding to the sheer volume of mail concerning antiques for sale (or containing the items themselves). Ford secretary H.R. Waddell remembered, "during the twenties, the largest portion of mail related to the subject of antiques...We would receive, say on Monday, up to 800 or 1,000 letters...Other days of the week, the incoming letters would run 400 to 600 letters a day."¹⁹ The secretaries came up with a system of numbered form letters to expedite the process.²⁰ Naturally, Ford himself was unable to keep personal tabs on every acquisition made in his name, though his agents were forced to deal with his capricious views on prices. One secretary later remembered that Ford was happy to spend upwards of \$45,000 on a highboy cabinet which replicated several others in his collection (approximately \$598,000 in 2013

¹⁸ "The Reminiscences of Mr. Israel Sack," 43.

¹⁹ "The Reminiscences of Mr. H.R. Waddell," 3-4, Ford Reminiscences, <http://cdm15889.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15889coll2/id/18206/rec/3> (accessed February 26, 2015).

²⁰ Ibid., 2-3.

dollars), but might vehemently object to some \$50 or \$100 object of special interest to the museum.²¹

Though there were apparently no explicit guidelines in the collection, there is a general sense that the Ford organization devoted itself almost entirely to the collection of artifacts related to Americans of European stock, i.e. “pioneers” and “forefathers.” Secretary Harold Cordell, who would become something of a self-trained museum professional, provided an illustrative recollection of a rejected group of Native American artifacts:

One Indian chief from Oklahoma drove up with a whole Ford load of bows and arrows and Indian fighting equipment and offered them as a gift. Henry took them all and probably gave them away to the boys around the Village, but in that collection were some very interesting things. It included arrows that had actually been used in combat, in killing bears, and so forth, but as the Museum didn’t contemplate any ethnological exhibits, they weren’t of any particular interest.²²

The upshot, of course, is that *ethnological* here was a stand-in for *non-white*. Even Greenfield Village’s inclusion of a group of small slave cabins—spare but dry and comfortable brick houses—and, later, a Maryland plantation house tended to sidestep any sense of historical racial struggles. Henry Ford’s museum dealt almost exclusively with the history of people who looked like Henry Ford.

Within this largely Anglo-Saxon context, Ford’s agents assembled a wide-ranging collection of artifacts related to Ford’s vision of “harrows and all the rest of daily life.”²³ This explicitly broad guideline also had its own implicit narrowing focus. Ford was most interested in objects that bore some relation to rural life—especially farming—of the 19th and early-20th century. Henry Haigh reported on Ford’s collections for *Michigan History Magazine* in 1925, and was greatly impressed with the breadth and completeness of the assembly of artifacts. Haigh felt that the collections could be

²¹ “The Reminiscences of Mr. Harold M. Cordell,” 2. Dollar conversion using Consumer Price Index increase from 1925 to 2013 via Samuel H. Williamson, “Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1774 to present,” MeasuringWorth, 2015, <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/> (accessed May 5, 2015).

²² Ibid., 47-48.

²³ Upward, *A Home for Our Heritage*, 2; see above.

organized into five areas: domestic life, from crockery to watches to musical instruments; agriculture, both large-scale (threshing machines, large plows) and small-scale (garden tools); early industrial machinery; and Ford's growing collection of historical buildings including the Wayside Inn and Ford homestead. Echoing Henry Ford's own views, Haigh called the collection the largest assemblage of "true history" of the United States, beyond even the collections held at the Smithsonian.²⁴

The collection that emerged was not so far off in overall effect from Ford's effort to recreate the world of his youth with the Ford homestead renovation. Ford was in his sixties by the time the Edison Institute began taking shape, and he was reportedly very happy to stroll idly up and down between his rows of artifacts, pausing to look at the workings of this or that machine and taking great pleasure in the orderly rows of tools and vehicles. "I certainly would say," remembered Ernest Liebold, "that the Village and Museum reflect Mr. Ford's interests more than anything else."²⁵ This was by design: Ford had little patience for anyone who might question the vision for his museum.

As at the Wayside Inn, Ford's primary assistants for the museum and Greenfield Village project were not historians, but rather men drawn from the ranks of the Ford Motor Company. The draftsman responsible for the new windmill at the Ford homestead, Edward Cutler, came to the Ford organization as a glass specialist having begun his career designing leaded glass windows in the Vancouver area. After impressing Henry Ford with his work in the windshield department at Highland Park and then endearing himself to his boss with a nostalgic windmill design, Cutler became the lead architect, designer, and preservationist for the over 100 structures that were either moved to or designed for Greenfield Village. What Cutler lacked in historical training he seems to have made up in design precision, though his greatest asset was his ability to translate Henry Ford's ideas into workable drawings. Traveling around the country sketching buildings and closely planning

²⁴ Henry A. Haigh, "The Ford Collections at Dearborn" (Lansing, MI: Michigan Historical Commission, 1925), reprint from *Michigan History Magazine*, January 1925, 14-19, Fair Lane Papers, Box 128, Folder 6.

²⁵ "The Reminiscences of E. G. Liebold," 902.

their dismantlement, transport, and reconstruction in Dearborn, Cutler served as an extension of Ford's whims. Architectural preservation, in the sense espoused by William Appleton and the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities for projects like the House of Seven Gables, was not in Cutler's repertoire (Ch. 1). But he and Ford do seem to have found a sort of working standard for the Village. Their deepest nod to authenticity was the excavation and transport of seven boxcars full of New Jersey clay upon which to place Thomas Edison's reconstructed Menlo Park laboratory buildings.²⁶

Along similar lines, the workflow through which various antiques were incorporated into the Edison Institute collection was a rather haphazard exchange between various Ford secretaries and agents. Harold Cordell struggled to parse through his stacks of the hundreds of daily letters offering antiques to Ford. If an item appealed to Cordell, he went to secretary Frank Campsall, who okayed payment. More expensive items and special cases went further up the chain to Ford's personal secretary, Ernest Liebold. Meanwhile, buyers working further afield, including Fred Black and Henry Ford himself, were sending anything and everything which caught Ford's fancy back to Dearborn. The project on the whole seems a rather piecemeal operation, and it was overseen wholly by Henry Ford's existing office staff.²⁷

Not everyone on Ford's staff was as comfortable as he was with the project's dearth of trained specialists or up-to-date standards. Henry's son Edsel was among those hoping the Edison Institute would be a museum up to the standards of the day. At Edsel's suggestion, Harold Cordell visited the Rosenwald Museum in Chicago as a model of a museum collection separated into different areas of daily life, and the Muller Museum in Munich for the mechanical models in its exhibits. Cordell explained:

²⁶ Bryan, *Henry's Lieutenants*, 81-87.

²⁷ "The Reminiscences of Mr. Harold M. Cordell," 63-67.

I had already prepared a summary of the exhibits we should have and had it bound up; one copy Edsel insisted on getting personally, the other copy was for the museum to use as a guide. I brought this down with me to Chicago, and to my great pleasure I found the Rosenwald program was practically a duplicate of what I had made up. Edsel was very much pleased when I came back and reported that.²⁸

But there is little indication that Henry took any outside ideas to heart. He instead reserved complete control for himself. “I don’t know of anybody,” remembered Ernest Liebold, “who handled the over-all plans for the Museum development, such as placing of material and so forth, outside of Mr. Ford.”²⁹ According to Cordell, “Edsel more or less dropped the subject after awhile.”³⁰

Persistent nonetheless, Edsel continued gently adjusting the trajectory of the museum and village behind the scenes. It was Edsel who asked Ford Motor Company secretary Fred Black to take over as Secretary-Treasurer of the Edison Institute during a visit to the 1934 Chicago World’s Fair.³¹ Black and Edsel Ford pitched an idea to Henry to bring in University of Michigan graduate students working on “museum techniques,” but the elder industrialist never allowed it.³² Edsel Ford also had a large hand in the architectural design of the museum. The architect, Robert O. Derrick, was a friend, and according to Cordell, Edsel Ford and Derrick had numerous design consultations outside the elder Ford’s oversight.³³

The setting of the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village, a large triangle of roughly 200 acres bound on one side by the Engineering Laboratory and on another by the Ford Airport, was open field when materials for the first historical building (a country store from Waterford, Michigan)

²⁸ Ibid., 63.

²⁹ “The Reminiscences of E. G. Liebold,” 895.

³⁰ “The Reminiscences of Mr. Harold M. Cordell,” 66.

³¹ “The Reminiscences of Fred L. Black,” 32.

³² Ibid., 44-45.

³³ “The Reminiscences of Mr. Harold M. Cordell,” 84-85.

began arriving in October 1927. Cutler had been drafting plans since early in the year. Though Ford only owned four historic buildings by the fall, it had already been decided that the plan of the Village would radiate outward from a church to be built on a knoll “in the manner of a typical New England town,” though no particular town was taken as a model.³⁴ Construction took on added urgency in the spring of 1928 when Henry Ford announced that he wished to dedicate the site on October 21, 1929, the 50th anniversary of his friend Thomas Edison’s successful invention of the incandescent lamp: “Light’s Golden Jubilee.” Later that year, the cornerstone was set for what would become the main building of the Edison Institute, an eight-acre museum building with a façade precisely modeled on Philadelphia’s Independence Hall. With an additional \$5 million gift from Ford toward construction, work at the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village hurtled toward the 1929 deadline.³⁵

William A. Simonds, who had been editor of the *Ford News* after assisting the company with the Sapiro trial that served to end the anti-Semitic rants of the *Dearborn Independent*, was named the first manager of Greenfield Village.³⁶ Writing in 1938, Simonds looked back with no small amount of sentimentality on the work leading up to the Light’s Golden Jubilee dedication. According to Simonds, Ford toured the site of Thomas Edison’s Menlo Park laboratories along with the aging inventor, his idol. Individual wooden boards from one of the laboratories were sought out from the farmers that had salvaged them. Ford oversaw a dig at Menlo Park which excavated numerous tools and electrical materials, and a great deal of trash. “All was carefully gathered together and shipped to Dearborn,” Simonds writes, “even the broken bottles and shards.” Alongside the loads of clay sent to Greenfield Village, “nothing was overlooked, not even the stump of the old hickory tree that

³⁴ Upward, *A Home for Our Heritage*, 26-28; 200 acres: William A. Simonds, *Henry Ford and Greenfield Village* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1938), 121.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 21-23.

³⁶ Bryan, *Henry’s Lieutenants*, 243-49; Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 333.

once grew near the laboratory.” Simonds’s romantic reminiscence was matched only by the sentimentality of his boss, who ordered the church built on the knoll at the center of the village to be named after his mother and his mother-in-law. “In July of that year [1928], Mrs. Ford herself turned the first sod to signal commencement of construction, and the bricks and doors from her girlhood home, the Bryant homestead, went into the building.”³⁷

Today, Greenfield Village is a massive, expertly curated attraction boasting 83 historic buildings “from Noah Webster’s home, where he wrote the first American dictionary, to Thomas Edison’s Menlo Park laboratory, to the courthouse where Abraham Lincoln practiced law.”³⁸ But the some 500 distinguished guests who arrived for Light’s Golden Jubilee on October 21, 1929 found “a muddy, virtually treeless village of about 30 buildings,” with the main hall only partially complete. After a tour of the grounds and a massive, candlelit black tie banquet, a network of 140 NBC radio stations carried the main event: a re-creation of Edison’s first test of his incandescent bulb overseen by Henry Ford and President Hoover.³⁹ The radio announcer, Graham McNamee, described the drama to listeners around the country who’d been instructed to turn off their own lights in tribute:

But here is Mr. Edison again. While he was at the power house, Mr. Jehl sealed up the old lamp, and it is now ready...Will it light? Will it burn? Or will it flicker and die, as so many previous lamps had died?

Oh, you could hear a pin drop in this long room.

Now the group is once more about the old vacuum pump. Mr. Edison has the two wires in his hand; now he is reaching up to the old lamp; now he is making the connection. It lights!⁴⁰

³⁷ Simonds, *Henry Ford and Greenfield Village*, 121-25. Ford liked the Martha-Mary Chapel so much that he ordered five replicas built around the country. The Martha-Mary Chapel on the grounds of the Wayside Inn, in white clapboard, still stands, and its basement holds the Wayside Inn archives.

³⁸ The Henry Ford, “About Greenfield Village,” www.thehenryford.org/village/about.aspx (accessed January 7, 2014).

³⁹ Upward, *A Home for Our Heritage*, 59-60.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

NBC listeners nationwide (ideally) illuminated their own homes in celebration. Ford's imagined Village had sprung to life.

Even at this early juncture, some degree of the issues in Ford's project—what Crowther called “crying contradictions” at the Wayside Inn—became apparent at Greenfield Village. The itinerant Ford secretary Ernest Liebold prepared for the movements of the Edisons, Fords, and Hoovers (along with the Secret Service detail) during the Light's Golden Jubilee event was a veritable medley of various transportation modes to accommodate Ford's notions of authenticity. The party traveled from the Rouge plant to Dearborn in a train drawn by a reconditioned 1860 wood-burning locomotive. For the luncheon at Fair Lane, the Fords' estate, the party traveled in Lincoln touring cars and limousines and Ford Tudor Sedans.⁴¹ But on the streets of Greenfield Village, despite the rain, all visitors were relegated to walking or taking horse drawn carriages borrowed from Ford's collections (Ford employees, dressed in period costume for the event, ended the day soaked).⁴² In a *New York Times* feature a few years later, the paper appreciated the historical conceit:

Only a few blocks distant is the vast Rouge plant of the Ford Company at Dearborn, Mich., but this bit of the old America discourages the intrusion of the machine age. Visitors to the village—numbering upward of a million since it was opened to the public in June of 1933—park their automobiles outside the gates and make the round of its exhibits in old-fashioned horse-drawn vehicles.⁴³

But with no certain time period unifying the buildings on the site or its design, the choice of horse drawn conveyance over readily accessible motor vehicles belies a sense on the part of its founder that the historical fantasy he was creating predated his own ubiquitous automobiles (the historical

⁴¹ “Tudor,” that is, as distinct from “Fordor,” in the Ford model nomenclature of the time.

⁴² Ibid., 64-67; “The Reminiscences of E. G. Liebold,” 884.

⁴³ “A Village of America's Yesterdays Assembled by Henry Ford,” *New York Times*, November 22, 1936.

reference point having moved in the past eight decades, Greenfield Village now offers rides in Model T's). What, then, do we make of Ford's historical recreation?

For Henry Ford, the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village served a distinct personal purpose. It offered an alternative narrative to Ford's own present situation. Toward the end of his life, Henry Ford spent a great deal of his time walking the halls of his museum and the streets of Greenfield Village, immersing himself in his own imagined past. Liebold remembered that while the Village was under construction, Ford began spending his mornings there before he would go anywhere else. Where the popular imagination might see Henry Ford in a grand office at the River Rouge plant, captaining the colossus of American industry, by the 1930s he was more likely than not to be a few miles away, on a reconstructed 19th century street, overseeing the construction of a historical fantasyland.

Looking at the project as a whole, it is clear that personal nostalgia played a large role in Henry Ford's construction of the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village. But as Svetlana Boym has shown, in an age of "mass culture" (i.e. large-scale commercialized cultural production), nostalgia was not simply a personal affliction but actually an important cultural force.⁴⁴ In Boym's argument, the rise of nostalgia and an obsession with heritage out of industrialization that we view as a contradiction in Henry Ford's activities was actually a causal relationship:

Nostalgia as a historical emotion came of age during the time of Romanticism and is coeval with the birth of mass culture. In the mid-nineteenth century, nostalgia became institutionalized in national and provincial museums, heritage foundations, and urban memorials. The past was no longer unknown or unknowable. The past became 'heritage.' The rapid pace of industrialization and modernization increased the intensity of people's longing for the slower rhythms of the past, for social cohesion and tradition. Yet this

⁴⁴ I should disclose a conflict in terminology here: Boym has clearly stated, "nostalgia is not 'antimodern'; it is not necessarily opposed to modernity but coeval with it. Nostalgia and progress are like Jekyll and Hyde: doubles and mirror images of one another." I go on using Boym's *nostalgia* alongside my own *antimodernism* because I utilize the latter as acting less against modernity and more as being ambivalent about its effects. Boym calls something like this "off-modern," where I follow Lears in the more direct "anti-." Boym, "Nostalgia and its Discontents," 8-9.

obsession with the past revealed an abyss of forgetting and took place in inverse proportion to its actual preservation.⁴⁵

Additionally, the drive to *control* the transmission of the past, in the 19th century, became a crucial means of controlling the culture of the present. In this vein, historian Paul DiMaggio's work illuminated the function of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts as an effort by the Brahmin class to solidify and shore up high culture amidst a rising tide of immigration in "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston" (1982). And Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (2nd edition, 2006) illustrated museums as a crucial tool for cementing colonial power by appropriating the heritage of the colonized.⁴⁶ It is a very short distance between the nostalgic and the political.

Benedict Anderson, especially, saw museums as a tool for ordering and privileging particular narratives of the past. In the second edition of *Imagined Communities*, Anderson illustrated museums and heritage sites in Southeast Asia as venues where colonial states could symbolize their control over the nations they had subjugated. The colonial power imposed its own ordering principle on the past from which the nation drew its identity: "the grandeurs of the Borobudur, of Angkor, of Pagan, and of other ancient sites were successively disinterred, unjungled, measured, photographed, reconstructed, fenced off, analysed, and displayed."⁴⁷ Henry Ford was no colonizing state, but he did enjoy unusually massive economic power and wield impressive personal popularity during the 1920s and '30s. Greenfield Village and the Edison Institute created a particular national narrative—a vision of the United States stripped down, whitewashed, and remade in the image of Ford's memory.

⁴⁵ Boym, "Nostalgia and its Discontents," 13.

⁴⁶ Paul Dimaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America," *Media, Culture and Society* 4 (1982): 33-50; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 2006), 163-85.

⁴⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 179.

Boym has identified a particular strain of nostalgia: “restorative nostalgia,” which “stresses *nostos* (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home.”⁴⁸ This formulation also addresses some of Ford’s lack of concern for academic rigor and historical authenticity—for Ford, the aim of the museum and village was only partially to display historical curiosities. Ford meant to set a public example: to remind his visitors of the lessons of the virtuous forebears. According to Boym, “the rhetoric of restorative nostalgia is not about ‘the past,’ but rather about universal values, family, nature, homeland, truth.”⁴⁹ Accordingly, Ford’s museum emphasized the values of domestic life, manual labor, community recreation in dance and music—the same values Ford most prized in himself and sought to engender in (or impose on) his workforce. One example especially illustrates this point: for all Ford’s collecting in every conceivable facet of 19th century rural American life, Ford—a man born in the same month and year as the battle of Gettysburg—decided not to include or emphasize artifacts related to warfare. Though the museum included a small collection of historical firearms, they were mostly related to hunting. Haigh explained:

No clumsy battle club or bludgeon of the stone age, nor spear nor bow-and-arrow of a later period, nor any dirk or dagger, no armour, helmet, plume or mailed glove of our fighting ancestors, nor any cannon, nor other death-dealing device, has found lodgment within the peaceful precincts of the Ford Collection.⁵⁰

Ford had such disdain for war that he chartered his own “Peace Ship” expedition in 1916 to sail to Norway and attempt to negotiate peace.⁵¹ A decade later, Ford had the chance to imagine a United States without such bloodshed. In Ford’s version of American history, war was pointedly absent.

The formulation of *restorative* nostalgia implies that something must be restored, that something has been lost and the nostalgic individual must work to bring it back. Accordingly, Boym

⁴⁸ Boym, “Nostalgia and its Discontents,” 13.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁰ Haigh, “The Ford Collections,” 16.

⁵¹ Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 194-200.

pointed to the dependence of restorative nostalgia on what she calls a “conspirational worldview,” an absolute binary in which the seat of the good, the home, must be defended and shored up against outside evils. It is a simplifying impulse: “ambivalence, complexity of history, the variety of contradictory evidence, and the specificity of modern circumstances are thus erased, and modern history is seen as a fulfillment of ancient prophecy.”⁵² Nostalgia, then, is not just escapist but active, even adversarial. It also endows the individual with a heavy purpose, and Henry Ford was never short on self-regard.

Henry Ford found much to struggle against in the world he inhabited in the late 1920s into the 1930s. We think most often of American culture in the period, especially after October, 1929, as starting to resist men like Ford. The heroes of American culture in the first decade of the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village are the WPA writers and Federal Theatre Project actors and millions of others connected in some way to the cultural front. Henry Ford was adjacent to these developments. As Michael Denning pointed out in the opening of his foundational cultural study of the period, those at the center of the cultural front were “the second generation of the second wave of immigration: ethnic Italians, Jews, Poles, Mexicans, Serbians, Croatians, Slovaks, Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos along with African Americans who had migrated north.”⁵³ Not incidentally, these same people were assuming more and more roles in Ford Motor Company plants. The cultural front was radiating out from Ford’s shop floor as Ford himself concocted an alternative cultural vision from the front office.

Ford most infamously attacked organized labor and the Left in 1937. By that spring, both General Motors and Chrysler had agreed to negotiations with the United Automobile Workers

⁵² Boym, “Nostalgia and its Discontents,” 14.

⁵³ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), xv.

(UAW) after being crippled by sit-down strikes comprised of a vast majority of their workers. Roughly 140,000 of 150,000 total GM employees and 60,000 of 70,000 workers at Chrysler were off the job at the peak of union organizing efforts at each company. Despite the efforts of Edsel Ford, who argued vehemently that the company should proactively seek negotiations with the UAW and thus avoid the costly strikes experienced at GM and Chrysler, Henry Ford stubbornly held out. He had reinstated the five-dollar day in all Ford plants in March of 1934 and believed both his workers and the American public would support him against the UAW, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), and a Roosevelt Administration buoyed by its landslide victory in 1936. Henry Ford would soon be proven wrong.⁵⁴

Ford put his anti-union efforts in the hands of his pugnacious head of security, Harry Bennett. By the second half of the 1930s, Bennett was Henry Ford's right hand man. As head of the Ford Service Department, Bennett assembled a private army of thugs and "investigators" to keep tabs on Henry Ford's employees—workmen and executives alike. On the shop floor, vocal union sympathizers and would-be organizers were routinely rooted out, beaten, and fired.⁵⁵ There were also reports that Bennett's men spied on Ford's closest associates, including his son, Edsel.⁵⁶

On the afternoon of May 26, 1937, UAW organizers arrived at a pedestrian bridge leading to Ford's River Rouge plant. The plan was to hand out union leaflets during the shift change as an opening salvo in the fight to unionize the world's largest automobile plant. Bennett was ready. Leading a group including not only members of his Ford Service organization but also local gang members and professional wrestlers, Bennett led a savage beating of the union organizers. One

⁵⁴ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 65, 133-39.

⁵⁵ Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 427.

⁵⁶ "The Reminiscences of A.A. Backus," 5, Ford Reminiscences, <http://cdm15889.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15889coll2/id/1385/rec/4> (accessed February 26, 2015).

man's back was broken. Walter Reuther, president of the UAW West Side local, was repeatedly kicked before being thrown down a flight of stairs.⁵⁷ Richard Frankenstein, director of the membership drive, described it as "the worst licking I've ever taken... They bounced us down the concrete steps of an overpass we had climbed. Then they would knock us down, stand us up, and knock us down again."⁵⁸ But Bennett either did not realize or severely misjudged the role the press might play in the aftermath of his assault. The beatings took place amidst a group of newspaper reporters and photographers, and Bennett's men turned on the newsmen, attempting to seize their notes and film. The result was a national press who was as eager as the union to publicize Ford Motor Company's culpability in the "Battle of the Overpass." In the NLRB review that swiftly followed, the same newspaper reporters became some of the strongest witnesses against Ford.⁵⁹ Henry Ford responded with impotent denial: "Anybody who knows the Ford Motor Company knows the things the Board charged never happened and could not happen here."⁶⁰

Meanwhile, the industry dominance Ford Motor Company had enjoyed in the 1920s had fallen off by the mid-1930s, largely due to the stubbornly old-fashioned practices of Henry Ford himself. Ford's insistence on having a hand in all the engineering matters at his company, his disdain for any clear chain of command or organization chart, and his extreme disinclination to listen to the input of his son, Edsel (president of the company) and his production chief, Charles Sorenson, had taken their toll. Henry Ford's ideas about automobile design, which had been revolutionary in preceding decades, were quickly becoming antiquated. General Motors and Chrysler products were transforming into what we might recognize as modern automobiles. Flashy and frequent restyling,

⁵⁷ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth, 1933-1962*, 139-141; Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 428-29.

⁵⁸ "Ford Men Beat and Rout Lewis Union Organizers; 80,000 Out in Steel Strike," *New York Times*, May 27, 1937, 1.

⁵⁹ Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 250-51.

⁶⁰ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 141.

an emphasis on quietness and comfort, and usable, efficient engineering were becoming the industry standard. Henry Ford's ideal motorcar was still something like a Model T—a tool or appliance rather than a lifestyle statement—and he acceded to these industry changes (and the urgings of his executives) only grudgingly and after the fact. Ford sales suffered as a result, and the previously unchallenged auto giant now often found itself taking second or even third place in sales to resurgent Chevrolet and Plymouth (see Ch. 4).⁶¹

In 1937, Charles Sorenson and Edsel Ford took a major step toward mitigating the meddling influence of the 74-year-old industrialist. They split Henry's beloved Engineering Department in two: all engineering work "as immediately affected production," as Nevins and Hill put it, was taken out from under Henry's nose at the old tractor plant—now the Engineering Laboratories—in Dearborn and moved five miles to the Rouge plant. There, the department received badly-needed modern testing equipment and a wind tunnel. "Purely experimental" engineering was allowed to remain in Dearborn, adjacent to the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village.⁶² Henry Ford maintained a strong voice in the company, and after Edsel's untimely death in 1943 he would even retake the title of President. But the literal five-mile distance between Henry Ford and the real work of the Ford Motor Company after 1937 is crucial to understanding the function of Greenfield Village.

At the museum and village, Henry Ford was free to ignore the violent realities of the 1930s business environment and his own role within them. Here it is important to note that Ford, whose reputation has been forged on thrift and economic savvy, largely ran the museum and village with regard to neither. "Henry was interested in the whole project as a plaything," wrote Cordell.⁶³ And

⁶¹ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 55-69.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 69-70.

⁶³ "The Reminiscences of Mr. Harold M. Cordell," 65.

Henry's plaything was hemorrhaging money. After Fred Black became secretary-treasurer of the Edison Institute in 1935, one of his duties was starting to sell off parts of the massive collection to help stem the losses. He remembered, "once a month, I sent to the Ford Foundation an estimate of the deficit that would occur the subsequent month. It usually ranged from \$100,000 to \$125,000," or some \$1,700,000 to \$2,120,000 in 2013 dollars.⁶⁴ Ford's various farming operations claimed such massive losses that Ernest Liebold began to fear government scrutiny:

We found that Mr. Ford's farm operations resulted in a loss from \$800,000 to \$1,000,000 a year. I told him on several occasions that we couldn't justify that with the Internal Revenue Department. While they would be willing to consider any reasonable amount for farm loss, yet when it came up to \$1,000,000, it was quite evident that either we didn't know how to run the farm or that there was a great deal being charged into the farm operations that didn't belong there.⁶⁵

But Ford was disinterested, and in his 1953 oral history interview, Liebold was unwilling or unable to give further insight into the financial problem. "I never analyzed the expenses," Liebold reported. "I didn't think Mr. Ford was interested in that."⁶⁶

As for the workers, at the outbreak of WWII some at Greenfield Village reportedly still received the same five dollars a day that formed the base wage of Ford's famous profit sharing program in 1914, and which Ford had reinstated as a minimum wage for some factory workers in 1934 following a post-1929 drop.⁶⁷ Average Ford Motor Company wages circa 1940 had reportedly

⁶⁴ "The Reminiscences of Fred L. Black," 33. Dollar conversion using Consumer Price Index increase from 1935 to 2013 via Williamson, "Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1774 to present," <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/> (accessed May 5, 2015).

⁶⁵ "The Reminiscences of E. G. Liebold," 61. \$1,000,000 in 1935, using the same CPI conversion as above n. 64, translates to a heady \$17,000,000 in 2013.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 62.

⁶⁷ For discussion of wages at FMC from WWI through the 1930s, see Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge*, 324-32, 526-34; and Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 43, 446 n. 36.

risen to more than 90 cents an hour.⁶⁸ A self-described “weary wife” of a Greenfield Village employee appealed to Clara Ford for help in 1942. After receiving no reply to her numerous letters to Henry, the woman sent Clara an itemized list of their monthly expenses to illustrate the direness of their financial situation. She wrote, “Do you realize that honest, decent living; married men are working in Greenfield Village for \$5.00 a day?” Her husband had worked 6 days a week, including holidays, for 15 years and was reportedly making less at that point than when he started. Though the letter remained in the Fords’ personal papers, there’s no indication that Ford relented.⁶⁹

The image I presented earlier of Henry Ford walking the bucolic streets in a history of his own making, lost in his own reveries as an escape from the baffling onslaught of modernity, is not so far from what was actually happening by the end of the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village’s first decade. Ford built an alternative narrative, a world in which the premodern industries and social patterns of his youth still held sway and time was stopped in some indeterminate “past.” But Greenfield Village was not important just because it provided an escape for Henry Ford. Countless other Americans, both in Dearborn and throughout the country, were happy to accompany him on his antimodern journey.

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym wrote:

Popular culture has little patience for ambivalence. The grandpa-entrepreneur who started his American career with building conventional attractions...got tired of creating illusions. He intended to bring the past back to life, to make something real, that one ‘could see and touch.’⁷⁰

Boym was talking not about Henry Ford and Greenfield Village, but about Richard Attenborough’s character in *Jurassic Park* (1993), a film which explored the limits of human control over nature and

⁶⁸ The industry average at the time was closer to \$1.00/hour. FMC wages would rise with the signing of its first agreement with the UAW in 1941. Figures from Walter Galenson, *The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labor Movement, 1935-1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 180.

⁶⁹ “A Weary Wife” to C. Ford, Mar. 11, 1942, Fair Lane Papers, Box 127, Folder 17.

⁷⁰ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 34.

the past in what Boym called “a nostalgic version of an ultimate colonial paradise behind computer-guarded barbed wire, only the colonial dream is displaced into prehistory.”⁷¹ Of course, the fictional Jurassic Park ultimately failed, with the iconic shot of an animatronic T-Rex roaring triumphantly in front of its own skeletal representation, a “When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth” banner falling down around it as the John Williams orchestral score reached its climax.⁷² But before this, the film imposed a lengthy list of cultural reorientations: the human hunter was killed by his prey; the lawyer suffered a grisly death in an outhouse; the handsome intellectual, despite his stylish overtures, failed to get the girl. The effect is a forceful, fanciful statement on the “limits of modern knowledge,” a paean to natural order.⁷³

The larger point is in how seamlessly this personal project of the “scientist-entrepreneur,” to borrow again from Boym, becomes a stand-in for American culture writ large. The lessons forged in the fantasyland of the rich entrepreneur were meant to carry directly to the outside world. And the dinosaur provided an engaging and useful (pre)historical tool for creating these lessons. The dinosaur is both physically real and not. In the nineteenth century, American museums clamored to add impressive prehistorical skeletons to their collections, bolstering their own historical clout and providing a useful symbol for a country “that forgot its history and recreated prehistory brand new.”⁷⁴ The dinosaur, wrote Boym, is “the mythical animal of Nature’s Nation”—America’s “scientific fairy tale.”⁷⁵ Similarly, Greenfield Village was a place where Americans who, like Ford, had felt the earth shift under their feet could retreat into an imagined past—a place that never

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² *Jurassic Park*, directed by Steven Spielberg (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 1993). The scene is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTWo9oLJOWk> (accessed March 2, 2015) and bears rewatching.

⁷³ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 33-36.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 33.

actually existed and yet they were sure they recognized. *Jurassic Park* had its dinosaurs, Ford had his harrows, but the upshot was the same: a moralizing version of history, a usable past based on convenient reality and compelling fantasy.

Fiction or not, many contemporary commentators seemed taken with Ford's vision of American heritage. In *The [Baltimore] Sun*, John Kenmuir waxed poetic about the Village's import:

Almost without realizing it, Mr. Ford conceived the idea of a sort of super-museum where, in place of dummy figures in glass cases, and models of early shops and machinery, living people would operate real things, live in genuine houses as their ancestors did, and conduct life in general as did their forefathers when there were no large cities, or connecting highways, or modern conveniences, and life was still rugged and a little uncertain.⁷⁶

The *New York Times* gave ample room to an interview and amble around the Village between Henry Ford and reporter S.J. Woolf in 1936. Therein, referencing the McGuffey cabin and schoolhouse which had been moved to the grounds, Ford posited his own early education in the McGuffey Readers as a model for a new generation:

He [McGuffey] introduced a new type of reader into the school of the country. It gave a moral basis to thought and conduct and broadened the character of the American people...This school house is an inspiration for us, for we are trying to produce a generation similar to that which learned its first principles under McGuffey and his type of school. It was, after all, a pretty good generation.⁷⁷

Even the *American Historical Review* ran praise for Ford's village. J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton reported on the project after a tour in 1931, while insisting (like Edsel) on the necessity of more expert guidance:

There are unlimited possibilities in Mr. Ford's plan. The museum so splendidly conceived and so well begun may develop into one of the most valuable of historical agencies. But to do this, it will, beyond doubt, be necessary for its founder to have the services of a professional staff, including experts in several fields, directed by a scholar of wide historical and technical knowledge, who has initiative, vision, human sympathies, and interests, and who possesses as well that *sine qua non* of the historian, a penetrating imagination.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ John Kenmuir, "Henry Ford Brings Antiquity to Life," *The [Baltimore] Sun*, November 1, 1931.

⁷⁷ S.J. Woolf, "Mr. Ford Shows His Museum," *New York Times*, January 12, 1936.

⁷⁸ J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton, "The Ford Museum," *American Historical Review* 36, no. 4 (July 1931): 775.

This sample shows that many visitors were able to construct a meaningful and exciting narrative for themselves from among the hodgepodge of buildings, in various states of authentic preservation, from a range of time periods, ordered according only to the industrialist's whims.

As stated above, Jessica Swigger has argued that Greenfield Village is the site of a “flexible past:” one in which ordinary buildings and objects made extraordinary and “historical” by their associations can be read by diverse viewers as sites for their own heritage.⁷⁹ Thus, in the years following its founding, visitors from Presidents and inventors to Detroit locals, reporters, and even professional historians could fill the narrative vacuum of Greenfield Village with histories of their own choosing, opting to see it as an emblem of a “simpler” past, a vision for the moral regeneration of the future, or a model for the academic profession. But some of these narratives would be more privileged than others, thanks both to the design of the Village and to the social position of individual visitors. In this way, Swigger saw the Village in a similar light as other museums, even those with more apparent academic heft. Not based on any particular time period, location, or discrete theme beyond the historical memory and philosophical leanings of Henry Ford himself, Greenfield Village might seem to be so imprecise as to be ahistorical—or at least, beyond consideration among the more academic and established museums and historical venues in the United States. But Swigger argued that Ford's Greenfield Village joined John D. Rockefeller's Williamsburg and Albert Wells's Sturbridge Village as sites where a new corporate bourgeoisie shored up its status at the head of American culture. In Swigger's words, “the Village's use of architecture to represent the past, its recreation of home and business interiors, and most

⁷⁹ Swigger, “History is Bunk,” 86-88.

importantly, its implied privilege of Anglo-Saxons over other races and ethnicities, place it firmly in the history of representations of the past in the United States.”⁸⁰

Curiously, in marshaling the past in service of a specific vision of America’s future, Ford hit upon some similarities with the contemporary writers of the history books he so disdained. Its interwar timing put *Greenfield Village* squarely among what we now see as the heyday of the Progressive historians. And not completely unlike Ford, they sought a socially useful and relevant vision of American history. As summarized by Michael Kraus and Davis D. Joyce, Charles Crowe’s eight characteristics of Progressive history have certain ideological resonances with Henry Ford’s historical projects:

(1) A vivid sense of social, economic, and intellectual process which placed man firmly in the stream of evolution; (2) a pragmatic determination to deal only with concrete situations; (3) a sort of anti-intellectualism which regarded ideas as secondary and as derived from such truly important historical forces as economics and geography; (4) an epistemological relativism which generally denied “scientific” history, and sometimes even scholarly objectivity; (5) a “presentism” which stressed the continuity of the past, present, and future and which clearly subordinated the past to the present; (6) an emphasis on the moral and social utility of history; (7) a tendency to see politics as a conspiratorial process in which dominant abstractions masked the play of the real historical forces; and (8) an interpretation of American history which stressed economic and/or geographical forces and found a central theme in the conflict of agrarianism with commercialism and capitalism.⁸¹

On some points, Ford could almost count himself among the academic elect—especially those which would allow his presentist leanings and the fluidity with which he saw the moral lessons of his constructed past informing the political realities of his own day. The differences begin on those points which would require any thought of “dominant abstractions,” as Ford was firmly disinterested in abstractions of any kind. This would also complicate the notion of Ford as a relativist, as his moral and historical truths were unyielding to him, and relative only to the outside

⁸⁰ Ibid., 29-31.

⁸¹ Michael Kraus and Davis D. Joyce, *The Writing of American History*, rev. ed. (Norman, OK: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 240.

observer. But the real point of departure between Ford and his contemporary professional historians sits on the political fulcrum that supported American culture during the late 1920s and 1930s: the Depression, the New Deal, and the shadows of one war bleeding into the loomings of another. So where Henry Ford's thinking bore some illustrative similarities to that of historians like Turner, the Beards, Parrington, and others, one cannot escape the vast chasm between them in their social and political aims. It is likely that Ford would have counted himself among those who rejected the argument of Charles Beard's progressive history, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913), as a desecration of the revered founders and their self-evident truths; more certainly, he was among those who neither wished nor bothered to read Beard's tome in the first place.⁸²

From a methodological perspective, Ford offered a substitute to the “bunk” history of the Progressive professoriate. Steven Conn has situated Henry Ford’s Edison Institute and Greenfield Village alongside Henry Mercer’s Mercer Museum as object-based alternatives to the specifically document-focused professional field of history as it developed toward the end of the 19th century. “Their experiments,” argued Conn, “stood as alternatives to the more narrowly focused, and less accessible, academic history that would ultimately triumph.”⁸³ Granting the Village’s sentimentality, its loose interpretation of periodization, and its convolution of purpose, Conn insisted that these were secondary to Ford’s real contribution to a discussion of public history: his own, quite successful (in terms of popularity), “version of an object-based epistemology.” “What is perhaps most significant here is not the particulars of Ford’s historical fictions, but the way he tried to tell the story—not the product but the method.”⁸⁴

⁸² On Beard’s conservative detractors, see *ibid.*, 254–55.

⁸³ Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life*, 151–52.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

But we should not be so quick to dismiss Ford's product. In 1980, an exhibit reviewer wrote, with an air of academic dismissiveness, that "the Edison Institute competes only indirectly with the Smithsonian Institution, Old Sturbridge Village, and Colonial Williamsburg. It competes directly for the recreational dollar with the likes of Lake Michigan beaches, the Detroit Tigers, and the Cedar Point Amusement Park in Ohio."⁸⁵ The implied hierarchy sets Ford's Village below the Smithsonian, Sturbridge, and Williamsburg, but the paradigm on which the hierarchy was based was, as we have seen, anathema to Ford's views on the use value of history. Some mixture of the collecting prowess of the Smithsonian combined with the popular appeal of Cedar Point is likely not far from what Ford was after. He was, after all, adamant that the values of his youth reach as many people as possible. On that count, Greenfield Village was and remains a success. By the 1930s, annual visitor numbers reached into the hundreds of thousands.⁸⁶ Recall, for a moment, the jury for the 1916 *Tribune* trial, who witnessed multiple days of a defense attorney putting Ford's historical ignorance up for display, in a trial that became a question of whether he could be reasonably called an "ignorant idealist," and still found in his favor. Just as Greenfield Village offered a "flexible past," a wide subset of the American population could see ideas of the purpose of history similar to their own displayed in Ford himself, as he nodded continually to the views, ideals, and prejudices of his audience.

More specifically, given its placement in the Detroit area amid a long history of immigration (both intra- and international) the constellation of possible narratives arising out of Greenfield Village is again conspicuous in its whiteness and Anglo-Saxon associations. In this way, Greenfield Village displays not only Henry Ford's vision of America, but also (and more implicitly) his ideas

⁸⁵ Larry Lankton, "Something Old, Something New: The Reexhibition of the Henry Ford Museum's Hall of Technology," *Technology and Culture* 21, no. 4 (October 1980): 595.

⁸⁶ Swigger, "History is Bunk," 77.

about Americanization. The Village's proscriptive ethos contains echoes of the Americanization School at Highland Park, in which recent immigrants who had become Ford employees celebrated their graduation by marching into a literal wood, canvas, and paper-maché “Melting Pot” and emerging as dressed as “Americans” sporting their Ford Motor Company badge. The Wayside Inn Boys School existed along similar lines, as many of its students were either immigrants or the children of immigrants.⁸⁷

The larger question is who, beside Henry Ford, Greenfield Village was *for*. Certainly, little mind was paid to the racial diversity of the surrounding area, even as it was apparent in Ford's own workforce. In the 1910s and 1920s, the Ford Motor Company rolled out a virtual welcome mat to African American workers migrating to Detroit from the South, opening high-paying skilled positions to black workers that had remained “white” jobs at General Motors and Chrysler.⁸⁸ In 1919, Ford's 1,700 African American workers—the most in the industry—enjoyed wages equal to their white counterparts. By 1922, the number topped 5,300, including a number of black managers and foremen.⁸⁹ But by the 1930s, the tit-for-tat loyalty Henry Ford expected from his African American workers began to erode. A cultural shift occurred within the community; Beth Tompkins Bates has illustrated how, “between the wars, sentiment in black Detroit changed from pro-industrial [and pro-Ford] to pro-union.” Detroit's black community turned out in support of progressive leaders like mayor Frank Murphy, and later organized in support of the UAW, in hopes of securing equal treatment not just on the shop floor but also in the notoriously racist and restrictive housing market and political climate of Detroit proper. “Ultimately,” wrote Bates, “the struggle for inclusion in the march toward the promise of America forged the labor-oriented civil

⁸⁷ Ibid., 47-49; on the melting pot ceremony, see also Baldwin, *Wheels for the World*, 94.

⁸⁸ Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit*, 2-3.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 39-42.

rights agenda embraced by black Detroiters on the eve of World War II.”⁹⁰ Once again, Henry Ford found history marching past him.

Greenfield Village, like so many neighborhoods surrounding it, largely excluded any trace of African Americans. The exception was a small group of small, solidly built brick slave quarters. The 1937 *Guide Book for the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village* listed the stone “slave huts” rather blithely in relation to the Logan County [Illinois] Courthouse, where Abraham Lincoln practiced law for a time: “In the shadow of the *Courthouse* are two SLAVE HUTS from the Hermitage Plantation near Savannah, Georgia. They are typical in size and furnishings of the slave homes of the old South, and are made of brick-bats from a brickyard on the plantation.”⁹¹ No other representation of African Americans history appeared in the village until 1942, when a recreation of George Washington Carver’s birthplace was dedicated on the site.⁹²

Meanwhile, the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village’s surroundings were kept stubbornly white by political force in the years following its opening. In 1942, the year before the famous race riots that began several miles north in Belle Isle, Dearborn elected Orville Hubbard mayor and kept him at that post until 1977. Demagogic, combative, and openly racist, Hubbard loudly resisted proposed housing projects in his city, battling alternately against federal agencies, private investors, and the Ford Motor Company to maintain the racial makeup of the Detroit suburb. Hubbard’s aims were neither implicit nor couched. During the vote on a rezoning request to accommodate the Ford-supported Springwells Park housing project in 1948, Hubbard sent city staff and department heads

⁹⁰ Ibid., 3-12.

⁹¹ The Edison Institute, *Guide Book for the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village* (Dearborn, 1937), 33-34, Series IV, Box 21, Folder 1, The Wayside Inn Archives, Sudbury, Mass.

⁹² “Ordinary cabin, extraordinary man,” *The Henry Ford Blog*, blog.thehenryford.org/2011/01/ordinary-cabin-extraordinary-man/ (accessed January 7, 2014). Swigger sees the Carver cabin as a similar marginalizing of African American history, pointing out that “even George Washington Carver’s memorial is a recreation of his slave cabin.” But Ford’s having it paneled with wood donated by the governors of each of the 48 states seems an attempt (if literally a surface gesture) to soften this a bit. Swigger, “History is Bunk,” 19.

to polling places bearing cards reading “KEEP NEGROES OUT OF DEARBORN / Vote *NO* on (Advisory Vote) / PROTECT YOUR HOME and MINE!”⁹³ Though Greenfield Village might have reflected Ford’s personal history, it largely ignored trenchant historical and contemporary issues—especially racial issues—in its surrounding community.

The crucial take-away is that Ford’s visitors so often appreciative and even comforted by this whitewashed version of American history—especially if they, too, were in a position to find their cultural power waning in the height of the Depression. Lillian Hale Fay was the wife of Charles Norman Fay, the Chicago financier who helped found the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Theodore Thomas at the end of the 19th century. In 1938, she and her husband were spending their old age in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and were great admirers of three of Henry Ford’s projects: the Wayside Inn, the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village, and the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*. Fay wrote to Ford that she was most impressed by the notion of “living history,” and Ford’s stubbornly triumphant vision of the self-made man: that “anything that one wishes to do, one may do, and put it on a paying, self-maintaining basis.” She concluded, “Thank you, Mr. Ford, more than I can say for the bigness, and the beauty, and the knowledge of my countrymen and my land that you have brought into my life and my experience.”⁹⁴

Here lies the danger in Ford’s potent and popular antimodern ideals. Wielding millions of dollars, the political and industrial clout of the Ford Motor Company, and unusual personal popularity (even for a person of his wealth and influence), Ford’s efforts to promote a limited notion of the American past bore real cultural weight. Part of the problem is endemic to the thesis of antimodernism itself. Were any of these people less wealthy or influential, they would have been

⁹³ David L. Good, *Orvie: The Dictator of Dearborn: The Rise and Fall of Orville L. Hubbard* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 160, quoted in Swigger, “History is Bunk,” 110-18.

⁹⁴ Fay to Ford, Apr. 10, 1938, Fair Lane Papers, Box 128, Folder 2.

and would continue to be dismissed for their eccentricities. But Ford's untiring work to bring antimodern values out of the parlors of New England and into the American popular consciousness means that these are viewpoints with which we must continue to contend. Just as the ideals of Lears's antimoderns "inspired trust and allegiance from much of the rest of American society," so too did Ford's views find wide appeal.⁹⁵ At Wayside Inn and at Greenfield Village, Ford set these ideals in stone. And in the 1930s, he would have them take to the air.

⁹⁵ And continue to do so—Salon.com ran a laudatory writeup on the \$5 day looking forward to the 2013-14 holiday sales season. Robert Reich, "What Wal-Mart can learn from Henry Ford," *Salon.com*, November 19, 2013, http://www.salon.com/2013/11/19/what_wal_mart_can_learn_from_henry_ford_partner/ (accessed January 7, 2014).

III.

Mr. Ford's Symphony: The *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* and Antimodern Cultural Messaging, 1934-1942

It is likely that on August 5, 1934, Henry Ford had a rather uncomfortable evening. Though he made no secret of his contempt for Detroit high society, avoiding the luxurious northern suburbs in favor of a compound in comparatively plebian Dearborn, Ford nonetheless found himself in black tie and a tight wing collared shirt, schmoozing with top-hatted counts and befurred socialites as photographers snapped away. The scene was Detroit's Orchestra Hall, and the occasion was the inaugural broadcast of the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*, Ford's newly minted program for CBS. In a large spread in the following week's society pages, the *Detroit Free Press* fawned, "it was the opening of the social season also, and if the numbers of prominent people who journeyed to Orchestra Hall for the concert and the brilliance of their costumes are a touchstone of the coming winter, we predict the best one in at least five years." "The audience for each of the coming Sunday broadcasts will be invited by Mr. Ford." Ford, for his part, looked less than exuberant (Fig. 3).¹



Figure 3. Henry Ford and Mrs. Ralph H. Booth at *FSEH* Premiere
Source: *Detroit Free Press*, August 8, 1934, 8.

¹ "Opening of Ford Broadcast Concerts Bring Together First Formal," *Detroit Free Press*, August 8, 1934, 8.

In 1934, broadcast radio was only about a decade old, and the automobile industry, extant since the turn of the century, had only really started to take off since the debut of Ford's Model T in 1908. The tripartite love affair between American music, broadcasting, and the automobile was still a matter of speculation rather than a foregone conclusion. The Ford Motor Company would devote more capital than any other automobile company to radio advertising between 1934 and 1942, most notably with its long-running program, the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* (FSEH).² Comprised of brief musical selections by members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and weekly guest soloists, the FSEH was unique among radio programs of the period. The reason was the intermission separating the two halves of the program, in which William J. Cameron, a longtime Ford spokesman and ghostwriter, delivered a short "talk" on economics, politics, morality, or even topics such as "Christmas." Eschewing sales plugs and any overt discussion of Ford products, the FSEH was instead a long-form expression of Ford culture and values. Regarded as a whole, the nine-season run of the FSEH displays an idiosyncratic vision of music, business, and American society. Outlining this vision, and the factors underlying its development, reveals how, in one sense, "American car culture" was not simply an organic development. Rather, the Ford Motor Company spent a great deal of time and resources to situate itself as an effective force in the shaping of American culture in the 20th century. The *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* was one important facet of this grand project.

This chapter begins by outlining the relationship between radio and the automobile industry before situating the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* among "cultural uplift" radio programming of the 1930s. It continues with an analysis of the development and content of a particular FSEH broadcast, February 15, 1942, to illustrate how the show functioned, in practice, as an expression of Ford's and Cameron's views. Next, the musical programming of the FSEH, what Cameron called "good music," is linked with the worldview—specifically, the anti-Semitism—that informed the Ford

² Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 329.

Motor Company's cultural output during preceding decades, including *The Dearborn Independent*. The show's particular engagement with issues of class and economics is situated against the social world of Henry Ford and the aspirations of both the elder Ford and his son, Edsel. The chapter concludes with an outline of the reception of the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*, both popular and critical, to explore where the proverbial rubber meets the road, and how this affects the historical import of the *FSEH* on the whole.

As with all of Ford's cultural projects, there is a tension in the ideological stance of the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* between a message of cultural change and uplift on one hand, and a reliance on "old fashioned," even pre-industrial virtue on the other. In Chapter 1, I characterized this apparent contradiction as a means of navigating deep-seated ambivalence toward modern life, and thus follow Jackson Lears in pointing toward the figure of the "antimodern modernist."³ Henry Adams, as Lears's primary example, transformed antimodern ambivalence into a profound and resonating, "coherent and enduring critique of modern culture."⁴ Adams's famous dual pursuit of Virgin and Dynamo displayed a yearning for spiritual fulfillment, personal meaning, and the cultural good within a frenetic and mechanized *fin de siècle* and early-twentieth century society.⁵

Henry Ford, of course, came to his antimodernism from an almost completely oppositional standpoint. Ford always saw himself as a man apart from the bourgeois elite embodied by Adams and examined by Lears. And Ford was similarly disinterested in the finer intellectual pursuits and introspection that characterize Lears's *dramatis personae*. Neurasthenia would have seemed to him like so much upper class whining. And yet Ford believed strongly in the restorative powers of nature, in the necessity of wholesome spiritual pursuit, in the capital-M Meaning lent to one's life by

³ Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 297.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 279-86.

productive manual labor. The *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*, in this sense, must be understood as an antimodern foray into that most modern of venues, American mass culture. And navigating the ideological tensions that arise therein, on matters economic, social, musical, and political, was both the primary intellectual problem for the *FSEH* and is the primary necessity for any subsequent historical understanding of the project. What follows is the means by which Henry Ford, through the pen of William Cameron, with the input of his son Edsel, and under the aegis of the Ford Motor Company, delivered an antimodern vision direct to the homes of 10 million listeners per week.⁶

On the eve of the stock market crash in 1929, newly viable car radios had caught the eye of a few (mostly upmarket) automobile manufacturers. Stutz made Transitone radios available for installation in their cars, and Cadillac and LaSalle both began installing antennae in the roofs of their models to facilitate aftermarket radio installations. To coincide with the 1929 New York Auto Show, the Automobile Radio Corporation partnered with Dodge to offer free installation to anyone purchasing a Dodge Senior Six at one of their fourteen franchised installers.⁷ But the American sociopolitical landscape would change drastically after October 29th, setting the automobile industry reeling, creating new audiences for radio broadcasting, and changing the relationship of both to the public. Over the next few decades, radio and the automobile would become more and more intertwined. Car culture would come to influence both the content and form of radio broadcasting (especially in its effect on popular music). What historian Cotten Seiler termed “the promise of automobility”—the possibilities opened by the ability to move oneself at will across the American

⁶ 10 million listeners: Fones-Wolf, “Creating a Favorable Business Climate,” 228.

⁷ Donald W. Matteson, *The Auto Radio: A Romantic Genealogy* (Jackson, MS: Thornridge Publishing, 1987), 66-68.

landscape—would increasingly include the ability to consume a wide range of cultural material at will while moving from place to place.⁸

“There is no greater puzzle in American economic history,” wrote Michael Bernstein, “than the persistent failure of investment activity during the depression of the 1930s to generate a full recovery.” And yet, following the crash of 1929, industrial production never fully recovered until after the Second World War, nor did unemployment fall below 18 percent.⁹ It is important to understand that the Depression, at least initially, was not universal in its effects. By 1932, economic deflation had actually bolstered the purchasing power of those who had retained high-paying jobs, and demand for luxury items, entertainment, and tourism briefly rose. This helps to explain, in part, the tack taken by American automobile manufacturers, who were contending with both a shrinking consumer market (in terms of purchasing power *and* population growth) and decreased demand for their product. In addition to cutting prices to drive demand, many auto manufacturers “turned to style changes and technical innovation to increase sales volume;” in other words, manufacturers attempted to increase the perceived value of their products rather than creating an entirely new product. There was no “simple, cheap ‘depression car.’”¹⁰ One such value-boosting technical innovation was a cheaper, more viable generation of automobile radios.

Manufacturer efforts to sell the car radio were bolstered by broadcaster efforts to cash in on a new and quickly-growing market. In 1936, NBC made a new pitch to its advertisers: “3,000,000 automobile sets can be tuned to your program!” But beyond the sheer number of new radio sets, NBC surveys concluded, “automobile sets have established new listening habits and practices. No

⁸ Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008).

⁹ Michael A. Bernstein, “Why the Great Depression was Great: Toward a New Understanding of the Interwar Economic Crisis in the United States,” in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 36-40.

longer is listening confined to the fireside.” The accompanying data on automobile radio use on weekdays and weekends pointed to a huge block of leisure-time listening on Sunday afternoons and evenings in the summer—“Sunday drivers” were making themselves known, listening for an average of 120 minutes a day on Sundays in summer.¹¹

So according to the usage profile presented by the networks, listening to the car radio was largely a leisure time activity. Immediately we can make a few assumptions about 1930s auto radio listeners. First, these were Americans who had access to large blocs of leisure time, including evenings and multiple hours on weekends. Second, we know that this was a relatively high-spending subset of individuals. Affordable though a \$50 car radio might have been to the average Packard buyer—down from an average cost of \$96 in 1930—it was still a luxury item in the mid ‘30s.¹² In 1934-36, the nationwide average annual expenditure for housing (rent and utilities) totaled \$485, or about \$41 a month.¹³ CBS also reported a much higher-than-average share of car radio owners owning cars costing above \$1,000—35.3%, versus 12% of total car sales in that price bracket for 1935.¹⁴ Note that average household income was \$1,524 in 1935, and had remained essentially flat since WWI.¹⁵ “This much seems certain,” concluded CBS’s 1936 auto radio market research report: “that today ownership of automobile radios...is concentrated among people of greater than average

¹¹ NBC, “Radio Takes to the Road” (New York: NBC, 1936), in *The Rise of American Radio* vol. 5, ed. Christopher H. Sterling (New York: Routledge, 2007), 81-86. CBS came to a similar conclusion in its own market research: “On Sundays just about twice as many listen for 5 and 6 hours as on week-days, a fact which might have been predicted by sociologists, hot-dog stand operators, or others who’ve noted the great American Sunday habit of piling baby carriage and picnic equipment into the tonneau, tethering the dog on the running board, and taking the family for a ride.” CBS Research Department, “An Analysis of Radio-Listening in Autos” (New York: CBS, 1936), in *The Rise of American Radio* vol. 5, ed. Christopher H. Sterling (New York: Routledge, 2007), 87-112.

¹² CBS, “Radio-Listening in Autos,” 104. \$50 in 1936 corresponds to approximately \$840 in 2013 dollars. Williamson, “Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1774 to present,” <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/> (accessed May 5, 2015).

¹³ United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (USBLS), *100 Years of U.S. Consumer Spending: Data for the Nation, New York City, and Boston*, Report 991, May 2006, <http://www.bls.gov/opub/uscsc/report991.pdf> (accessed September 4, 2013), 16.

¹⁴ CBS, “Radio-Listening in Autos,” 105.

¹⁵ USBLS, *100 Years of U.S. Consumer Spending*, 15.

income, purchasing power and inclination to spend.”¹⁶ In other words, car radio owners were model consumers. And radio, both as an advertising venue and as equipment, represented a huge opportunity for American automobile manufacturers.

The relationship between radio, corporations, and consumption was highly contested in the 1920s and ‘30s. As Susan Smulyan has demonstrated, the development of corporate broadcasting structures was never a foregone conclusion, and listeners then were even more resistant than listeners today to advertising and the idea of radio as a sales tool. Smulyan clarifies, “when the first radio station began in 1920, no one knew how to make money from broadcasting.” New business-owned stations shared the airwaves with countless hobbyists and private broadcasters transmitting across the entire radio dial, who, along with many listeners, bristled at the idea of stylistically limited, sales-minded network radio. Federal regulation of the airwaves came in fits and starts, culminating in a victory for corporate broadcast networks under the 1934 Communications Act (under which radio still operates). “The negative results of the acceptance of networks and broadcast advertising were evident as early as the 1930s,” wrote Smulyan; “advertisers’ impressions of what listeners liked actually controlled programming.”¹⁷

When the Ford Motor Company considered expanding its radio sponsorship in the summer of 1936, it relied on the impressions of N.W. Ayer & Son, a major advertising agency out of New York.¹⁸ Though the agency first recommended a daytime serial “women’s program,” with the reasoning that “daytime listeners expect to hear more hard-hitting commercial announcements, apparently are very responsive to them, and the networks allow more time for selling talk [during the

¹⁶ CBS, “Radio-Listening in Autos,” 105.

¹⁷ Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1994), 1-9.

¹⁸ For discussion of N.W. Ayer & Son’s impact in the realm of print advertising, see T.J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

day].”¹⁹ A subsequent letter suggested that Ford look instead at a “human interest” program, in more direct competition with shows like *Major Bowes’ Amateur Hour* (discussed below):

The Ford Motor Company is particularly suited for the sponsorship of a ‘human interest’ program because the Company is looked upon by the public as a human organization, rather than a cold, corporate business. Furthermore, the nature of Ford markets—the characteristics of buyers of Ford cars—would give such a program a particularly pungent appeal.

The pitch continued with a few possibilities: a “vox populi program, called ‘America Speaks’ or ‘Voice of the People’ or a similar name,” a “newspaper of the air,” “a national spelling bee,” or a variety show with Paul Whiteman’s or Raymond Page’s orchestras and “Lionel Barrymore or Wallace Beery as master of ceremonies.”²⁰

Ayer and Ford had already been collaborating on a weekly program broadcast on CBS since October, 1934. The *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* brought a program of classical music performed by the Ford Symphony Orchestra (made up of members of the Detroit Symphony) to a weekly audience of some ten million.²¹ The company message came in the form of the voice of William J. Cameron, the unofficial spokesman of Henry Ford. At the midpoint of each *FSEH* program, Cameron would deliver a short speech outlining a viewpoint on some question of American mores. The first few seasons give a good indication of the range of Cameron’s speeches: Common topics included Ford’s insights in business matters (e.g. “A Shorter Work Day;” “Wages versus Paternalism;” “Machines and Jobs”), characterizations of American culture (“The American Woman;” “The American Trend;” “The Constitution;” “New England Character”), thoughts on major Christian and national holidays (“The Light of Easter;” “Thanksgiving;” “Mother’s Day;” “The Voice of Christmas”),

¹⁹ McClinton to Barbier, July 31, 1936, Acc. 44, William J. Cameron Records Subgroup, Box 9, Folder “Ford Sunday Evening Hour: Correspondence: Suggestions and Criticism,” Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford.

²⁰ McClinton to Barbier, September 24, 1936, Acc. 44, William J. Cameron Records Subgroup, Box 9, Folder “Ford Sunday Evening Hour: Correspondence: Suggestions and Criticism,” Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford.

²¹ Fones-Wolf, “Creating a Favorable Business Climate,” 228.

profiles of “great men” (“Thomas A. Edison;” “Lincoln and Lee;” “George Washington;” and, of course, “Henry Ford”), and commentary on the American political and economic climate (“The Control of Profits;” “Share the Wealth;” “The Cost of a Job;” “Who Owns the United States?” “Liberals and Conservatives”).²²

In their tone, Cameron’s speeches on the *Sunday Evening Hour* were similar to offerings from other major corporations on their own radio programs. As Elizabeth Fones-Wolf has illustrated, companies like General Motors, DuPont, and Ford took advantage of the airtime available from advertising-hungry radio networks and the supposedly trustworthy nature of the medium (versus print media) to promote their businesses to the American radio public during the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s. Couching their messages in a patriotic and educational tone, corporations sidestepped discussion of their products in favor of “a mixture of ‘institutional advertising,’ aimed at creating a positive corporate image, and ‘advocacy advertising,’ aimed at shaping public policy.”²³ The National Carbon Company, also working with N.W. Ayer & Son, created an archetype of corporate-sponsored regularly-schedule music and variety shows with the *Eveready Radio Hour* in 1924. Michele Hilmes has argued that focusing on topics such as “Armistice Day” and “The Golden Wedding Program,” featuring “old time” songs from Stephen Foster and others, the weekly radio shows (with the *Eveready Radio Hour* as a model) “represent not only a unifying strategy for an hour of entertainment, but build on and recruit a sense of national unity.”²⁴ In the Depression-era American political climate, both of these concerns existed in relation to the expanded regulatory structure and populist messaging of the New Deal. But as we will see, the message of the *FSEH* expanded beyond questions of political and corporate policy to offer a broad-based cultural critique utilizing both

²² See Cameron, *The Ford Sunday Evening Hour Talks*, First and Second Series, “Table of Contents.”

²³ Fones-Wolf, “Creating a Favorable Business Climate,” 226.

²⁴ Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 63-65.

Cameron's speeches and musical programming to draw a line between business-minded conservatism and mass-market populism.

In his introduction to the inaugural *FSEH* broadcast on October 7, 1934, Edsel Ford outlined a rationale for the series' classical music programming. Ford welcomed Victor Kolar, assistant director of the Detroit Symphony, as director of the Ford Symphony Orchestra and soprano Maria Jeritza as the first week's soloist. Continuing, Ford explained, "it should be understood that while a high musical standard will characterize these programs, they will be kept within the widest range of general interest. Too often a 'symphony orchestra' suggests a type of composition which is unfamiliar to the great world of music lovers, and I am glad to say that this will not be one of these programs."²⁵ In this seemingly innocuous statement, Ford outlined the program's and his company's cultural tactic: choosing a symphony orchestra as opposed to a dance band or rotating folk program immediately gave the *FSEH* a tone of education or "cultural uplift," a common goal of broadcasters in the period attempting to bolster their claims to airspace and friendly federal regulation—hence the "high musical standard." But Edsel Ford, and Henry by proxy, gave the program's highbrow aspirations a lowbrow hook by aligning themselves with the vast majority of Americans who were not frequent attendees of the concert hall, with a nod to the "great world of music lovers" and a knowing jab at "*those* programs." This was wholesome, enlightening family entertainment, with all the baggage that those adjectives carry, presented not by a highbrow outsider, but by a benevolent and understanding friend of the working man.

The broadcast networks saw it in their best interest to offer programming that offered some cultural education in order to meet the vague requirement that their licensing represented some "public convenience, interest, or necessity" as laid out by the Communications Act of 1934, which

²⁵ Cameron, *The Ford Sunday Evening Hour Talks*, First and Second Series, 13-14.

created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).²⁶ The *FSEH* was of a moment in this regard. For example, NBC created a Public Service Department, and in 1936, organized the NBC Symphony Orchestra under Arturo Toscanini. CBS created the American School of the Air in the early '30s, and subsidized New York Philharmonic broadcasts. According to historian Michele Hilmes, these “uplift” programs lagged in popularity versus the new vaudeville/variety shows, such as *The Chase and Sanborn Hour* and *The Jack Benny Program*, which combined comedy/variety bits and orchestral numbers.²⁷ Nonetheless, Ford soldiered on with a program that completely eschewed the lowbrow in favor of Cameron’s “good music:” orchestral pieces, selections from opera, and the occasional hymn or choral work.

As an example, a press release retained in the Ford Motor Company’s advertising records in Dearborn gives the full program for the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* broadcast of February 15, 1942, conducted by Eugene Ormandy and featuring violinist Efrem Zimbalist. The first half of the program presented music listeners might have heard from names they surely would have recognized, with the Finale from Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto in D Major as a vehicle for Zimbalist’s virtuosity and the rich orchestral textures and clear melodies of Berlioz and Rachmaninov to make the best of dynamically limited single-speaker 1930s radio sets. The second half, following Cameron’s talk, included the third movement of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony, Strauss’s “Ave

²⁶ The section in question: “If upon examination of any application for a station license or for the renewal or modification of a station license the Commission shall determine that public convenience, interest, or necessity would be served by the granting thereof, it shall authorize the issuance, renewal, or modification thereof in accordance with said finding. In the event the Commission upon examination of any such application does not reach such decision with respect thereto, it shall notify the applicant thereof, shall fix and give notice of a time and place for hearing thereon, and shall afford such applicant an opportunity to be heard under such rules and regulations as it may prescribe.” *Communications Act of 1934*, 47 U.S. Code (1934), § 309(a).

²⁷ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 189-92.

Maria,” a choral arrangement of “Waters Ripple and Flow,” and culminated in a Protestant hymn: “My God, I thank thee who hath made.”²⁸

The *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* attracted large in-person audiences in Detroit for its weekly broadcasts from the city’s largest auditorium, the Masonic Theater. A total of 1.3 million people attended *FSEH* concerts between 1934 and 1942, and 300,000 additional Michiganders had requested tickets and could not be accommodated.²⁹ The program was performed, according to one trade journal, on “a scientifically constructed stage,” “conceived with a mechanical motif and giv[ing] the impression of the ultra modern” (Fig. 4).³⁰ Indeed, the gently scalloped walls, glossy conductor’s stand, and pseudo-abstract instrumental adornments gave the *FSEH* stage a fashionable, technological flavor, echoing the emphasis Cameron’s talks placed on business innovation and unfettered development. But if these audiences had wanted high-tech, forward-thinking entertainment, the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* was hardly an ideal choice. In keeping with Edsel Ford’s inaugural broadcast promise that the program would satisfy “the widest range of general interest,” the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* had remained stubbornly conservative in both its programming and overall message—this “ultra modern” stage was a venue for Beethoven and choral settings of folk songs.

²⁸ Ford Motor Company, “Zimbalist Featured on Ford Sunday Evening Hour,” Press Release, c. February 15, 1942, Acc. 451, Box 6, Folder “Summary of Publicity,” Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford. No composer information was listed for “Waters Ripple and Flow,” but it possibly corresponds to Deems Taylor’s English-language arrangement of a “Czecho-Slovak folksong:” Deems Taylor, *Waters Ripple and Flow* (*Teče Voda, Teče*) (New York: J. Fischer & Bro., 1926).

²⁹ Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 316; 534nn20.

³⁰ *Broadcasting, Broadcast Advertising*, May 1, 1937, 86.

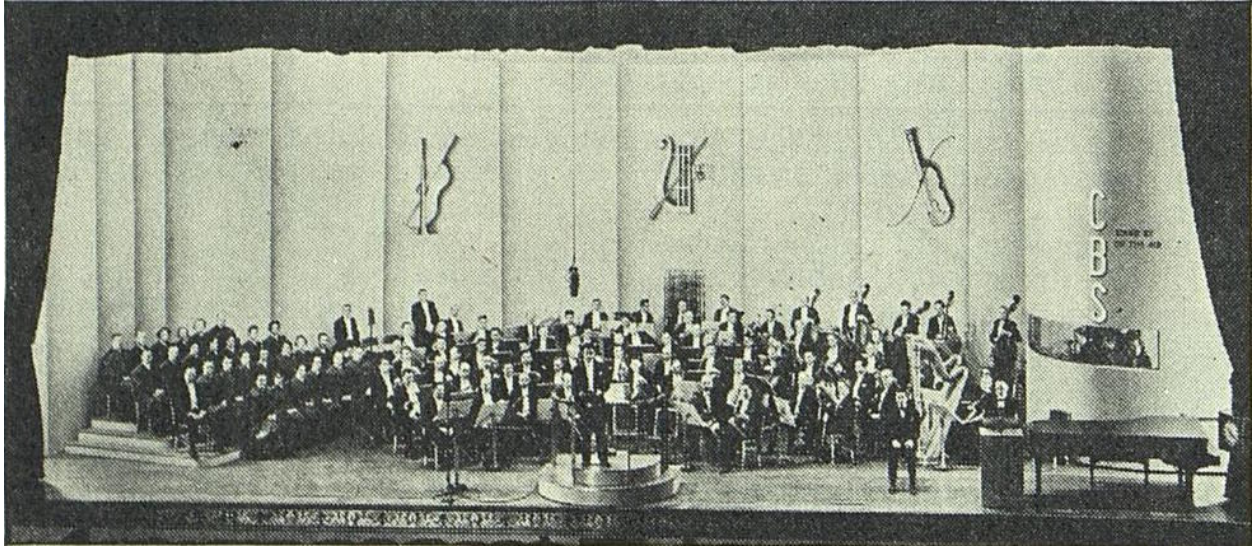


Figure 4. The *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* stage at Detroit's Masonic Theater, circa 1937.

Source: *Broadcasting, Broadcast Advertising* 12, no. 9 (May 1, 1937), 86.

The choice to end in a hymn and to include the audience in its performance is indicative of the marriage of business-mindedness and “traditional” (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) values that characterized the *FSEH*. In fact, the dual exaltation of Protestant mores and technological innovation had been a touchstone of Ford’s social policy since its inception. This Christian emphasis was not incidental. A 1945 image of a *FSEH* broadcast shows the chorus framed by a backdrop in the form of a Gothic stained glass window, featuring a crucifix and the message, “On Earth Peace Goodwill toward Men” (Fig. 5). The whole experience, especially for the broadcast’s in-person audience, is rich in signifiers. Some 5,000 people would have gathered that evening in February, 1942 in Detroit’s Masonic Auditorium to watch a program of European art music and to themselves join in a hymn under the auspices of CBS and the Ford Motor Company. In many ways, this 1942 program: an audience of thousands of Detroiters singing a hymn in a “scientifically” optimized environment while millions of Americans listened on, represents the culmination of the cultural programming Henry Ford had put in place for his own workers three decades earlier.



From the collections of The Henry Ford (P.833.82327/THF122930)

Figure 5. A *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* broadcast, circa December, 1945.

Source: P.833.82327/THF122930. From the collections of The Henry Ford. Reproduced in Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 323 (erroneously listed as a 1934 photo).

Until 1921, the Ford Motor Company had maintained a Sociology Department: an office dedicated to the “Americanization” of the company’s largely immigrant workforce (see also Ch. 1). Henry Ford had brought on an Episcopal priest, the Very Reverend Samuel S. Marquis, to run the department in 1916, and Marquis built it into a wide-ranging service and education department. Under Marquis’ leadership, Ford’s Sociology Department taught and promoted “American” values like thrift, saving for retirement, home ownership, and temperance. A language school taught English lessons to new immigrants. Paychecks could be withheld from irresponsible employees and

forwarded directly to other members of their families. And employees were encouraged to buy cars—explicitly, without regard to manufacturer, but implicitly (in the open air of the employee parking lots) a Ford. The Sociology Department closed, according to Ford biographer Douglas Brinkley, as part of a changing trend in Ford Motor Company away from its youthful idealism and toward increased growth and efficiency.³¹ But the values Ford espoused to its workers—economic independence, sober consumerism, mobility—became the same values that paired with Ford’s and Cameron’s racism-infused nationalism to underlay the antimodern message of the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*.

William Cameron’s talk for February 15, 1942, themed around racial and religious difference, was driven by a more practical impetus along with Ford’s cultural mores. Cameron claimed that the talk was simply the second yearly meditation on the National Conference of Christians and Jews’ call for a “Brotherhood Week.”³² But there was a longstanding financial concern underlying his remarks stemming from Henry Ford’s and William Cameron’s famous anti-Semitism, as demonstrated by one trail of correspondence in the archives: In March of 1939, the owner of a Los Angeles Ford dealership had written to a company Branch Manager in Long Beach to follow up on a conversation they’d had regarding strategies to “increase...business with the Jewish people.”³³ Upon purchasing a new station wagon, a local contractor and president of B’Nai B’Rith had expressed to this Ford dealer that “it is the general feeling among the Jewish people that Mr. Cameron is picking on their race, also that the Ford Motor Company has removed all Jewish people holding jobs of importance from their employ.” The contractor seems to have gotten everyone’s attention by suggesting that by

³¹ Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 275-79.

³² W. J. Cameron, *The Ford Sunday Evening Hour Talks*, Eighth Series (1941-1942) (Dearborn, MI: 1942), 68, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

³³ Frank French to Ira Groves, March 7, 1939, Acc. 44, William J. Cameron Records Subgroup, Box 9, Folder “Ford Sunday Evening Hour: Correspondence: Suggestions and Criticism,” Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford.

“clarifying the Company’s attitude, that Ford products could enjoy at least a 10% increase in sales to the Jewish people alone.”³⁴ The branch manager passed this up the chain to the Sales Department in Dearborn, whereupon the letter made its way to Cameron’s office, an employee assured the branch manager it would be addressed, and a handwritten note (in what seems to be Cameron’s hand) stapled to the top reads “Talk suggestion important.”³⁵

Over the next several seasons, Cameron would indeed soften his tone on religious difference, especially as anti-Semitism gained a wartime link with Nazism (another dangerous and enduring association for Henry Ford). For this 1942 talk, Cameron moved toward a denunciation of the racial enmity that had informed his writing for nearly three decades:

As to racial enmity such as a few would excite against the Jew because he is a Jew, there can be no two opinions. When we saw racial enmity rising in Europe we knew immediately the regime that instigated it was doomed...Anti-Semitism is the negation of humanity, intelligence, and Christianity...*Any* antagonism toward *any* people *as people* because of color, race or religion is a vestige of tribal barbarism.³⁶

To be sure, Cameron’s reversal appears more rhetorical than indicative of a sea change in his personal views; he began the talk by emphasizing his beliefs that “*racial distinction is a fact*” and that “American-minded people do not need to be purged of racial or religious bigotry; the moral climate of America, given time, bleaches out such hatreds.”³⁷ But the question of whether or not Cameron remained, at root, a racist is of secondary importance to the earnestness with which he backpedals his previous work to offer an edifying wartime message for “Brotherhood Week.” In this talk, as in others, he appeared to combine a concern for Ford profits—he was aware of the adverse effect of the Ford’s anti-Semitism and the anti-Semitic content of Ford’s *Dearborn Independent* periodical on the

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ira Groves to J.R. Davis, Internal Memo, March 9, 1939; Laub to Groves, March 23, 1939, Acc. 44, William J. Cameron Records Subgroup, Box 9, Folder “Ford Sunday Evening Hour: Correspondence: Suggestions and Criticism,” Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford.

³⁶ Cameron, *The Ford Sunday Evening Hour Talks*, Eighth Series, 70, emphasis original.

³⁷ Ibid., 68, emphasis original; Cameron also apparently missed the irony in “bleaches.”

bottom line—with an impulse to use the influence of the Ford Motor Company and the reach of radio to directly influence the American public.

The evil character in Cameron’s “Brotherhood Week” oration was not racial discord or disunion but the wartime enemies of the United States, and anyone who would discount the moral imperative to fight a war to spread American values abroad. “Then why Brotherhood Week,” asked Cameron, “especially in America, the Land of the Open Door for 300 years, hospitable to people of every nation, tongue, and creed, and today the Land of the Refugee.” “Why not Brotherhood Week in countries where racial intolerance has exploded in unspeakable cruelty?” It is a credit to American permissiveness, Cameron wrote, that “militant pacifists” can “preach pacifism” without fear of jailing.³⁸ Of course, plausibly supporting the premise of American moral righteousness required some righteousness on the part of the speaker, and in this case achieving that purity required no small amount of self-exoneration and denial. For Henry Ford and William Cameron, this meant offering a conspicuous denial of anti-Semitism (with the final twisted claim that the real victim was the anti-Semite all along). But in terms of American culture, the more powerful and trenchant idea expressed in Cameron’s talk was the notion that one could simply sweep aside inequality as a “good” and flatly deny prejudice—his listeners could simply “refuse to listen” to “*manufactured* intolerance.” Cameron was unwittingly prescient when he opined, “let the very *names* of bigotry and intolerance be buried under a white Silence.” A stubborn white silence on bigotry and intolerance, of course, was and remains one of the great challenges in American culture (see also, “bleaches out such hatreds”).

Understanding the basis the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*’s problematic stance on the issues in American society requires some background on the working relationship of Henry Ford and William Cameron, and how the latter ended up on CBS between the music of Rachmaninov and Beethoven. The entry point, here, is not Cameron’s speech, but the orchestral selections.

³⁸ Ibid., 68-69.

On the occasion of the 200th broadcast of the *FSEH* on October 22, 1939, W.J. Cameron presented an in-depth discussion of the program's musical programming:

Doubt was expressed, of course, that good music is too 'high-brow' to be popular. But no other sort of music survives long enough to be lived with. To speak of popularity, however, is not to speak primarily of the music, it is to speak of people. The best we know in music has not been perpetuated from generation to generation by a conspiracy of musicians, but by the plaudits and demands of plain people. Independent agencies that check the radio-using population report that 65 percent of the Ford Sunday Evening Hour audience is made up of American people of the rank and file. It is they who approve good music. We could take no pride whatever in a program that appealed only to one age group, or one economic group or one culture group; but we are proud of the fact that such very great numbers of young and old in every group, employes [*sic*] and employers, mechanics and professional persons; farmers, educators, bankers, housewives; those who knew music, those who only 'like music' and those who are not sure *where* they stand toward music—all sorts and conditions of people, plain people predominating—are the constituent elements of our great Sunday evening host of listeners. We who meet in this Hour week after week are a cross-section of America.³⁹

We should pause first at Cameron's designation of "good music." In the case of the *FSEH* programs, this referred to Western art music, conducted exclusively by white males, performed with a symphony orchestra and featuring soloists trained in the European tradition. Cameron's *good* is especially distinctive for what it excludes: performers and composers of color, of any range of social class, and with any association to popular or 'lowbrow' entertainment—there's no muted trumpet here, no guitar or banjo, no drum set. While Cameron was by no means the only commentator in the first half of the 20th century to strike this designation, his words are notable because he was the mouthpiece of one of the largest and, arguably, most culturally central corporations in the United States. That fact alone would cast a shadow over his later statement that "the best we know in music has not been perpetuated from generation to generation by a conspiracy of musicians, but by the plaudits and demands of plain people," even if it was not rendered plainly false by the long history

³⁹ W. J. Cameron, *The Ford Sunday Evening Hour Talks*, Sixth Series (1939-1940) (Dearborn, MI: 1940), 19-20, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

of economic, political, and social power which set Western concert music atop Cameron's pedestal. Though not necessarily an unusual pitch in the '30s, the symphony-as-populist icon was a hard sell in this case.⁴⁰

Of course, by the end of the passage, Cameron has already tipped his hand. Return for a moment to his foray into statistics for the claim that "65 percent of the Ford Sunday Evening Hour audience is made up of American people of the rank and file." Though he gives no indication by which he's chosen his categorization of "rank and file," Cameron's 65% sounds strikingly low considering the massive popular audience for radio. That nearly half the *FSEH* audience falls outside the radio base suggests that the program audience skewed toward higher income listeners, who may well have been more receptive to Cameron's usual message of economic conservatism and government non-intervention. It seems that on both sides of the radio broadcast, the automobile and the radio met on the higher end of the American economic ladder during the interwar era.

No matter who was listening, it is apparent from the talent lists that the *FSEH* was bringing in world-class musicians and soloists, week in and week out. Under Kolar's baton in the first two seasons, the *Hour* soloists included such luminaries as tenor Paul Althouse, baritones Nelson Eddy and Ezio Pinza, soprano Rosa Ponselle, and contralto Rose Bampton. Starting with the 1936-37 season, the *FSEH* began fielding numerous conductors each season, and the list is a veritable who's who of 20th century orchestral leaders. Fritz Reiner, a frequent guest on the *Hour* podium between 1936 and 1941, would go on to become music director of the Chicago Symphony. John Barbirolli, Toscanini's successor at the New York Philharmonic, led the Ford Symphony Orchestra in the summers of 1938 and 1939, as well as during a brief stint for the 1940-41 holiday season. Eugene Goossens of the Cincinnati Symphony appeared in 1941 and 1942. But perhaps the most famous of

⁴⁰ Others during this time, notably Aaron Copland, would find considerably more success forwarding the notion that symphonic music could be a truly populist pursuit. See, for example, Elizabeth B. Crist, *Music for the Common Man: Aaron Copland During the Depression and War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

the *FSEH* conductors was Eugene Ormandy, the prolific leader of the Philadelphia Orchestra for nearly half a century, who took the Ford podium at least once each season between 1936 and the series' close in 1942. During the 1941-42 season, Ormandy commanded the highest conductor's fee of any of the guests, making \$1500 per appearance—double the fee paid to a young George Szell who conducted for two weeks that fall.⁴¹

There was also a darker undertone to Cameron's designation of "good music," which gives a lens into the longer history of the Ford values promoted in the *FSEH*. Henry Ford's views on music were a matter of periodic discussion in the *Dearborn Independent*, a small newspaper Ford purchased in 1918 to serve as a mouthpiece for his personal social and political views. Ford brought on Edwin G. Pipp, former editor of the *Detroit News*, to direct the content, a fitting choice, according to Douglas Brinkley, as "both men were in fact idealists who believed in Wilson's League of Nations, women's suffrage, Prohibition, and more or less progressive programs."⁴² As Ford himself was never a particularly adept writer, his columns and the recurring "Mr. Ford's Own Page" were ghostwritten by Pipp's protégé from the *News*, William J. Cameron.⁴³ As time went on at the *Independent*, its social and economic commentary infamously descended into anti-Semitic screed, often penned by

⁴¹ *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* Talent Lists, Acc. 451, Box 6, Folder "Publication Data, 1939-1941," Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford.

⁴² Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 257-58; Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge*, 124-25.

⁴³ Nevins and Hill offer a particularly colorful description of Cameron: "Largely self-educated but extremely well-read, with a brilliant mind, this Scot possessed an evangelical temperament which enabled him to infuse editorials, sermons, radio talks, and brief essays with an inspirational quality. On the *News* he had written an editorial, "Don't Die on Third"—an exhortation to get to home base on any undertaking—which was frequently quoted and reprinted. Pipp, who correctly thought him one of the best newspaper writers in America, said that he would 'be lost without Billy Cameron.' With something of the directness of Arthur Brisbane and the studied grace of Alexander Woollcott, Cameron commanded a religious eloquence quite his own. He then belonged to one of the most curious sects on earth, the British Israelites, who believed themselves descendants of the Lost Tribes, and based an esoteric interpretation of history and eternity on data derived from the Great Pyramid. In mundane matters, however, he had a practical idealism. During his service on the *News*, he had for dears done social work among derelicts—all the more effective because he himself knew the power of drink—and had delivered weekly homilies at a religious center on Randolph Street, then Detroit's 'skid row' or section for outcasts." Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge*, 124-26.

Cameron (who himself was descending ever further into alcoholism) or by Ford's personal secretary, Ernest Liebold.⁴⁴

Henry Ford's anti-Semitism, in particular, has been attributed to causes ranging from his "rural nineteenth-century Midwestern upbringing" to some neurosis or intellectual limitation.⁴⁵ Richard Hofstadter, in *The Age of Reform*, explained both Ford's anti-Semitism (as expressed in the *Independent*) and his vociferous hatred of the banking and investing sector as "the foibles of a Michigan farm boy who had been liberally exposed to Populist notions."⁴⁶ Early Ford historians Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill also faulted the anti-Semitic beliefs of Ford's inner circle, including Liebold, Cameron, and his close friend Thomas Edison.⁴⁷ The anti-Semitic vitriol culminated in the Ford-financed publication of four volumes of anti-Semitic articles entitled *The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem*, between 1920 and 1922.⁴⁸ Ford appears to have pulled Cameron off "the Jewish articles" in 1922. Soon after, the *Independent* met a fatal legal challenge. Chicago attorney Aaron Sapiro, a leader in the farm cooperative movement and a target of particularly vitriolic attacks in the *Independent*, brought a libel suit against Ford which was largely responsible for the paper's demise in 1927. Cameron testified for five days as Ford's chief witness and assumed full (if dubious) responsibility for the content of the *Dearborn Independent*, alleging Ford had never been consulted.⁴⁹ Pipp, who had resigned from the *Independent* in disgust in April, 1920,

⁴⁴ Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 261; "Thanks to the painstaking reconstruction of Neil Baldwin and others, we know that Ernest Liebold and William Cameron were largely responsible for the [*Dearborn Independent's* anti-Semitic] campaign." Link, *Transnational Fordism*, 50.

⁴⁵ See Douglas Brinkley's discussion, *Wheels for the World*, 260: eg. "Norman Hapgood concluded that outside of the automotive realm, Henry Ford had the mind of a child."

⁴⁶ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 81, also quoted in Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 260.

⁴⁷ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge*, 311-13.

⁴⁸ *The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem*, 4 vols. (Dearborn, MI: The Dearborn Publishing Company, 1922).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 317-21.

later tried to clear Cameron's name from charges of anti-Semitism by pinning the blame instead on Liebold.⁵⁰ But whatever its cause or mode of expression, the anti-Semitic impulse was Ford's.⁵¹

Ford's anti-Semitism as penned by Cameron took particular aim at popular music, which Cameron generalized under "jazz" and which the *Independent* frequently derided as a social ill and degenerate art form. A vitriolic article in the third volume of *The International Jew* entitled "Jewish Jazz Becomes Our National Music" gives the most expansive expression of Ford's musical bigotry.⁵² In a rambling, logically vacuous article, the unnamed author began with a story from the *New York Times* reporting an anti-trust suit brought against companies owned by Irving Berlin and others accused of controlling "80 percent of the available copyrighted songs used by manufacturers of phonographs, player piano rolls, and other musical reproducing instruments."⁵³ The author's conclusion:

*Popular Music is a Jewish monopoly. Jazz is a Jewish creation. The mush, the slush, the sly suggestion, the abandoned seriousness of sliding notes, are of Jewish origin. Monkey talk, jungle squeals, grunts and squeaks and gasps suggestive of cave love are camouflaged by a few feverish notes and admitted to homes where the thing itself, unaided by the piano, would be stamped out in horror.*⁵⁴

Though unsigned, the florid language and gross overstatement read like the work of Cameron. A racist dismissal of "jazz" is not, in and of itself, historically unusual. But the author then returned to a familiar high culture vs. low culture theme from the *Sunday Evening Hour*, offering this unattributed quotation (with his own emphases):

⁵⁰ Ibid., 313-14.

⁵¹ For the most in-depth discussion of Ford's anti-Semitic projects, see Neil Baldwin, *Henry Ford and the Jews: The Mass Production of Hate* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003).

⁵² "Jewish Jazz Becomes Our National Music," in *Jewish Influences in American Life, The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem*, vol. 3 (Dearborn, MI: 1921), 64-74.

⁵³ "Jewish Jazz," 64.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 65, emphasis original.

Meanwhile the Oriental, especially the Jewish, infection in our music, seemingly less widespread than the German was or the French is, may prove even more virulent. Those not temperamentally immune to it catch it less severely, like Mr. Leo Ornstein; and if they ever throw it off, as he has given some signs of doing; seem to be left devoid of energy and, as it were, permanently anemic.

The insidiousness of the Jewish menace to our artistic integrity is due partly to the speciousness, the superficial charm and persuasiveness of Hebrew art, its brilliance, its violently juxtaposed extremes of passion, its poignant eroticism and pessimism, and partly to the fact that the strain in us which might make head against it, the deepest, most fundamental strain perhaps in our mixed nature, is diluted and confused by a hundred other tendencies.

The *Anglo-Saxon group of qualities*, the Anglo-Saxon point of view, even though they are so thoroughly disguised, in a people descended from every race, that we easily forget them, and it is not safe to predicate them of any individual American, *are nevertheless the vital nucleus of the American temper. And the Jewish domination of our music, even more than the Teutonic and the Gallic, threatens to submerge and stultify them at every point.*⁵⁵

The tract, as it turns out, originated in a 1921 essay by Columbia professor Daniel Gregory Mason, entitled “Psychoanalysis and the American Composer.”⁵⁶ I reproduce it here at length, mindful of its deeply reprehensible content, because it demonstrates how anti-Semitic bigotry informed Cameron’s posturing of the Ford Motor Company on the function of music in American society. In the screed above, “low” music is presented as damaging not only for its racial associations but also because of the effect of its unrestrained “passion” on the sensibilities of society. That “Anglo-Saxon group of qualities” so threatened by “Oriental” influence are then set at “the vital nucleus of the American temper,” so that the binary becomes jazz and “Oriental” music vs. *American* Western art music—this provides the nationalistic impulse Cameron trumpets in the musical programming of the *FSEH*.⁵⁷ That Cameron’s passage of choice also decries “Teutonic” influence is ironic; his ideas on music run closely to those later espoused by Third Reich cultural leaders of whom many were reportedly avid readers of *The International Jew* series.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 66-67.

⁵⁶ Daniel Gregory Mason, “Psychoanalysis and the American Composer,” in *Music as a Humanity, The Appreciation of Music*, vol. 4, ed. Daniel Gregory Mason (New York: H.W. Gray, 1921), 112-13.

⁵⁷ On the cultural marshaling of Orientalism, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

As Macdonald Smith Moore has shown, Daniel Gregory Mason was of an 1870s generation of “Yankee composers,” along with figures like Charles Ives and Carl Ruggles: generally Yale or Harvard educated, from English, Congregationalist stock, and confident in their moral and cultural authority to speak for America on the whole. Figures, in other words, who like Henry Ford felt a responsibility for and capability of the moral guidance of the country. “Living in an ideal past and an ideal future, Yankee composers conducted a jeremiad against the profane present. If they would but try, contemporary Americans could best experience the American spirit through musical culture. In concert, audiences could worship culture. Through music the categories of a true civil religion could emerge.”⁵⁸ Moore outlined strains of both anti-modernism and anti-urbanism inflicting the vehement anti-Semitism, associated closely with disdain for jazz, among some musical critics in the ‘20s. “Mason,” for example, “felt that composers such as [Aaron] Copland and [Ernst] Bloch were despoiling were despoiling redemptive culture and creating in its place a musical asphalt jungle.”⁵⁹ Mason and others expressed ambivalence regarding the rise of the radio and recording industries, criticizing their commercialization and triviality even as the big three broadcast networks supported their own symphony orchestras. But “the real rub,” as Moore saw it, is that recordings by popular composers like Gershwin were massively outselling their old-stock Yankee counterparts.⁶⁰ The people, it seems, did not always want what Mason and Ford alike were trying to give them.

Nonetheless, Ford engaged in numerous projects promoting folk music and “old-fashioned” dances as a moral salve for their present. When Henry and Clara Ford purchased the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts, the Fords took a special interest in renovating the ballroom, and retained

⁵⁸ Macdonald Smith Moore, *Yankee Blues: Musical Culture and American Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 4-8.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 129-34. Moore, in this discussion, uses the *Dearborn Independent* as an example of the anti-Semitic tracts decrying Jewish composers as peddlers or “middlemen,” devaluing American music with jazz and primitivism. Ibid., 143-46. On anti-New York and anti-assimilationist attitudes, see also *ibid.*, 150-60.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 149-50.

the services of a local dance instructor to assist them in holding Appalachian square dances there. Ford eventually brought the instructor, Benjamin Lovett, to Dearborn in 1928. Thereupon Ford continued his foray into music education by building stages in numerous Ford-owned buildings (including the Dearborn Engineering Laboratory) and bringing in numerous fiddlers and additional dance instructors to hold square dances for his workers and guests in Michigan, teaching from the Dearborn Publishing Company's pamphlet, *Good Morning: After a Sleep of Twenty-five Years Old-Fashioned Dancing is Being Revived by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford* (see Ch. 1).⁶¹

This all points toward yet another apparent contradiction in Ford's cultural messaging: the *International Jew* and the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* both adopt a patrician, elitist view concerning music as a means of disparaging the patrician classes and social elite. The musical contradiction is similar to the central paradoxes in studies on Henry Ford: how his rhetoric (and that of the *FSEH*) could be both anti-elite and anti-New Deal, at once presuming to champion the working class and disparaging "capitalists" while remaining vehemently anti-union, and how he could agitate tirelessly for rural, "old fashioned" values while working at the forefront of urbanization and industrialization. To an extent, Ford simply ignored the contradiction in favor of a belief in his own cultural messianic abilities. As Greg Grandin put it, "Ford tried to transcend this dissonance with a self-regard bordering on the Promethean."⁶² But pegging any of this as neurosis misses the point: Henry Ford's social views, and the peculiar logic of the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*, responded directly to Ford's (both the man's and the company's) interwar situation.

⁶¹ Emery C. Warnock, "The Anti-Semitic Origins of Henry Ford's Arts Education Patronage," *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 30, no. 2 (April 2009): 86-88; *Good Morning*.

⁶² Grandin, *Fordlandia*, 41.

Some clarity comes from a brief digression into the social structure in which Ford found himself during the 1920s and '30s. Alan Brinkley has described this time as “a world in which both the idea and the reality of mass consumption were becoming central to American culture and to the American economy, gradually supplanting production as the principal focus of popular hopes and commitment.”⁶³ *Jazz*, in the parlance of the time, referred not only to a specific music but was a capacious term directly related to this social shift. “Jazz,” according to David Savran, “represented a *social relation*, a result of and analogue to new forms of labor, both mass production and reaction against mass production.” It was “a cultural practice around and through which a new structure of feeling and new class relations crystallized.” And jazz, at the time, described “a panoply of musical styles, most of which, in fact, [was] the product of European Americans associated with Broadway and Tin Pan Alley.”⁶⁴ Hence Cameron’s curious alignment of anti-Semitism and anti-jazz which seemed to completely ignore African Americans. Cameron’s “good music” was a direct analogue for good social practice—in other words, resistance to the supposed indulgence and vapidness of a social world based on mass consumption.

Detroit, as the home of the American automobile, was an important center in this new social world. The “Motor City” moniker was by no means an overstatement. Detroit’s automobile industry launched with the opening of the Olds Motor Works in 1899. By 1927, the auto industry represented 57% of the value of the city’s manufacturing production, which was “an extraordinary degree of specialization for a city of Detroit’s size.”⁶⁵ The leaders in this industry were not, for the most part, working class success stories (as Henry Ford saw himself). The automobile industry in

⁶³ Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 4.

⁶⁴ David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009), 6-7.

⁶⁵ Donald Finlay Davis, *Conspicuous Production: Automobiles and Elites in Detroit, 1899-1933* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), x.

Detroit was largely a realm of the elite; early auto entrepreneurs were on average young, well-connected, native-born, previously successful businessmen from powerful families.⁶⁶ Those born outside Detroit's patrician circles, like the Dodge brothers and Henry Ford, found themselves both outside Detroit's elite society and shut out of the highest product price brackets—they moved instead to build products for the working-class buyers that top-price brands like Packard had abandoned.⁶⁷ Donald Finlay Davis has suggested that both Ford's enduring personal identification with farmers and the working class against upper class non-producers and his continuing professional focus on producing cars for the working class are directly related to his ostracism from Detroit society. Ford saw himself as a successful worker rather than a monied patrician even as he became one of the wealthiest men in the nation, and was a continual thorn in the side of Detroit elites who attacked his pacifism, his idiosyncratic business practices, his insistence on raising wages, and his unwillingness to subscribe to a wholly profit-minded model. Ford focused on lowering prices while the rest of the industry raised them, he distrusted and dismissed the high cultural aspirations of his fellow business owners, and became, economically as well as socially, something of a loner.⁶⁸

Henry Ford and the “gasoline aristocracy” were certainly not alone among corporate leaders in their resistance to New Deal reforms.⁶⁹ Kim Phillips-Fein has shown how the conservative movements of the late 20th century drew, in part, on the Depression-era organization of elites such as the du Pont brothers against the expanded regulatory state and what they saw as a political alignment against the same business owners who had, merely a decade before, been the supposed

⁶⁶ For Davis's breakdown of the relevant statistics, see *ibid.*, 26-39.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 84-105.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 117-58.

⁶⁹ “gasoline aristocracy:” *ibid.*, 3.

heroes of American society.⁷⁰ And yet, as we see, Henry Ford arrived at this political position by a different route from his peers. Stefan Link has argued against the common tendency to follow Gramsci in the equation of “Fordism and Americanism,” to take Ford “as the archetype of modern American industry during the 1920s,” and to “put Fordism...at the center of the industrial renewal of American capitalism in the early 20th century.” Instead, as Link’s work showed, Ford’s views were in fact rather idiosyncratic vis-à-vis the norms of 1920s and ‘30s American business and were adaptable to a range of political and industrial philosophies, including those of the Nazis and the Soviets, as well as that of the interwar United States. Fordism in Link’s formulation is thus not simply a phase of American capitalist development or a broad cultural-economic condition (pre-post-Fordism, to coin a particularly ugly term), but rather a specific producerist ideology centered on high-volume mechanized production. Link called the ideology *illiberal modernism*: “the conviction that liberal capitalism was historically obsolete; that a more equitable social and economic order would replace it; and that technology and science would play a central role in bringing this order about.”⁷¹ Tenuous though it may seem in retrospect, the *FSEH* could maintain both an anti-elite and anti-New Deal message based on Henry Ford’s own idiosyncratic logic.

The shape of the musical programming on the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*, on the other hand, is attributable to the cultural aspirations of Edsel Ford as much as to the social views of his father. As with the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village, Edsel had his own ideas regarding the cultural position the FMC and the Ford family should take (see Ch. 2). In the 1930s, as Nevins and Hill explained, “Edsel Ford was nominally President of the Ford Motor Company, but his father held

⁷⁰ Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmens’ Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: Norton, 2009), 3-25.

⁷¹ Link, “Transnational Fordism,” 11, 37-38.

the majority of the stock and the power.”⁷² It appears that Edsel aspired to leverage his position to join the polite Detroit society his father had spurned—he moved from suburban Dearborn to upscale Grosse Pointe, became a leading donor to the Detroit Institute of Art, and talked of emulating his more aristocratic peers in producing a more luxurious and exclusive product.⁷³ Supporting charitable and cultural causes had already become a path to social legitimization for Detroit’s new business elite. Horace Dodge, lumber baron William H. Murphy, and Paul Gray (son of FMC’s first President), became principal benefactors of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and industry money funded the construction of a new concert hall in 1919. The city’s “new money” had fully made its way into Detroit’s charitable giving circles and major social clubs by the ‘20s.⁷⁴ Edsel Ford also donated to the Detroit Symphony, and the Symphony benefited from the new Ford Foundation in its early years under Edsel Ford’s presidency.⁷⁵ Recall that it was Edsel Ford who took to the airwaves during the first episode of the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* to promise the series’s “high musical standard.” And Edsel had personally ushered the *FSEH* concept into existence. While Henry Ford, William Cameron, Edsel Ford, and N.W. Ayer executives were all aware of the enthusiasm with which the public had regarded Ford’s partnership with the Detroit Symphony for the Chicago World’s Fair, it was Edsel who convinced Henry to go along with Ayer’s suggestion that Ford sponsor a Detroit Symphony radio broadcast.⁷⁶

⁷² Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 10; the authors later include a brilliant and informative little vignette of Henry Ford’s regular lunch table at the Engineering Laboratories Building in Dearborn. At 12:55pm, for a 12:59 arrival by Ford, the company’s major officers and department heads gathered daily in their regular seats around the eccentric elder: Edsel to his right, Charles Sorenson to his left, and next to Sorenson, W.J. Cameron. *Ibid.*, 56-57.

⁷³ Davis, *Conspicuous Production*, 124-25.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 105-11.

⁷⁵ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, 408, 412.

⁷⁶ Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 315.

The Ford Motor Company received thousands of letters in response to the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*, of which many were receptive and complimentary of the car company's cultural messaging. Several supporters drew a connective line between broadcast music and American culture on the whole, and viewed the *FSEH* as an important rectifying force. A Mrs. D.H. McClure wrote to Cameron in December, 1939:

We, on each Sunday evening, listen to your wonderful program and the fine orchestra. America needs the cultural contact, that contact which is obtained through good music and other fine arts. You are doing a fine thing for America with your music and your cars.⁷⁷

And from Mrs. Joseph A. Ryan:

We are just an average family with very few musical advantages, but we do know the difference between the terrible "swing" which seems to clutter up the air and the very excellent music we are privileged to hear through your generosity.⁷⁸

These messages appeared among many complementing the musical programming, the quality of performances, and the content of Cameron's speeches. Cameron's talks in particular seem to have resonated with many listeners, who praised their common-sense reasoning, patriotism, and old-fashioned, conservative viewpoint—often at the same time alluding to the declension of "these days" and "this current generation." The Ford message, still carrying the strains of conservative Midwestern Protestantism that formed the basis of its worker outreach and informed its public posturing, was never an unpopular one.

But other *FSEH* listeners were quick to trace ideological connections between Cameron's radio talks and his earlier writing for the *Dearborn Independent*, or to peg his talks as somehow "anti-American." William Cameron's personal papers contain letters decrying his "hypocrisy" as either an anti-Semite or critic of U.S. policy, and one respondent who even suggested that Cameron avail

⁷⁷ Mrs. D.H. McClure to W.J. Cameron, December 15, 1939, Acc. 23, Box 17, Folder "Subject Files, Radio Programs, 1939-1941," Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford.

⁷⁸ Mrs. Joseph A. Ryan to W.J. Cameron, May 16, 1941, Acc. 23, Box 17, Folder "Subject Files, Radio Programs, 1939-1941," Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford.

himself, after a talk on material shortages, of one enclosed toothbrush, “slightly used.”⁷⁹ There was also a concern among Ford dealers that the *FSEH* musical programming was too highbrow to be of much use in promoting their products. In October, 1938, Cameron’s office received one of his published talk pamphlets with a typed response on the back from “A FORD DEALER:” “You are running an American institution & selling to the American public so why not use American talent. Why not have a program that fits the mind of the people who buy your cars. People that listen to Grand Opera don’t buy or drive Fords.” Attached to the pamphlet is a handwritten retort: “Good Idea for a Talk: The people who listen to Grand Opera or any good music because they love it, and not because its fashionable, are and always have been the sort of people who buy Fords.”⁸⁰ Cameron would not be swayed.

The ratings history of the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*’s initial 8-season run (omitting its brief reprise in 1946) belie the same indomitability of purpose as the terse response to the concerned Ford dealer (Fig. 6). In 1958, Harrison Summers at Ohio State compiled the Hooper Ratings (a telephone-based forerunner to the Nielson company) of major network radio broadcasts broken down into thematic category—the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* and its ilk fit under the heading of “Concert Music” including “programs of ‘serious’ music, major programs of religious music, or programs presented by military bands.”⁸¹ Though the *FSEH* routinely beat the average ratings trend

⁷⁹ Ru. Newsone(?) to Cameron (Cosmopolitan Hotel stationary), October 13, Acc. 44, William J. Cameron Records Subgroup, Box 9, Folder “Ford Sunday Evening Hour: Correspondence: Suggestions and Criticism,” Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford.

⁸⁰ “A Ford Dealer” to Cameron, October 12, 1938, Acc. 44, William J. Cameron Records Subgroup, Box 9, Folder “Ford Sunday Evening Hour: Correspondence: Suggestions and Criticism,” Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford.

⁸¹ Harrison B. Summers, ed., *A Thirty-Year History of Programs Carried on National Radio Networks in the United States, 1926-1956* (New York: Arno Press, 1971), 3. The data in Fig. 6 includes ratings (as reported by Summers) of the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*; the average of ratings in the “Concert Music” category; the top program in the category; and the top program whose listed sponsor was an automobile manufacturer, for the years 1935-1942—the initial run of the *FSEH*.

of concert music programs, Ford's concert program actually led its category only once, in 1940.⁸² In other years it generally ran in the top five in its category against segment leaders like Firestone Tires' *Voice of Firestone*, which took top concert program honors in the Monday 8:30pm spot on the NBC Red Network in 1938 and 1939.⁸³

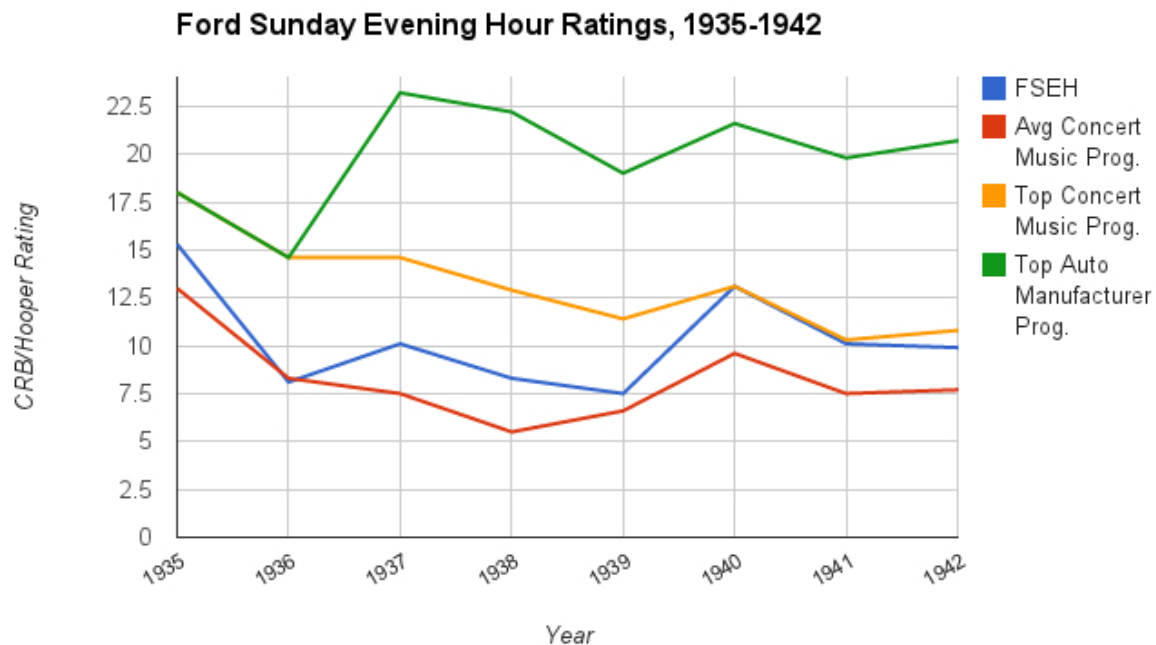


Figure 6. *Ford Sunday Evening Hour Ratings in Context*
Source: Data adapted from Summers, ed., *A Thirty-Year History of Programs*.

More telling than Ford's performance against other concert programs was its perennially weak performance against the top program sponsored by an automobile manufacturer, which starting in the 1936-37 season and continuing until its replacement in 1945-46, was Chrysler's *Major*

⁸² cf. Fones-Wolf, "Creating a Favorable Business Climate," 228: "Although never a top-ranked show in its time slot, it was the most popular of the concert programs, with an audience of over ten million;" and Lewis, *Public Image of Henry Ford*, 316-17: "On the other hand the Sunday Evening Hour, whose audience was variously estimated at from 10,000,000 to 13,000,000, had almost twice as many listeners as any other symphonic program, including the General Motors Concert Hour (which featured the New York Philharmonic Orchestra)." Note that the C.E. Hooper Company omitted sustaining programs—programs funded by the networks themselves without corporate sponsors—from their rankings. This means, for example, that a program such as the NBC Symphony Orchestra hour was unrated until picked up by GM in 1944 (when it debuted with a relatively weak Hooper rating of 5.4).

⁸³ Summers, ed., *A Thirty-Year History of Programs*.

Bowes Amateur Hour, airing Thursdays at 9:00pm on CBS. A stark contrast from the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*, the *Amateur Hour* was essentially the original *American Idol* (or *Gong Show*, depending on one's reference point). Hopeful acts both black and white—the show was, notably, integrated—traveled from all over the country to audition for a spot on the show, emceed by “Major” Edward Bowes. Bowes would strike a gong on the air to cut short failing acts, and callers from the show's home New York market and a weekly rotating “honor city” could call in to voice their support for one act or another. The *Major Bowes Amateur Hour* became a massive hit, prompting spinoff board games, toys, and films, and helping to launch musical careers such as those of Ann-Margret, Gladys Knight, and Frank Sinatra.⁸⁴

In contrast to Edsel Ford's promise that the *FSEH* “[would] not be interrupted by irritating sales talks,” the *Major Bowes Amateur Hour* was peppered with plugs for Chrysler's upcoming models, sales promotions, and so forth.⁸⁵ Though Major Bowes was apparently a friend of Walter Chrysler, the *Major Bowes Amateur Hour* had no real connection to Chrysler itself—it could just as easily have been sponsored by Palmolive or Ovaltine. Conversely, one bright spot in the *FSEH* statistics is the unusually high degree to which listeners, when prompted, identified the program with Ford Motor Company: between 75 and 96.5 percent.⁸⁶ Even in the absence of overt advertisement for Ford cars during the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*, it appears that the program was effective in keeping the Ford brand name in consumers' minds.

⁸⁴ Ross Melnick, “Remediating the Radio Contest Genre in Major Bowes' Amateur Hour Films,” *Film History* 23 no. 3 (Jan. 2011): 331-33; Charles K. Hyde, *Riding the Roller Coaster: A History of the Chrysler Corporation* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 121-22; John Dunning, “Major Bowes Original Amateur Hour,” in *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 425-29; The Library of Congress holds successful audition application forms from the *Amateur Hour*, and that of Frank Sinatra and the 3 Flashes (renamed “The Hoboken Four” for broadcast) is available from www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trm018.html (accessed February 26, 2015).

⁸⁵ Cameron, *The Ford Sunday Evening Hour Talks*, First and Second Series, 14. Unlike the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*, there are several example *Major Bowes* broadcasts available online. See, for example, <http://youtu.be/bUzt0ofscjQ> (accessed February 26, 2015).

⁸⁶ Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 317.

Free of “irritating sales talks” did not, however, mean free of pro-Ford sentiment. William Cameron’s talks on American economics, politics, and society were charged enough to put him on the wrong side of major networks’ policies disallowing propaganda or unbalanced discussion on controversial issues. Cameron and Ford were warned twice by CBS. The Canadian Broadcasting Company, going a step further, banned the Cameron from its airwaves.⁸⁷ The July, 1938 issue of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis newsletter was dedicated to a blistering critique of Cameron’s *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* talks: “In summary, Mr. Cameron’s talks stack the cards in favor of the Ford Motor Company and against writers, government officials, labor leaders, and others who do not approve of Ford policies. This is obviously what he is paid to do. He does it effectively.”⁸⁸ The report made the trenchant observation that Cameron “makes ‘the American way’ synonymous with the Ford way;” thus, “Anti-Ford becomes anti-American.”⁸⁹ And Cameron went to great extent in building a cult of personality around Henry Ford as the pinnacle of aw-shucks American virtue, as displayed in one of the report’s rather suggestively edited excerpts:

The only letters he [Mr. Ford] takes time to write with his own hand are to little boy and girl friends who are having a birthday.... He will nail up a door for a whole season rather than disturb a robin’s nest; he has postponed the hay harvest because ground birds were brooding in the field.... Rising at 6 in the morning, he is often one of the tens of thousands of Ford men going to work...⁹⁰

Taken as a whole, Cameron’s *FSEH* talks are unified in their agitation for an American culture suitable for and receptive to Henry Ford and his company, and this was by no means lost on the listening public. *Propaganda* is indeed a useful term for Cameron’s work, but I want to caution against

⁸⁷ Ibid., 327.

⁸⁸ Institute for Propaganda Analysis, “The Ford Sunday Evening Hour,” *Propaganda Analysis: A Monthly Letter to Help the Intelligent Citizen Detect and Analyze Propaganda* 1, no. 10 (July 1938): 4, Acc. 44, William J. Cameron Records Subgroup, Box 9, Folder “Ford Sunday Evening Hour: Correspondence: Suggestions and Criticism,” Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 3, quoting Cameron’s talk, “Just Circulating ‘Round,” October 14, 1934.

any tendency to summarize the *FSEH* as propaganda, as such, at the risk of overlooking the nuances of its concurrent intended functions as advertisement, as entertainment, and as education. This multivalence is part of what made the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* so effective. As the report noted, “what appears to be a consistent policy of Mr. Cameron is to make several talks that, taken separately, seem to have no propaganda intent, but, when viewed in the light of subsequent talks, become an important part of the whole.”⁹¹

On the musical side, the powers that be at the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* expected to meet with some derision, both from working listeners (like “A Ford Dealer”) and highbrow critics. As *FSEH* producer William Reddick explained at the outset of the program’s brief reprise for the 1945-46 season, “If a musician tells us our program stinks, then we’re happy. We know we are still pleasing to the public.” “We cater to the human weakness,” he said, “of wanting to feel cultured without really being so.” And so no musical selection ran more than ten minutes, an emphasis was placed on well-known composers and tunes, and the program opened each week with the charming, simple tune of the “Children’s Prayer” from Humperdinck’s *Hänsel und Gretel*.⁹²

For all Ford’s (Henry’s and Edsel’s) and Cameron’s insistence on “good music,” on education and uplift, on ambitious oratory cloaked in the mantle of workaday down-home wisdom, the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* came off to some (including, it seems, its producer) as dry, middling entertainment. As *Billboard* reported in 1940, “classy and sometimes sleepy. That sums up the debut program of the ‘Ford Sunday Evening Hour’...Lily Pons warbled prettily as guest soloist, and William J. Cameron spoke with impressive diction and sophomoric thought on the fact that the times were ‘grim.’” “Wind-up was a hymn, *Praise to the Living God*...This left the listeners sober as

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² “Four Hundred Fords,” *Newsweek*, December 31, 1945, 85.

judges.”⁹³ An earlier review in the same publication was highly complimentary of Eugene Ormandy’s conducting, if not the programming, and concluded, “it has been a firm conviction of this listener that the grandiose editorializing of Mr. Ford’s Mr. Cameron could very well be dispensed with, with no one the loser, least of all the radio audience.”⁹⁴ The *United Auto Worker* summed it up in verse:

Now the music dies out in the distance,
They announced a lovely old hymn,
Giving all glory to God
And singing their praises to him.

But I wonder if those up in heaven
Ever look down from above
And see guns, tear-gas and night-sticks,
A symbol of Ford’s brand of love.

Do you think, Henry Ford, you exploiter,
You can buy with this kind of stuff
The thanks and goodwill of thousands
Who haven’t nearly enough?

So you might as well keep your music
And shut old Cameron’s yap
For while we enjoy your music
We haven’t time for your crap...⁹⁵

At the very least, it seems that some of the “critical distance” we feel now from the *FSEH* was shared by its contemporaries.

And yet, Ford continued the broadcasts. By the time of Reddick’s 1945 interview in *Newsweek*, the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* was “one of the oldest musical standbys in radio.”⁹⁶ It even outlasted the *Major Bowes Amateur Hour*, which was replaced for the 1945-46 season by Chrysler’s *Andre Kostelanetz Orchestra* after several years of lagging ratings—ratings that, nonetheless, surpassed

⁹³ Paul Ackerman, “Ford Sunday Evening Hour,” Fall Program Reviews, *The Billboard*, October 12, 1940, 8.

⁹⁴ Richman, “Ford Sunday Evening Hour,” Program Reviews, *The Billboard*, September 24, 1938, 8.

⁹⁵ *United Auto Worker*, May 13, 1939, quoted in Sigmund Diamond, *The Reputation of the American Businessman* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), 167, in turn partially quoted in Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 328.

⁹⁶ “Four Hundred Fords,” 85.

those of the *FSEH*.⁹⁷ With mixed reviews and a lukewarm audience, the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* was never a runaway hit, nor did Cameron's talks appear to make the cultural inroads that he and Henry Ford intended for them. But Ford continued to pour money into the *FSEH* and other radio shows, spending twice as much on radio between 1934 and 1942 as General Motors and Chrysler combined. David Lewis argued that the program was a success: "In return for its \$7,344,000 outlay, the Ford Company reached radio audiences totaling more than 500,000,000,000 and entertained studio audiences aggregating 1,300,000."⁹⁸ But there are serious questions as to the esteem with which that massive total radio audience held the *FSEH*, and both letters and press reviews indicate that the program may have alienated many listeners for the various reasons outlined above. "Unquestionably," Lewis summated, "the company looked upon the investment as sound," but it is apparent from Cameron's work with Ford that a simple cost-benefit analysis was never really at the heart of Ford's cultural projects, including *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*.⁹⁹

Taken together, the over 400 short speeches and musical programs of the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* display a vision of culture combining a belief in the redemptive value of "good music," Ford's idiosyncratic socioeconomic ideals, and an antimodern ambivalence toward a modern society shaped in large part by the mass production, mass mobilization, and mass culture of which Ford was a driving force. What emerges is a peculiar case: how the visions and interests of three men, Henry Ford, Edsel Ford, and William Cameron, combined with the necessities of promoting one of the world's most powerful corporations to a weekly audience numbering in the tens of millions. The *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* is an illustrative example of the particular role the Ford Motor Company assumed in the rise of mass culture in the United States, premised on the notion that social uplift,

⁹⁷ Summers, ed., *Thirty-Year History of Programs*.

⁹⁸ Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 329. Lewis's rather huge 500 billion listeners figure is presumably the sum of the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*'s estimated radio audience over its entire run.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

the preservation of “American values,” the limiting of government encroachment, freedom (as Cameron formulated it), and the sale of Ford motorcars were all inextricably linked. Later in the 20th century, the radio would become a necessary feature of the car. American music would feed off the rise of American car culture while simultaneously singing its praises. But at the start of this relationship, and crucial to understanding it, is the point at which the automobile industry explored, and exploited, the possibilities of American broadcast radio.

IV.

Tin Lizzie Dreams: The Model T as Antimodern Icon

In his 1975 novel *Ragtime*, E.L. Doctrow imagined a meeting between two Americans at the pinnacle of early-20th century business: J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford. In Doctrow's vignette, Morgan has grown lonely at the top of the world's economic pyramid. Constantly disappointed by his peers' inability to match his level of greatness, Morgan looks to history for explanations for his singular success. After years of study and after consulting countless scholars, Morgan has come to believe that he is the recipient of a "secret wisdom" passed down through the ages, a *prisca theologia* inherited from the time of the Egyptian Pharaohs and reincarnated in the form of great men such as J.P. Morgan and, Morgan now believes, Henry Ford. Morgan feverishly explains this to Ford after inviting him to his home in Manhattan. After a rich luncheon, Morgan takes Ford into a secret anteroom in his library into which he has smuggled the sarcophagus of Seti the First from the Temple of Karnak. He entreats Ford to accompany him down the Nile so that they may decipher the ancient hieroglyphs for themselves. "Why," concludes Morgan, "should we not satisfy ourselves of the truth of who we are and the eternal beneficent force which we incarnate?"¹

Ford's response completely deflates Morgan and stops the conversation in its tracks. But Doctrow perfectly captured the industrialist's anti-intellectual practicality. Ford tells Morgan that he, too, has placed his belief in reincarnation:

Well then, Ford continued, I happened to pick up a little book. It was called *An Eastern Fakir's Eternal Wisdom*, published by the Franklin Novelty Company of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. And in this book, which cost me just twenty-five cents, I found everything I needed to set my mind at rest. Reincarnation is the only belief I hold, Mr. Morgan. I explain my genius this way—some of us have just lived more times than others. So you see, what you have spent on scholars and traveled around the world to find, I already knew. And I'll tell you something, in thanks for the eats, I'm going to lend that book to you. Why, you don't have to fuss with all these Latiny things, he said waving his arm, you don't have to pick

¹ E.L. Doctrow, *Ragtime* (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 151.

the garbage pails of Europe and build steamboats to sail the Nile just to find out something that you can get in the mail order for two bits!²

And though Doctrow painted Ford as something of an embarrassment, the reader notes that Ford gets a better ending than Morgan, returning contentedly (if ignorantly) to Dearborn. J.P. Morgan, meanwhile, completes his Egyptian journey solo and passes a dark and chilly night alone in the empty King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid at Giza, bitten by bedbugs and struggling to convince himself of the meaningfulness and transcendence of his experience.³

Doctrow's novel reveled in the madness of the first two decades of the American 20th century. A peeping tom pops out of a closet to shock Emma Goldman, who was massaging a nude Evelyn Nesbit. Archduke Franz Ferdinand congratulates Harry Houdini for inventing the airplane. Sigmund Freud rides through a carnival Tunnel of Love with Carl Jung. A ruined Model T sits at the center of a plotline that eventually kills two main characters and dooms a third to a Mexican exile (after Booker T. Washington fails to negotiate a resolution). Amidst this crazed backdrop, Doctrow's characters struggle to cling to their principles, to maintain some semblance of order in their lives, to find a new kind of fulfillment within the frantic cavalcade of American modernity.⁴

In E.L. Doctrow's hands, Henry Ford was emblematic of a self-assured anti-intellectualism that would see him scot-free through the trials and tribulations of this new reality. Ford had already found his fulfillment. As Doctrow described Ford upon the completion of the first assembly line-produced Model T's:

Part of his genius consisted of seeming to his executives and competitors not as quick-witted as they. He brushed the grass with the tip of his shoe. Exactly six minutes after the car had rolled down the ramp an identical car appeared at the top of the ramp, stood for a moment pointed at the cold early morning sun, then rolled down and crashed into the rear of the first one. Henry Ford had once been an ordinary automobile manufacturer. Now he experienced

² Ibid., 152.

³ Ibid., 144-53, 308-11.

⁴ Ibid.

an ecstasy greater and more intense than that vouchsafed to any American before him, not excepting Thomas Jefferson. He had caused a machine to replicate itself endlessly.⁵

The real brilliance in this brief passage is the deft way in which Doctrow infused Ford's triumph with both nation-building grandeur (Jefferson) and a profound misgiving about its implications (the crash and a heavy cadence on the word *endlessly*). It was a heady question, but one automatic by the time of Doctrow's writing some three decades after Ford's death: Ford succeeded, yes, but what did that mean for the nation?

E.L. Doctrow was far from the first author, before or after, who would grapple with the specter of the lanky industrialist from Dearborn. But whether writers have regarded Henry Ford with critical or even mirthful eyes, like Doctrow, or painted Ford in glowing hagiographical tones, there has been a unifying tendency in work both popular and scholarly on Henry Ford. Ford, the story goes, was the harbinger of the American 20th century; the father of mass production and midwife of a consumer culture mobile on four wheels; a living, breathing symbol of American modernity in the form of industrial capitalism tempered by down home know-how.

This chapter focuses on the *but* that inevitably comes at the end of those sentences. As I have shown in Chapters 1-3, Ford was beset by misgivings about the modernity he was helping to create. With projects like the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts, the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan, or the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* broadcast nationwide, I argue that Ford's work was characterized by a pervasive antimodernism. Following T.J. Jackson Lears in his formulation of antimodernism and carrying it farther into the twentieth century, Chapters 1-3 highlight Ford's ambivalence toward the reality in which he found himself between World Wars I and II and the means by which he confronted the future by creating a useful vision of the American past.

⁵ Ibid., 135.

In this chapter, I complete the picture by confronting Ford's most "modern" of works, the ubiquitous and transformative Model T. I argue that the Model T was shaped by the same antimodern impulse that brought us the Wayside Inn and Greenfield Village; that these latter projects were not departures from Ford's essential work, as they have since been described, but rather that the Model T was of one being with Ford's understandings of the past and his vision for the future. Joining the Model T with Ford's more obviously antimodern historical projects in part requires addressing the "great man syndrome" that has cropped up around Ford in the intervening decades. Even in some of the best scholarship on Ford, there's a sense that in creating the Model T, Henry Ford somehow anticipated the richness and breadth of American car culture that would follow. In fact, Ford would come to be surprised and even distressed by the cultural shifts that came in the wake of his "Tin Lizzie." The open question was the degree to which Ford could maintain control of the cultural implications of his creation. In a centennial volume commemorating the Model T in 2008, historian Robert Casey offered a typical *but* at the end of his introduction to the great four-wheeled symbol of the American twentieth century: "Yet before the Model T reached the end of its long production run, Ford had doubts about the consequences of what he had wrought."⁶

None of the factual information concerning Henry Ford here was previously unknown: that he was capricious and impulsive in his business dealings, that he withdrew late in life into a historical fantasy of his own making, or that he nearly ruined the company that had made him one of the richest men in the country. But there's a dissonance between the facts of Ford's life and his reputation as a primary mover in American business. *Fortune* magazine displayed as much when they named Ford the top American businessmen of the 20th century in a November, 1999 cover article.

⁶ Robert Casey, *The Model T: A Centennial History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), xv.

The authors closed their warts-and-all assessment with an abrupt pivot, from Ford nearly destroying the Ford Motor Company to Ford as harbinger of the century's shift toward mobility:

Increasingly whimsical and capricious, Ford reigned over a failing company run by sycophants and thugs until his wife and daughter-in-law forced him to turn it over to his grandson Henry II in 1945.

They were just in time. Ford Motor prospered with more professional management and now ranks as the world's second-largest industrial company (after General Motors), with revenues of \$143 billion. And the company has stayed in the family for four generations. Old Henry's descendants own 6% of Ford Motor stock, and his great-grandson William Clay Ford Jr. is chairman of the board. As for his larger legacy, well, just look around you.⁷

Earlier opinions of Ford had been even more glowing: a sample of executives named Henry Ford the greatest American businessman in history in a 1967 University of Michigan Survey, as did the readers of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce periodical *Nation's Business* in 1971.⁸

In the twentieth century United States, the symbol of the businessman took on a powerful web of sociocultural and patriotic associations. To be a great businessman was to be a visionary, possessing unusual insight into the future, preternatural knowledge of the true wishes and aims of the consuming public, and leadership skills on par with any of the great statesmen of history—a paragon of American manhood. “The equation of business enterprise and patriotism was not one which was derived for the first time on the occasion of the death of Henry Ford,” wrote Sigmund Diamond in 1955. “It appeared at least as early as the time of Commodore Vanderbilt; with the discussion of J. P. Morgan it received a new impetus; and it had been utilized by Ford himself.”⁹ The role was intimately tied up with modern American ideals of masculinity. Born in 1863, Henry Ford came of age in the midst of what Gail Bederman has shown to be a crucial time of change in conceptions of manliness. Middle class men at the turn of the twentieth century needed to combine the Victorian self-control that had become the hallmark of their nascent class identity with the

⁷ Stewart et al., “The Businessman of the Century.”

⁸ Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 481.

⁹ Diamond, *The Reputation of the American Businessman*, 146.

vigorous and virile lifestyle that was to be the bulwark against personal neurasthenia and national decline.¹⁰ The boardroom, then, was to be a new frontier of manly decisiveness and self-determination, and middle-class businessmen its aggressive warriors and conquerors.¹¹

Throughout his career, in the office and out, Henry Ford reveled in what Theodore Roosevelt called the “strenuous life,” tying into a longstanding antimodern concern with American “overcivilization” dating from the mid-19th century.¹² Ford regularly insisted for turning wrenches for himself, sometimes to the dismay of his Engineering Department employees. His “old fashioned dances” were as much a vigorous exercise program as they were a primer on his particular view of respectability. And Ford took a special pleasure in camping trips with his friends Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone, and John Burroughs. Armed with tents, furniture, automobiles, and a sizable support staff, the self-styled “Four Vagabonds” set out into the hinterland where they purchased antiques, watched birds with Burroughs, worked on engines with Ford, and enjoyed long conversations around the campfire following full catered dinners. At times they would take turns gathering firewood or cooking over the campfire. Biographer Steven Watts reports that on Ford and Edison’s camping trips, “the sixty-something automaker would cavort joyfully through the woods, running and jumping, climbing trees, and chopping logs.”¹³ Ford historians Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill wrote that during a stop during a 1918 trip, the camping party found themselves stuck in Pennsylvania “with a broken fan and a punctured radiator on one of their Packards.” “The mechanics shook their heads and suggested waiting for new parts from Pittsburgh. Ford snorted.

¹⁰ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 10-15.

¹¹ Peter N. Stearns, *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society*, 2nd ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990), 110-14.

¹² Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 26-28.

¹³ Watts, *The People’s Tycoon*, 16.

‘Give me a chance,’ he demanded, took off his coat, and in two hours had ingeniously repaired the damage.”¹⁴

Ford’s personal emphasis on manly pursuits also shaped his life at home in Dearborn. He often spent hours hiking through his estate, Fair Lane, admiring the bird population he and Clara worked so hard to encourage.¹⁵ In his younger days, Henry Ford built and piloted racecars. He generated considerably publicity for himself and his designs with exploits like setting the world record for a mile run in a racecar, on ice, in 39.4 seconds.¹⁶ Henry was also fond of challenging his companions to footraces, and he took great pride in his ability to outrun most opponents, even well into his eighties.¹⁷

But above all else, Henry Ford was a tinkerer. As a boy, Ford demonstrated an early aptitude and affinity for all things mechanical. When faced with the prospect of manual labor on the family farm, Ford was much happier to dismantle whatever machines were involved in the job, learning their workings and looking for some way of improving them and saving labor. He became especially fond of the precise and reliable machinery of clocks and watches. Early in his life, Ford “became obsessed with work efficiency.” Ford’s sister Margaret gave one example: their farm gates were heavy and unwieldy, so Ford invented a means of opening and closing them from the comfort of his wagon. Watts sums this up as an “admiration for production but disregard for hard manual labor”—a “Michigan farm boy” for whom production efficiency à la Frederick Winslow Taylor was simply “second nature.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge*, 485-86.

¹⁵ Watts, *The People’s Tycoon*, 465.

¹⁶ Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 24-27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 229-30.

¹⁸ Watts, *The People’s Tycoon*, 14-15.

In 1879, at age fifteen, Henry Ford quit school and moved to Detroit where he took an apprenticeship at the James Flower & Brothers Machine Shop, supplemented with a night gig repairing clocks and watches. A few years later, Henry returned to the family farm and spent his time repairing machinery for his neighbors and working on a design for a “farm locomotive” that might save him and others from the challenge and tedium of farm labor. After marrying Clara Bryant in 1888, the newlywed Fords settled into a new house on an 80-acre farm given to them by Henry’s father. But Clara was as pragmatic and devoted to Henry’s creative urges as Henry himself, and she agreed to move back to Detroit with him in 1891, where Henry reentered the machinist trade and continued working on his inventions. Ford secured a job covering the night shift at a Detroit Edison Illuminating Company substation at Woodward and Willis Avenues, where his devotion to his work and skilled maintenance of the generators helped him quickly move up the company chain. By the winter of 1892-93, Henry Ford was chief engineer of the substation, which afforded him a comfortable salary of \$1,000 a year and—crucially—the necessary stability to continue work on his design for an internal combustion engine.¹⁹

The first successful test of Henry Ford’s first gasoline engine provides perhaps the most apt image of his productive life. The setting was Christmas Eve, 1893, in the Fords’ home on Bagley Avenue in Detroit. Clara Ford was reportedly hard at work in the kitchen on a Christmas meal for the extended family. In came Henry from the shed, carting an ungainly single-cylinder internal combustion engine which, he had realized, would require three hands to operate. So Clara patiently assisted while Henry situated the machine over the sink, connected it to the kitchen’s electric light to provide a spark, and turned the flywheel. Meanwhile, Clara poured in the gasoline “from an engine grease cup,” as secretary Fred Black told the story, “one drop at a time.” The rudimentary engine

¹⁹ Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 10-17.

fired on the second attempt and ran for less than a minute, filling the kitchen with black smoke and both Fords with no small amount of pride.²⁰

In the twenty-first century, Americans are accustomed to the symbol of the eccentric genius, passionately toiling away in a shed or a garage at an invention that would revolutionize the American marketplace. The trope is particularly strong in computing, where Hewlett-Packard, Apple, Google, and Microsoft all tout their garage origins. But around the first decades of the twentieth century, the archetypical titans of business were J.P. Morgan and Cornelius Vanderbilt, a staid and patrician lot compared to a Larry Page or a Steve Jobs.²¹ Even though *Ragtime* slightly predated the explosion of computing technology and the image of the scrappy start-up, Doctrow well understood the cultural ground shift between an economy dominated by Morgan and one dominated by Ford. It is impossible to understand the impact of the Model T without keeping in mind the decidedly humble and haphazard scene of Henry Ford manually turning over a dirty engine in his kitchen, his dreams literally hand-fed by his wife, Clara. It was at once homespun and old-fashioned, and importantly, irrevocably new.

Ford was entering a busy network of machinists, engineers, and inventors of all kinds working on a patentable design for an automobile. Around 1894, Henry formed a relationship with engineer Charles B. King, a noted designer of systems for railroad cars, and King's assistant, Oliver Barthel, and the three began working on new engine designs. Jim Bishop and George Cato, Ford's coworkers from the Edison Company, joined the entertainingly named Edward S. "Spider" Huff in lending a hand over the succeeding years. Individuals and small companies around the country and the world were working on their own automobiles, and Ford's informal association followed their lead in learning and adapting ideas from their competitors into their own designs. And so they

²⁰ Ibid., 18-19; "The Reminiscences of Fred L. Black," 28.

²¹ On the popular reputation of Morgan and Vanderbilt, see Diamond, *The Reputation of the American Businessman*, 53-106.

inspected automobile designs like the Duryea and the Kane-Pennington, and pored over engine diagrams in *The American Machinist*. When Ford famously succeeded in testing his quick and lithe “quadricycle” on the early morning of June 4, 1896, it was truly the culmination of a team effort. As Ford drove up the street, Jim Bishop rode along on his bicycle and assisted when one of the “ignitors” failed so the little car could return home to Bagley Avenue. Clara Ford, who had stayed up with her husband many of the nights leading up to the first test, cooked breakfast for the triumphant inventors.²²

The intervening twelve years between Ford’s test of his quadricycle and the 1908 introduction of the Model T was a volatile mix of successes and failures for the 30-something inventor. A group of prominent Detroit investors lead by Mayor William Maybury created the city’s first automobile manufacturer, the Detroit Automobile Company, in 1899. Henry Ford was named Mechanical Superintendent and tasked with developing both a profitable product—the company’s first was to be a delivery truck—and a plant in which to manufacture it. But the truck that emerged was only of middling quality, and the company proved unable to produce them in either a profitable or timely manner. The Detroit Automobile Company ceased operations a year later, and dissolved in 1901.²³

Ford’s side project at Detroit Automobile was the creation of a low-slung, 26 horsepower two-cylinder racecar, which he entered in Michigan’s first automobile race, at Grosse Pointe, on October 10, 1901. After the completion of the steam and electric-powered classes, a bevy of mechanical problems among the gasoline-powered entrants left only two contestants: Ford’s racer, and the world speed record-holding Alexander Winton. With Ford himself at the wheel and Spider Huff hanging bravely off the running board to provide counterbalance around turns, Ford’s slower

²² Nevins and Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company*, 142-57.

²³ Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 30-34.

but harder car came from behind to win the race, passing an ailing Winton racer to post an average speed of 45 miles per hour over the 25 mile contest.²⁴

Ford's faith in the value of racing publicity was prescient. His victory over Winton helped land him yet another round of backers, again led by William Murphy, in the creation of the Henry Ford Company with Ford as Chief Engineer. But Ford proved more interested in the development of a larger, faster racecar than he was in the development of a marketable \$1,000 consumer automobile, and this company too found itself grinding along without a product. With the financiers complaining of Ford's intransigence, and Ford complaining of what he saw as a vulgar focus on profit, Henry Leland was brought in to take over operations. Ford accepted a \$900 buyout to leave the firm in 1902. Leland adapted Ford's designs to accept a new single-cylinder engine and began sales as the Cadillac Motor Company, joining the General Motors Corporation in 1909.²⁵

Coal magnate Alexander Malcolmson provided the financial leadership for Ford's third and lasting entry into the manufacturing business. The Ford Motor Company (FMC), incorporated in 1903, proved an effective vehicle for Henry Ford's hope of introducing a low-cost, mass-market automobile thanks in part to the wealth of talent accompanying Ford in the enterprise. Malcolmson's business manager, James Couzens, masterfully steered the financial end of the company and became one of Henry Ford's most important allies. Charles Sorenson, who would come to be Ford's production chief, and Joe Galamb, the Hungarian-born draftsman who would take a leading role in the design of the Model T, joined the firm in the following years. By 1905, the FMC had moved to a sizable 3-story manufacturing facility on Piquette Avenue, and was focused on

²⁴ Ibid., 37-41; Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 65-69.

²⁵ Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 41-43.

the development of its Model N, a light, durable, and inexpensive machine following on the heels of the Models C and F.²⁶

Malcolmson, meanwhile, was adamant that the company devote itself producing to large, luxurious, and expensive automobiles like the company's Model B and upcoming Model K, which was to weigh over 50% more and cost more than three times as much as the Model N. Though the inexpensive cars outsold their larger counterparts, Malcolmson's strategy was not unreasonable. The larger cars carried with them a larger profit margin, and fit well in an auto market that had been geared toward high-price models (and consumers with the income to afford them). But Ford would not be dragged along by the purse strings for a third time. Leaning heavily on the expertise of his ally, James Couzens, Ford outmaneuvered Malcolmson and secured control of the company. In 1906, the FMC board of directors removed Malcolmson from the role of Treasurer, who sold off his shares to leave Henry Ford the majority stakeholder and soon-to-be president of the company which bore his name.²⁷

Looking back on this period in his life, Henry Ford viewed his eventual emergence from these corporate struggles as a vindication of his disdain for the profit motive and the input of his investors. For Ford, there was a sharp and impermeable distinction between producers—like him, those who made things—and financiers, who worked solely with and for money. He described the rise and fall of the Detroit Automotive Company as a story in which he played the poor rube reformed: “A group of men of speculative turn of mind organized, as soon as I left the electric company, the Detroit Automobile Company to exploit my car...In March, 1902, I resigned,

²⁶ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 84-97. The alphabet soup of early Ford models here is unfortunate in terms of clarity, but necessary for showing the competing visions that finally yielded the Model T.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 97-100.

determined never again to put myself under orders.’’²⁸ More importantly, Ford took a deeply symbolic view of the actual automobiles his company produced:

For instance, I do not consider the machines which bear my name simply as machines. If that was all there was to it I would do something else. I take them as a concrete evidence of the working out of a theory of business which I hope is something more than a theory of business—a theory that looks toward making this world a better place to live. The fact that the commercial success of the Ford Motor Company has been most unusual is important only because it serves to demonstrate, in a way which no one can fail to understand, that the theory to date is right.²⁹

In other words, Ford’s response to the strategic successes that set his company at the forefront of the American automobile business leading into the second decade of the twentieth century was to reject the notion that these had been strictly business successes at all. Ford, in his own mind, was still in the workshop, transcending mere business, improving the lives of his fellow workers.

Toward the end of his life, when the River Rouge plant was the world’s largest manufacturing facility, Henry Ford would spend the majority of his time avoiding the heavy din of industry in his comparatively quiet Engineering Laboratory and Greenfield Village. During the development of the Model T, Ford’s retreat was a 12-by-15 foot room tucked away on the third floor of the plant on Piquette Avenue. In this early Experimental Department, according to employee C.J. Smith, Ford was free to tinker and experiment alongside his engineers. The work was a matter of trial and error: Ford or one of the others would suggest an idea, a part would be made up, fitted to a car, tested, and then revised. This was not the FMC’s only engineering department, but it was Ford’s own. On some projects, notably the five-cylinder car with which Ford hoped to replace the Model T, even production chief Charles Sorenson would be kept out of the room.³⁰

²⁸ Ford and Crowther, *My Life and Work*, 36.

²⁹ Ibid, 2.

³⁰ “The Reminiscences of Mr. C.J. Smith,” 3-4, 36-37, Ford Reminiscences, <http://cdm15889.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15889coll2/id/15876/rec/62> (accessed March 2, 2015).

Ford, for his part, spent hours on end in the room's rocking chair discussing the design with his team, sketching ideas out on the blackboard, or lending the occasional hand with a tool.³¹

The prime directive for the Model T was that it be durable, easily repaired when things did go wrong, and (above all) lightweight. The upshot, as Ford's thinking went, was that these would help keep the purchase price and the cost of ownership low. In this way, he was continuing along the same design line he'd pursued with his previous two companies and partially realized with the Model N. FMC tester Louis J. Kinietz recalled a drive he took with Henry Ford four years before the introduction of the Model T:

In the spring of 1904 I had the pleasure of driving Mr. Ford downtown several times in the car I was testing. I remember one day when he was with me, the conversation was naturally automobiles, and he asked me what I thought about them. I told him I thought they were the coming means of transportation. He said, 'That's right, if the manufacturer does his part, and would make the car practically free from trouble and lower in price so people could buy them.' I have heard it said that Mr. Ford just stumbled on the idea of the low-priced car. I am sure this is not so, for he had the idea in mind years before he built the Model T.³²

The differentiating factor between Ford's hopes in 1904 and their realization in 1908 was the advent of vanadium steel. Primarily associated with English metallurgist J. Kent-Smith, who demonstrated the steel to Ford at the Piquette Plant, vanadium steel was so-named for its inclusion of vanadium alloy. Though it required hotter temperatures than normal carbon steel to produce, vanadium steel was both lighter and stronger—a crucial advantage for an automobile designed to contend with rough, muddy, rutted roads. FMC began incorporating vanadium steel into its designs in 1907, and it was to be a crucial component in the effort to keep the Model T as lightweight as possible.³³

³¹ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company*, 389-90.

³² "The Reminiscences of Mr. Louis J. Kinietz," 5-6, Ford Reminiscences, <http://cdm15889.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15889coll2/id/7361/rec/1> (accessed March 11, 2015).

³³ Casey, *The Model T*, 19-20; Nevins and Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company*, 348-49.

Designing the Model T as a “universal car,” as Ford called it, required adapting it to the operating conditions it would face in the rural expanse of the United States.³⁴ In the first decade of the 20th century, the poor state of American roads in comparison to the far better roads in France and Germany exerted a marked influence on early American automobile design on the whole. European auto design generally followed the trend set by Daimler’s 1901 Mercedes, with a low-slung chassis and seats set directly behind the engine. American designers, by contrast, had to sacrifice the better handling and easy high-speed cruising offered by the Mercedes’ low center of gravity in favor of large wheels, high-strength steel, and generous ground clearance—durability, not speed, was the primary concern.³⁵ And the harsh conditions took a heavy toll on both drivers’ cars and their pocketbooks. Around the time of the introduction of the Model T, drivers might expect to spend half the value of an inexpensive car on repairs in one operating season.³⁶

In fact, the roads on which the Model T was designed to operate were often barely recognizable as such. According to historians John Jakle and Keith Sculle, “in 1900, the United States had some 2.5 million miles of rural road, but less than 160,000 miles [6.4 percent] could be said to be improved above the level of dirt track.”³⁷ The situation was worse in the South where, as historian Howard Lawrence Preston explained, “by 1904, only a fraction over 4 percent, or 31,780, of the 790,284 miles of public roadways in the South were classified as ‘improved.’” And “most of this so-called improved road mileage was within urban rather than rural counties and consisted of stretches of roads that were macadamized or graded and covered with a thin layer of gravel or

³⁴ “Universal car:” see “The Ford Line,” *Ford Times*, July 1915, 479; Christopher W. Wells, *Car Country: An Environmental History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 50.

³⁵ Casey, *The Model T*, 3-4.

³⁶ John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *Motoring: The Highway Experience in America* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

topsoil.”³⁸ The use of asphalt to improve more primitive road surfaces was not widespread until the 1920s, and the process of laying asphalt was not fully mechanized until the 1960s. At the turn of the century, most roads were made of dirt haphazardly dragged and graded by local farmers. “Little more than reserved rights-of-way left open for public travel, most of America’s rural roads were notoriously primitive and usually amounted to little more than dusty tracks that dissolved into mud in wet weather.” Drainage-improving cover, such as gravel or regional variants such as fire-hardened red clay in the South or oyster, clam, or “reef” shell along the Chesapeake and Gulf coasts were substantial improvements.³⁹

Efforts to improve American roads coalesced under what is now called the good roads movement. With overtones of rural uplift and improving the lives of farmers, the good roads movement is generally cited as an offshoot of progressivism. Its roots predated the Model T by several decades, stemming instead from the popularization of bicycling in the 1870s. Private clubs sprang up to assist and advocate for the interests of bicyclists and then motorists, with membership rolls ranging from the broadly democratic (such as the massive Automobile Club of Michigan) to the elite (Manhattan’s posh Automobile Club of America). Clubs throughout the country associated under the umbrella of the Automobile Association of America (AAA), founded in 1902. Its multivolume *Blue Book*, a clear and authoritative guidebook to roads and amenities in various regions of the country, became indispensable to early motorists.⁴⁰ The good roads movement was an especially attractive cause to farmers in the rural South, who looked forward to decreased strain on

³⁸ Howard Lawrence Preston, *Dirt Roads to Dixie: Accessibility and Modernization in the South, 1885-1935* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 13.

³⁹ Jakie and Sculle, *Motoring*, 56-61.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 34-37.

their animals, easier and freer access to regional markets, and improved educational and social opportunities.⁴¹

According to Preston, the locally-focused social benefits intended by good roads progressivism were different from what actually took shape in the first decades of the 20th century:

The negative reaction of farmers to the construction of interstate tourist highways [and the taxes associated with maintaining improved roads] is unmistakable evidence of how lost the basic progressive ideals of the good roads movement eventually became. While the label 'progressive' may very well pertain to road improvement efforts in the South aimed at improving education, increasing church attendance, facilitating farmers' efforts to get their produce to market, and helping to reduce expensive railroad rates, it does not accurately apply to what the movement actually became: an effort to construct long-distance interstate highways.⁴²

In fact, it was simply a sociocultural project of a different flavor that had won out: that of the 1900s "See America First" campaign, or what Marquerite Shaffer has called "national tourism"—tourism as a uniquely American (and lucrative) project of nation building.⁴³ The first step was drawing wealthy tourists out of the cities and into the hinterland, and that required reliable interstate routes.

As we've seen, there were major regional differences in road quality, but that variation could be just as stark traveling from one town to another. The Federal Highway Act of 1916, which based disbursement of federal highway funding on stringent standards for state highway departments, had a stabilizing and standardizing influence on road building in the United States. Prior to the Act, disparate and sometimes conflicting state and local authorities presided over a broken web of roads of widely varying surfaces and qualities.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, private highway associations sprang up to fill the void in federal and state oversight, creating, promoting, and maintaining a web of cross-country

⁴¹ Preston, *Dirt Roads to Dixie*, 13-18.

⁴² Ibid., 66.

⁴³ Marquerite Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 3.

⁴⁴ Jakie and Sculle, *Motoring*, 40-41, 53.

auto trails which competed for auto travelers. Each named highway had its own distinctive logo, which was posted on poles and signposts along the route so drivers could find their way. Even after large stretches of the trails became numbered federal interstate routes after the Federal Highway Act of 1921, many of the most popular and widely-used auto trails continued to be known by their original names. The Lincoln Highway (US-30), for example, was a private route with financial supporters including “General Motors, Willy-Overland, U.S. Royal, and Goodyear.” And the north-south Dixie Highway (whose eastern route became US-41) found support from Southern state governors as a route for vacationers to Florida, but also was important for its role in carrying industrial migrants north.⁴⁵

All this improvement, though, was merely in progress when the Model T debuted in 1908. And so one of the primary factors in its success was the ease with which the design absorbed the rigors of overland travel. The lowest point on the body of the car sat 10 inches off the ground, offering the Model T more ground clearance than many modern SUVs.⁴⁶ A three-point suspension for the front and rear axles allowed the car to keep all four wheels on the ground even over extremely uneven road surfaces and, crucially, allowed the chassis to flex without transferring the stress to the engine block itself, which had been a common cause of mechanical failure in less robust cars attempting to traverse poor roads.⁴⁷ Vanadium steel went into the components of the Model T most prone to physical abuse, including axles, frame brackets, parts of the transmission, and the driveshaft. An ingenious flywheel magneto provided the electric spark for the engine, as well as serving a lubricating function, without the need for a battery. And as befitting Henry Ford’s wishes,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 43-54.

⁴⁶ The 2014 iteration of Land Rover’s Range Rover boasts 8.7” of ground clearance. The 2014 Jeep Wrangler, in its most aggressive factory off-road trim (the “Rubicon” model), matches the Model T at 10”.

⁴⁷ Casey, *The Model T*, 23-25.

the Model T weighed a lithe 1,200 pounds, allowing it to be powered sufficiently by a small, tough 20 horsepower four cylinder engine.⁴⁸ *Motor Age* magazine lauded the Model T at its introduction:

This new car, replete with innovations which have been tried out during the last 9 months, combines in its make-up features heretofore untried in motor car engineering, all of which are introduced with the aim of building a light-weight machine, capable of irregular road conditions as encountered in America, and possessing reliability features equal to the demands of motorists.⁴⁹

The response by consumers was enthusiastic and immediate. Early demand so far outpaced production that beginning on May 1, 1909, the FMC stopped accepting orders for nine weeks in an effort to catch up.⁵⁰

The actual experience of driving a Model T was mentally and physically demanding, often harrowing, and far removed from the process of driving comparatively the comfortable automobiles that followed it. Drivers sat far above the road on a bench seat which covered the fuel tank, and the fuel level was determined by pulling up the seat and using a dipstick, or simply listening to the pitch and rhythm of the sloshing as one drove along. Driving a Model T involved three foot pedals—with quite different functions from their modern counterparts—as well as a hand lever and two stalks on the steering post controlling the throttle and spark timing, respectively. Starting the Model T's engine via its front-mounted hand crank required as many as seven steps (depending on how one counted), and mistake or misfortune could result in a runaway car or a broken wrist. Once moving, the driver was exposed to all the sounds, noises, smells, and dust of the road, the rattles of the car, and the full effects of the elements. A single windshield wiper—hand operated—was offered as optional equipment, but not until 1925.⁵¹

⁴⁸ "Field of Motor Car Development," *Motor Age*, July 2, 1908, 30-33.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 42.

⁵¹ Casey, *The Model T*, 96-102.

Naturally, there's little surprise that the experience of driving in 1908 was starkly different from the experience of driving a century or so later. But what drivers experienced behind the wheel of their Model Ts at the beginning of the 20th century does speak to the beliefs and intentions Henry Ford had the role of the automobile in American culture. Ford, in his antimodern vision, neither foresaw nor intended the shape American automobility would take as the century progressed.

First, a primer on *automobility*: in 2000, Mimi Sheller and John Urry argued from a sociological perspective that the automobile was not just a neutral technology or consumer product like any other, but in fact was a major shaping factor in modern industrialized culture and society. "Mobility," they posited, "is as constructive of modernity as is urbanity, that civil societies of the West are societies of 'automobility' and that automobility should be examined through six interlocking components." These six components, which I quote at length, were:

- The quintessential *manufactured object* produced by the leading industrial sectors and the iconic firms within twentieth-century capitalism (Ford, GM, Rolls-Royce, Mercedes, Toyota, VW, and so on); hence, it is the industry from which key concepts such as Fordism and post-Fordism have emerged to analyse the nature of, and changes in, the trajectory of western capitalism.
- The major item of *individual consumption* after housing which (1) provides status to its owner/user through the sign-values with which it is associated (such as speed, home, safety, sexual desire, career success, freedom, family, masculinity, genetic breeding); (2) it is easily anthropomorphized by being given names, having rebellious features, being seen to age and so on; and (3) generates massive amounts of crime (theft, speeding, drunk driving, dangerous driving) and disproportionately preoccupies each country's criminal justice system.
- An extraordinarily powerful *machinic complex* constituted through the car's technical and social interlinkages with other industries, including car parts and accessories, petrol refining and distribution, road-building and maintenance, hotels, roadside service area and motels, car sales and repair workshops, suburban house building, new retailing and leisure complexes, advertising and marketing, urban design and planning.
- The predominant global form of quasi-private *mobility* that subordinates other 'public' mobilities of walking, cycling, traveling by rail and so on; and it reorganizes how people negotiate the opportunities for, and constraints upon, work, family life, leisure, and pleasure.
- The dominant *culture* that sustains major discourses of what constitutes the good life, what is necessary for an appropriate citizenship of mobility, and which provides potent literary and artistic images and symbols...
- The single most important cause of *environmental resource-use* resulting from the incredible range and scale of material, space and power used in the manufacture of cars, roads, and

car-only environments, and in coping with the material, air quality, medical, social, ozone, visual, noise and other consequences of pretty well global automobility...⁵²

John Urry later described this as the “system of automobility,” in which “what is key is not the ‘car’ as such but the system of these fluid interconnections.”⁵³

The system of automobility, as described by Sheller and Urry, was what we might call a mature system—one dependent on a century of preceding social, cultural, and industrial developments and thus situated at the end of the 20th century moment at which it was written. In other words, automobility so described in 2000 is a historical endpoint, which Ford helped make possible with the introduction of the Model T 92 years earlier. The open question is the degree to which observers working from within this particular condition of modernity, in which automobility has been fully realized (or adopted, or imposed) may draw a causal line back to Henry Ford and the cars and system of production which bore his name. Return for a moment to the sense of inhuman inevitability accompanying Doctrow’s image of Ford watching the first Model T’s come off the assembly line. The point of real interest in the passage is not the first Model T, which rolls effortlessly down the ramp and into the sun, but the second Model T—the one made possible by mechanical replication—which appears at the top of the ramp before rolling down mindlessly into the back of the first. Here, Doctrow raised the important suggestion that Henry Ford had simply set a process in motion—“a machine to replicate itself endlessly”—for which he would not and could not maintain control over the endpoint. Ford’s interest in rebuilding and reimagining pre-automobile built environments at Sudbury and Dearborn take this suggestion a step further. Not only did Ford not foresee the extent of the changes automobility would involve for the United States, he actually took steps, if even on a small scale, to reverse them.

⁵² Mimi Sheller and John Urry, “The City and the Car,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24, no. 4 (December 2000): 738-39.

⁵³ John Urry, “The ‘System’ of Automobility,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 4/5 (2004): 25-26.

To reiterate, in 1908, the mature system of automobility was not a foregone conclusion. Americans had to develop their own ways of using, understanding, and adapting to this new machine. Christopher Wells surveyed a wide range of early-20th century periodicals devoted to motoring to develop a picture of early attitudes toward the automobile, and found that early drivers tended to fall into one of two basic schools of thought: what Wells called “mobility-minded” and “horse-minded” individuals. The difference was in the driver’s point of reference. Those who Wells called horse-minded compared the automobile to the horse and viewed one largely as a replacement for the other—the automobile might be better or worse than the horse, but the basic fabric of society and the environment would remain constant. Mobility-minded individuals, on the other hand, took a more transformative view of the technology as one that would radically change how Americans moved about the country. The most optimistic among them envisioned luxurious private vehicles moving speedily along smooth, publicly financed superhighways—a country remade in service to what we might now call automobility in its most optimistic guise.⁵⁴

In the first decade of the 20th century, the automobile best adapted to the transformative vision of the mobility-minded was the 1901 Mercedes, developed at Daimler by engineer Wilhelm Maybach. It was a sporty, low-slung affair in which the driver sat behind an engine concealed by a long hood—“the first ‘modern’ motor vehicle.”⁵⁵ Its power and stance made the Mercedes ideal for high-speed touring on well-surfaced roads. Automobiles like the Mercedes, which were often called

⁵⁴ Christopher W. Wells, “The Road to the Model T: Culture, Road Conditions, and Innovation at the Dawn of the American Motor Age,” *Technology and Culture* 48, no. 3 (July 2007): 500-02. Wells also points out automotive historians’ propensity toward another backwards reading in the history of the car—that of the general adoption of gasoline engines over electric or steam-powered automobiles. Many historians have viewed this as indicative of the obvious superiority of the gasoline engine, but Wells shows that this supposed superiority was still a matter of enthusiastic debate among the historical actors actually doing the deciding in the first decades of the twentieth century. *Ibid.*, 504-05.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 507.

“French-style” stateside, became a favorite of Americans with the means to afford their high price and expensive upkeep, and with access to good roads on which to run them.⁵⁶

But the majority of the United States, as we have seen, did not have access to improved roads early in the century. Fast, sleek French-style designs were poorly suited for use in much of rural America, and they were expensive to boot. Before the advent of the Model T, rural consumers were more likely to choose automobiles of the horseless carriage design, which were often indistinguishable from farm buggies with steering tillers and engines attached. They were economical, rugged alternatives to horses, and well-suited to the needs of horse-minded rural consumers.⁵⁷

The genius of the Model T, in Wells’s treatment, is that it blended the body style and high power-to-weight ratio of the French-style cars with the durability, high stance, and (crucially) the relatively low price of horseless carriage-style high-wheelers and runabouts. Ford’s “Universal Car,” as FMC advertising painted it, was universal in part because it adapted to the needs of both the mobility-minded and horse-minded consumer. In so doing, the Model T opened a space for Americans who had no previous reason to do so to imagine new uses, spaces, and possibilities for their automobility.⁵⁸

Horse-minded farmers were especially enthusiastic and creative in the adoption of the Model T to their needs. In addition to its uses as a car, farmers “displayed extraordinary ingenuity in adapting it for uses around the farm such as grinding, sawing, pumping, shelling, plowing, and even running washing machines.”⁵⁹ Aftermarket manufacturers offered kits for transforming the Model T

⁵⁶ Ibid., 508-10.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 510-14. On the two-sidedness of the American industry in 1908 see also Casey, *The Model T*, 1-12.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 516-22.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 521, citing Ronald Kline and Trevor Pinch, “Users as Agents of Technological Change: The Social Construction of the Automobile in the Rural United States,” *Technology and Culture* 37, no. 4 (October 1996): 763-95.

into a light, powerful farm tractor. And the T's reliable four cylinder engine performed admirably as a stationary farm engine, if the user jacked up the back end and suspended a belt around one of the rear tires. The "horse-minded" moniker is helpful in pointing out one of the greatest appeals of the Model T: it could do much of the work a horse could do, and a lot that a horse could not, without fatigue, concern for the elements, or complaint. A rural family could take their Model T several miles into town and back in the evening without concern for whether or not it would be ready for work, in its full capacity, the next morning. To modern drivers, this may seem overly basic, but to early rural Model T owners, it would have been positively transformative. Ford biographer Douglas Brinkley related the story of one farm inhabitant who "eagerly recounted how her whole world had opened up since she had acquired her Ford, which allowed her to work in the cornfield in the morning, do housework in the afternoon, and then drive thirty miles into town and back for a band concert at night."⁶⁰

Ronald Kline and Trevor Pinch have argued that the adoption and adaptation of the automobile in rural America during the early 20th century is best described in a SCOT (social construction of technology) model in which relevant social groups create their own meanings and interpretations for a particular technological object. Following the work of historians like Susan Douglas on early radio or David Nye on early electronic objects, Kline and Pinch show that farm men and women were as instrumental in the creation of the meaning of the automobile in rural life as manufacturers themselves; that far from an impermeable "black box," the automobile was an object of "interpretive flexibility" which rural Americans often reimagined for their own ends, creating new roles and modes of work and socialization for themselves in the process.⁶¹ One of the

⁶⁰ Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 127-28.

⁶¹ Kline and Pinch, "Users as Agents of Technological Change."

greatest strengths of the Model T, then, was the ease with which it could be adapted to the whims of any user with reasonable mechanical skill and imagination, and customized extensively with the countless aftermarket items, trinkets, and fixes aftermarket companies produced for it.⁶²

Author E.B. White fondly recounted the experience of customizing one's Model T in his 1936 essay, "Farewell, My Lovely!"⁶³ "There was this about a Model T," wrote White, "the purchaser never regarded his purchase as a complete, finished product...Driving away from the agency, hugging the new wheel between your knees, you were already full of creative worry." White then listed some of his must-buy items:

First you bought a Ruby Safety Reflector for the rear, so that your posterior would glow in another car's brilliance. Then you invested thirty-nine cents in some radiator Moto Wings, a popular ornament which gave the Pegasus touch to the machine and did something godlike to the owner. For nine cents you bought a fan-belt guide to keep the belt from slipping off the pulley.

You bought a radiator compound to stop leaks. This was as much a part of everybody's equipment as aspirin tablets are of a medicine cabinet. You bought special oil to prevent clattering, a clamp-on dash light, a patching outfit, a tool box which you bolted to the running board, a sun visor, a steering-column brace to keep the column rigid, and a set of emergency containers for gas, oil, and water...It was only a beginning. After the car was about a year old, steps were taken to check the alarming disintegration. (Model T was full of tumors, but they were benign.)⁶⁴

White also gave a sense of the rich oral tradition borne out of drivers seeking to repair their own Model T's and keep the often finicky machines running. "The lore and legend that governed the Ford were boundless. Owners had their own theories about everything; they discussed mutual

⁶² While it's clear that the manufacturer could not maintain complete control over how drivers utilized and understood their automobiles, the precise place where the lines are drawn between the agency of drivers, their automobiles, manufacturers, and the state in reshaping American space and social patterns under automobility has not been completely settled in the literature. For sake of clarity, historians have tended to focus their discussions the interactions of a few of these players, such as James Flink with manufacturers and drivers or Cotten Seiler with drivers and the state. Settling the whole issue is not germane to the purpose of this dissertation, hence the early citation of Urry's "system" and my model of a web of eliding and competing interests. But the role of the automobile in American history—the *how* of its effects—is still very much an open debate.

⁶³ E.B. White, "Farewell, My Lovely!" *The New Yorker*, May 16, 1936, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1936/05/16/farewell-my-lovely> (accessed January 20, 2015). Also cited by Wells, *Car Country*, 52n47 as Lee Strout White, *Farewell to Model T* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1936).

⁶⁴ White, "Farewell, My Lovely!"

problems in that wise, infinitely resourceful way old women discuss rheumatism.” “I remember once spitting into a timer;” wrote White, “not in anger, but in a spirit of research. You see, the Model T driver moved in the realm of metaphysics. He believed his car could be hexed.”⁶⁵

From the history of how the Model T came about, we know that Henry Ford had a great affinity for tinkerers, experimenters, and backyard mechanics. Even sitting at the head of the FMC colossus, Ford tended to count himself among their ranks. This was balanced somewhat by Ford’s annoyance at the constant clamoring for change in a product which he regarded as wholly sufficient for the ends of any driver.⁶⁶ The “universal car” moniker may have been a marketing flourish, but it ran closely alongside Ford’s personal vision for the Model T:

I will build a motor car for the great multitude. It will be large enough for the family but small enough for the individual to run and care for. It will be constructed of the best materials, by the best men to be hired, after the simplest designs that modern engineering can devise. But it will be so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one—and enjoy with his family the blessing of hours of pleasure in God’s great open spaces.⁶⁷

There was nothing in Ford’s plan to suggest designed obsolescence, market segmentation, fashionable styling, or any of the other automotive industry ideas that would eventually render the Model T outdated and outmatched in the American automotive market. Ford’s plan, as he expressed it, was to build the first and last necessary automobile.

Taken together, Henry Ford’s beliefs about what an automobile should be, as made evident in the Model T, can be expressed in three parts: first, the automobile should be *flexible*, in that it is adaptable to the needs, whims, and jobs of the owner—a tool, in other words, to lessen labor (especially farm labor) and provide healthful outdoor enjoyment. Second, the automobile should be *conservative*. Though the design of the Model T was subject to constant minor tweaks and revisions,

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Wells, *Car Country*, 54.

⁶⁷ Ford, *My Life and Work*, 73; Wells calls the “universal car” label “grandiose marketing hype.” *Car Country*, 50.

Ford was resistant to the inclusion of new technologies (e.g. the electric self-starter) and wholly uninterested in the notion of innovation for sake of newness. Furthermore, the Model T was purpose-built to function in the rural United States as it existed in the first decade of the 20th century; it was not forward-looking. The Model T was a car for the world as it was and had been, not as it might one day be. Finally, the automobile should be *simple*. Here, I borrow Ford's own word to describe what was reportedly the primary obsession of his automotive designs. Lincoln designer Eugene T. Gregorie remembered that Henry Ford "had a mania for simplicity, I mean, plain simplicity."⁶⁸ Simplicity made the car more durable and more amenable to a rough existence on rural back roads, but more crucially, simplicity in the sense of easy replication and mechanization was absolutely central to Ford's success in streamlining Model T manufacturing enough to push down its price. Simplicity allowed not only the optimization of a single car design, but also the optimization of the factory that produced it.⁶⁹

Of the three factors, flexibility, conservatism, and simplicity, that went into Henry Ford's automotive ideal, simplicity was the most central to the design of the car itself. But it was the Model T's essential conservatism that spoke most to Henry Ford's notions about what we would now call automobility—the whole interactive system of automobile, environment, culture, regulation, and driver. Henry Ford oversaw the design of the Model T with the farm, the muddy, rutted road, and the home mechanic in mind. Aesthetically, the Model T placed function over newness or beauty. Other than nickel-plating the radiator grille for 1926, Ford put little to nothing on the car that could be called a flourish or a nod to the class pretensions of its driver.⁷⁰ In fact, Ford resisted one of the

⁶⁸ "The Reminiscences of Eugene T. Gregorie," 25, Acc. 1673, Automotive Design Oral History Project, Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford, http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Design/Gregorie_interview.htm (accessed March 2, 2015).

⁶⁹ Wells, *Car Country*, 56-57.

⁷⁰ Casey, *The Model T*, 92-93. Here it should be noted that the adage of Model Ts coming only in black is not entirely accurate. Early examples came in a dark Brewster Green, red, or gray. All Model Ts were green from mid-1909 to early

central factors in the creation of the automobile as an object of consumer desire: advertising. Ford thought the manipulation of consumer desire a base pursuit, even as the rest of the market moved on without him and despite the urgings of his executives (including his son, Edsel). Ford “adamantly refused to allow his firm’s public image to move away from his emphasis on large-scale production, standardization, and low prices until well after the company had irretrievably lost its lead to Alfred Sloan’s innovative marketing and organization at General Motors”—that is, until after the end of the Model T.⁷¹

Of course, the Model T did not only exert an influence on Ford’s competitors. The impact of the T’s popularity on the expansion of automobility can hardly be overstated. In 1908, the year of the Model T’s introduction, there were 197,500 motor vehicles registered in the United States. By 1928, when the Model T’s production run had ended, there were 23,133,243 registered motor vehicles.⁷² The Ford Motor Company had produced over 15,000,000 Model Ts.⁷³ According to James Flink, “the withdrawal of the Model T from the market coincided with the realization of mature market conditions in the United States.” For the first time in 1927, the majority of new cars sold were replacing old ones; “by 1927 every American who could afford a car already owned one.”⁷⁴ Automobility, in other words, had transformed from a specter on the horizon to a nearly pervasive condition in the nineteen years the Model T was on the market, and the Model T deserved much of the credit for the shift.

1911, then were dark blue until about 1915, when black became standard until colors were again offered in 1925. Ibid., 67.

⁷¹ Pamela Walker Laird, “‘The Car Without a Single Weakness’: Early Automobile Advertising,” *Technology and Culture* 37, no. 4 (Oct. 1996): 803-05. Ford ceased advertising completely between 1917 and 1923. Casey, *The Model T*, 86.

⁷² National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, “Motor Vehicle Registrations, 1895-1929,” *Facts and Figures of the Automobile Industry* (New York: National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, n.d.) <http://www.railsandtrails.com/AutoFacts/> (accessed January 20, 2015).

⁷³ Casey, *The Model T*, 73.

⁷⁴ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 130-31.

This again put Henry Ford in T.J. Jackson Lears's antimodern bind: "how people like antimodern dissenters could half-consciously help to create a sleeker modern culture they neither understood nor desired."⁷⁵ For with the sudden ubiquity of the automobile came a number of marked changes away from the world into which Ford had introduced the Model T, and the world he would work to preserve at the Wayside Inn and Greenfield Village.

The most affective structural change was the above-discussed expansion in America's network of paved roads and highways. By the time the Model T was pulled from the market in 1927, what had been a haphazard web of dirt and gravel tracts was superseded by a quickly expanding, publicly funded network of paved and numbered federal highways. For the Model T itself, this meant that the tall, ungainly stance that had started out as one of its major selling points was becoming a liability. In the 1920s, Ford was losing sales to competitors like Chevrolet who offered cars with quieter and more comfortable rides. Features like the planetary transmission that had contributed to the Model T's durability and ease of repair on dirt roads were beginning to seem at best inconvenient and outmoded and at worst unsafe compared to the competition. Despite Ford's continuing ability to lower prices—the company's one trump card—Ford's absolute sales peaked in 1921 and began a decline from which they never recovered no matter how low the Model T's price was set.⁷⁶

Meanwhile, the automobile industry into which Henry Ford came of age—one of a personal network of engineers and experimenters turning wrenches in back lots and testing cars on empty early-morning streets—had grown up around him to take on the full trappings of 20th century managerial capitalism. Henry Ford, as we have seen, maintained a lifelong disdain for corporate organization. He hated paperwork and reports, he had no patience for boardroom meetings, and he

⁷⁵ Lears, *No Place of Grace*, xiii.

⁷⁶ Casey, *The Model T*, 92-94.

was inherently mistrustful of any conclusions brought to him that he had not arrived at himself.⁷⁷

Edsel Ford and other executives grew increasingly frustrated as it became apparent that the Model T was losing ground to its competitors, but Henry would not be swayed. FMC Vice President Ernest C. Kanzler found himself shut out of Ford's inner circle for drafting a memorandum laying out clear rationale for replacing the Model T in 1926. That spring, Henry Ford toured the company's New England sales agencies and returned to tell his executives, "most of your trouble at the present time is a question of your mental attitude."⁷⁸

But several miles north of Dearborn in Warren, General Motors under the control of Alfred P. Sloan, Jr. was surpassing the FMC's previously insurmountable sales numbers by taking Henry Ford's model of vertical integration and mechanized mass production and adding to it the newest strategies in early-20th century consumer culture. Where Ford had limited his company to the Model T and later—under Edsel's control—the Lincoln, General Motors offered a panoply of brands and models designed to reach every corner of the American automobile market. Ford's disdain for continually refreshed styling and designed obsolescence contrasted completely with Sloan's realization that in a saturated marketplace, automobile purchases could be motivated by emotion, fashion, and perceived comfort—and facilitated by offering customers sales on installment plans. In contrast to the unyielding sameness of the Model T, Chevrolets, Buicks, Cadillacs, Pontiacs, Oldsmobiles, Oaklands, and GMC trucks began arriving to the marketplace with up-to-date styling and full ranges of available convenience features and creature comforts. Ford's "universal car" had

⁷⁷ On Henry Ford's organizational ideas, see Ch. 1.

⁷⁸ Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge*, 409-16.

been supplanted by GM's universal range, and Ford sales would lag behind Chevrolet until the eve of the stock market crash in October, 1929.⁷⁹

As president of the Ford Motor Company since 1919, Edsel Ford had a clear understanding of the ground shift under the feet of the company and the Model T. He and executives loyal to him began quietly agitating long before 1927 for a new model that could better meet the needs of American consumers and protect the FMC's bottom line against the sales onslaught from its competitors. Henry's response, as he maintained the effective last word in the enterprise, was to dig in his heels and, if necessary, to directly contradict and undermine his son in an effort to maintain his vision. Ford did so even as it became increasingly clear that his actions were not only culturally regressive but, business-wise, so backward-looking as to border on delusional.⁸⁰

The 1927 launch of the Model T's successor, the Model A, met with massive public excitement and fanfare. Crowds clamored to see the new car at one of several nationwide "salons," where the car was put on display. The FMC estimated that 10,534,992 Americans visited salons or dealerships on the first day the car was unveiled.⁸¹ In New York, first-day orders with cash deposits numbered over 50,000.⁸² Hoping to capitalize on Henry Ford's huge public popularity and name recognition, the company took pains to present the handsome new Model A as the product of Henry Ford's expertise. And indeed, Ford did offer extensive personal input into the mechanical

⁷⁹ Ibid., 416-21, 476-77; Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 339-43. On Sloan's transformation of General Motors into a modern, bureaucratic, hierarchical, decentralized corporation, see David Farber, *Sloan Rules: Alfred P. Sloan and the Triumph of General Motors* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁸⁰ Nevins and Hill offered the most important qualifier to this view: that although Henry Ford was clearly ignoring the writing on the wall by resisting the end of the Model T, it was understandable that he would try to hold off on the introduction of its successor until the company could produce a model that could replicate some of the Model T's universal appeal. Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge*, 411-12. Sloan's corrective insight at GM was that the days of a single, simple universal car had already passed.

⁸¹ Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 356-57.

⁸² Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge*, 459.

design of the Model A. Styling remained principally Edsel's domain.⁸³ But Ford insiders knew that Henry had only come around to replacing the Model T under massive pressure both from his family and his executives. Given the chance, it seems likely that Ford would have continued selling his beloved Tin Lizzie ad infinitum in the belief that the world as he knew it still existed across the country.

1923, the year the Model T's market share peaked and began falling, was the year that Henry Ford purchased the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts and began his antimodern building projects in earnest, remaking a pre-automobile fantasy along the Boston Post Road (Ch. 1). In 1926, the year Ford personally spent \$288,000 to move the increasingly busy Post Road away from the Wayside Inn to insulate the property from the din of trucks and automobiles, Model T sales dropped by 400,000 units from the previous year while Chevrolet's improved by 260,000.⁸⁴ When Henry Ford barred automobiles from carrying visiting business leaders and dignitaries around the rainy Greenfield Village site on its dedication day in October 21, 1929, his company had finally retaken the sales lead against Chevrolet, though FMC's total value had fallen behind that of GM (Ch. 2).⁸⁵ Henry Ford was 66 years old.

The implication is not that there was a causal connection between the decline and demise of the Model T and Henry Ford's antimodern projects. The Model T's market share was still on the rise when Henry Ford began the renovation of his family homestead in 1919. But Ford's unwavering insistence on producing the Model T even as the automotive market and the landscape and culture of the United States changed so markedly around him was borne out of the same antimodern vision

⁸³ Ibid., 437-58.

⁸⁴ Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, 189-90.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 476-77.

that yielded the old fashioned dances, the Wayside Inn Boys School in Sudbury, and the message of Cameron's speeches on the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*. Henry Ford spent a massive amount of time, energy and capital not only denying the changing condition of modernity, as he did with the Model T, but actually advocating for an antimodern worldview to match his own. The Wayside Inn, the Edison Institute and Greenfield Village, the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*, and even the Model T by the end of its run were public entreaties toward the imagined America of Ford's youth. Ford's eventual failure was inevitable; he could not turn back the clock on cultural change in the United States. But the continuing popular appeal of Henry Ford and his legacy, over 150 years after his birth, is a testament to the cultural potency of his vision. Henry Ford did not just express or espouse antimodernism—he mass-produced it. In E.L. Doctrow's *Ragtime*, Henry Ford's populist, backward-looking anti-intellectualism rendered J.P. Morgan, the old guard, fully silent. No figure, even a decade and a half into the 21st century, has yet silenced the cultural impact of Henry Ford.

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