



American Automobile Production: From the Ford Model T to the “Rocket 88”



Assembly line workers at the Ford Highland Park auto plant, c. 1914-1915

Henry Ford’s Model T is considered to be one of the most famous, and for its time, best-selling cars in the world, transforming the automobile from a luxurious novelty item into an essential component of American life. In 1908, the year the Model T was introduced, there were only about 18,000 miles of paved roads in the United States. In order to handle the hazardous conditions of the roads, the Model T was outfitted with resilient but interchangeable parts, allowing for a car that was fashionable, affordable, reliable, and easy to maintain. Where earlier automobiles were built by hand one at a time, Ford’s integrated moving assembly line production gradually reduced construction time from 12.5 hours per car to 1.5 hours. This change effectively accelerated the speed of production, enabling Ford to lower the car’s price. By the time production ceased in 1927, Ford had sold 15 million Model Ts.

The onset of Great Depression in 1929 led a to significant decline in auto sales. However, upon the United States’ entry into World War II, all U.S. manufacturing of commercial cars and auto parts for domestic use came to an abrupt halt. Additionally, all civilian sales were frozen by order of the federal government’s Office of Production Management, a department soon after superseded by the War Production Board. The freeze would stay in effect from February 1942 until October 1945, during which time the auto industry retooled its factories to manufacture wartime contracts, such as tanks, jeeps, planes, helmets, and weaponry, which they sold to the Allied forces. With civilian auto production on hiatus, an estimated one million cars were taken off the road by their owners, to reserve for their own use after the war.

When the Allied forces declared victory over the Empire of Japan and Nazi Germany in 1945, American spirit surged to an all-time high. The United States emerged from the war a global superpower, having avoided the crippling debt and bombing campaigns that had decimated other countries. Americans who had served were ready to return home, start jobs and families, buy houses, and settle into a new lifestyle that emphasized leisure over sacrifice. By the time auto production resumed in the late 1940s, many Americans who had owned cars before the war were ready to replace their outdated vehicles with new models that were sleek, dependable, and often times, futuristic. With many Americans enjoying an abundance of optimism and economic prosperity for the first time since the Depression and the War, auto sales exploded as soon as factories began to produce new models. Among the most celebrated early cars to hit the postwar market were the 1949 Ford, the Cadillac Coupe de Ville, and the Oldsmobile “Rocket” 88.