

# The FORD Legend

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HENRY FORD



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## HENRY FORD - MOVIE MOGUL

By Phillip W. Stewart

In the Winter 2010 issue of this newsletter, in the *What is Your Ford IQ?* column, there was a true/false question about the Ford Motor Company Motion Picture Unit. Did you get it right?

Yes, it is true...there was a time between 1915 and the mid-1920s during which Henry Ford was a movie mogul, overseeing the largest motion picture production and distribution operation on the planet. During those years, roughly one-seventh of America's movie-going audience watched Ford Motor Company (FMC) films each week! The films were also translated into eleven different languages and shown around the world.

How did Henry Ford get into the movie business? While doing research for my latest book, *Henry Ford's Moving Picture Show: An Investigator's Guide to the Films Produced by the Ford Motor Company, Volume One, 1914-1920*, I was able to piece together a story that began during the summer of 1913. That was when Ford witnessed a movie production company filming some of the operations of his Highland Park plant. He was in one of the scenes, which afforded him an up-close look at the movie-making process. Intrigued by the possibilities of using this technology to train his large workforce, Ford also thought it might be a way to communicate the news of the day to the public, to educate them about the world in which they lived, and, of course, illustrate the wonders of Ford automobiles.

In true Ford style, he bought a movie camera that September, tinkered with it, started filming family and factory scenes, and consulted with friends like Thomas A. Edison. In April 1914, Ford told Ambrose B. Jewett, the head of the company's advertising operation, to set up a "moving

picture" department. Within months, FMC became the first American industrial firm to possess a fully functional motion picture facility. Its two-man staff quickly grew to a crew of over 25, as it acquired modern 35mm cameras and established its own film-processing laboratory at the Highland Park Plant. Thus, Henry Ford's Motion Picture Department was born, and rivaled any Hollywood studio. The first film produced, *How Henry Ford Makes One Thousand Cars a Day*, was released later that summer.

For the next two years, the Motion Picture Department's principle production effort was the *Ford Animated Weekly*. Movie houses around the country showed this 10 to 15 minute educational newsreel that documented the events of the day, at no charge. At its peak, more than three million people in over 2,000 theaters viewed the *Weekly* regularly. Although there was no advertising in the reel, a rendering of a Ford Model T radiator was the background for the superimposed opening title and subsequent sub-titles.

In late 1916, Ford decided to slow down the hectic production pace required to make newsreels and turned instead to less  
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From the collections of The Henry Ford (P.833.5412/THF103594)

(continued from page 1)

expensive to produce historic and educational films. *The Ford Educational Weekly* was the result, with in-depth coverage of topics like geography, travel, and education. Although theater managers were at first resistant to the change, titles such as "A Visit with Luther Burbank," "The Story of a Cake of Soap," "Petrified Forest of Arizona," and "Story of a Grain of Wheat" proved to be popular with the movie audiences of the period. Again, at no cost to the theater owners, these films were commercial free except for a "Distributed by the Ford Motor Company" tag line on the title graphic.

In September 1917, the FMC in-house newspaper, *The Ford Man*, reported that, "Today, Ford films are shown in more than 3,500 theaters in the United States alone – likewise throughout the Dominions of Canada, the British Colonies, South Africa, India, Japan and most of the countries of Europe. It is a conservative estimate that between four and five millions of people are entertained by the pictures in this country every week." By mid-1918, FMC had become the largest motion picture distributor in the world spending \$600,000 a year—the equivalent of over \$8.6 million today—on film production and distribution.

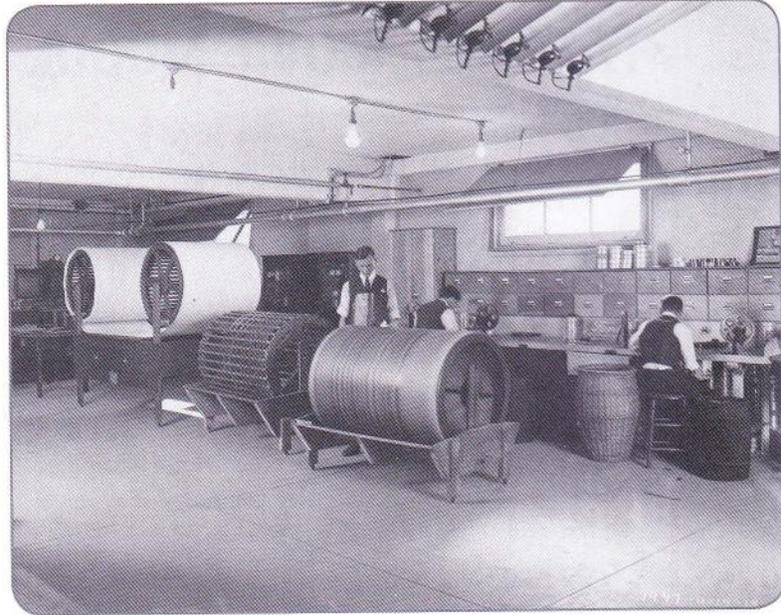


From the collections of The Henry Ford (P.833.1949/THF103592)

In late 1918, in another effort to trim costs, FMC partnered with the Goldwyn Distribution Corporation to circulate the *Ford Educational Weekly*. Near the end of 1919, the series appeared on over 5,200 movie screens every week. Soon thereafter, in an effort to reduce production costs even more, FMC began to charge theaters a dollar a week to show the reel. Theater owners noisily objected, and many ceased to show the film. Then, in May 1920, with the publication of anti-Semitic attacks in the Henry Ford-owned newspaper *The Dearborn Independent*, more theaters stopped running the title in protest. By August, distribution numbers had dwindled to about 1,300 theaters and the *Ford Educational Weekly* ceased production in December 1921.

Continuing with Ford's focus on educational films, the newly

formed Department of Photography, which combined motion picture and still photography operations, was directed to develop and produce the *Ford Educational Library* in 1920. Designed for use in elementary and high schools, universities, churches, and other non-profit educational institutions, a committee of college professors identified appropriate topics for the series like transportation, agriculture, geology, medicine, safety, and civics.



From the collections of The Henry Ford (P.833.1947/THF103590)

The 50 or so completed titles in the *Library* were sold for five cents per foot or rented for fifty cents a day per reel. While the *Ford Educational Library* was heavily promoted, it was not widely accepted and faded from sight during the waning months of 1923.

As noted earlier, while cameramen were busy creating educational and training films, others worked to actively promote the company and its products. Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, motion picture cameramen documented the activities of the company and captured FMC products in action. Ford had this footage edited into promotional films that were provided to FMC branch managers and dealers throughout the country. The earliest examples, produced in 1920, *Keep the Boys on the Farm* and *Farm with a Fordson*, promoted the advantages of Fordson tractor power over animal power. Other films of the era included *The Ford Way of Coal Mining*, *Where and How Fords Are Made* and *Golden Opportunities*. While most films ran twenty to thirty minutes, some like *The Ford Age*, were longer and ran up to an hour in length. A variety of places, such as dealership showrooms, fraternal lodges, schools, recreation halls, county fairs, and even on the sides of buildings were used to show these promotional movies. These films proved to be so popular in both large cities and rural areas, that by the mid-1920s FMC estimated 2,500,000 people a month came to view the films. In some of the more rural areas, these films were the first motion pictures that the farmers and their families had ever seen.

In addition to all the films mentioned above, Henry Ford had his own private photographer. Most of the photographs and motion

picture footage of Henry and Clara Ford, their house at Fair Lane, their son Edsel and his wife Eleanor, the grandchildren, Ford's close friends, visiting VIPs, camping trips, and travels were shot by one man, George Ebling. From 1918 until his retirement in 1946, Ebling, or a team of assistants under his direct control, captured the personal and family side of Henry Ford. During those years, he filmed everything from the Ford grandchildren's birthday parties to the New York World's Fair. Ebling's keen eye, adaptability to an often changing environment, and patience with the Ford family created an unexcelled historic visual record of hundreds of titles on thousands of feet of celluloid.

At the height of the Great Depression in 1932, after suffering its worst sales numbers on record, the necessity to reduce costs forced FMC to shutter its airplane business and some other non-core endeavors, including the motion picture production facilities. Thus, Henry Ford's movie mogul days officially ended. A greatly reduced Photographic Department staff continued to make films documenting the company's operations for internal use, while outside motion picture production companies were contracted to produce promotional and sales films. Though the Motion Picture Department was reestablished in 1952, it never achieved the impact that it had when Henry Ford was in charge. On November 28, 1962, FMC transferred all rights to their surviving 1,800,000 feet of motion picture film to the National Archives.

Because of the broad scope of their subject matter and the era in which they were photographed, the films of the Ford Motor Company provide a unique look at America's past. The moving images are truly Americana in motion, produced by an original movie mogul—Henry Ford.

*Phil Stewart is an award-winning author of seven motion picture related reference books. His most recent title, Henry Ford's Moving Picture Show: An Investigator's Guide to the Films Produced by the Ford Motor Company, Volume One, 1914-1920 is available from Amazon.com and other on-line sources. Please visit Phil's website at [www.pwstewart.com](http://www.pwstewart.com) or contact him via email at [pws@pwstewart.com](mailto:pws@pwstewart.com).*

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## HFHA's Mission

To Foster Interest in the Life and Accomplishments of Henry Ford, and to Preserve and Interpret the Landmarks Associated With His Life.

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

By Joe Adams



The recent HFHA Garden Tour at Fair Lane was an event that will not soon be forgotten. The beauty of the grounds of the estate on a cloudy spring morning was remarkable. I was struck by the care and detail invested in planning the transformation of the property from what was once farmland by the Ford's and Jens Jensen, and how seemingly no detail was left to chance.

The selection of each variety of plant was stunning. Of course it was a moment of nirvana as we took in the wonderful Lilacs, in full bloom that day, and their intoxicating perfume which is truly one of my favorite scents. However the one item that struck me the most was the lovely yellow rose bush just outside of the pool area. A lovely shrub that had just begun to bloom, we were told that the flowers last approximately three days... and that the bush blooms just once a year... A year's worth of labor and care for just 3 days. I can only imagine that Mrs. Ford cherished those 3 days, and would like to believe that both she and Mr. Ford took time to enjoy those special days that the pale yellow flowers graced their home.

How often, when we encounter a thing of beauty or a special moment, do we really take the time to stop and smell the proverbial rose?! I'd like to think that events like the garden tour or our upcoming visit and dinner at the Roush garage are just such moments. A time to gather with friends who share a common interest, take in the sights of the moment, and remember a man who profoundly impacted our lives. Would you please take a moment to share the upcoming annual dinner and future events that come along our way? As always, we enjoy sharing the journey with you.

## Ford Quote

*The secrets of life are open to the thinker... We prefer the swarm of other people's ideas to our own thinking, because thinking is the hardest kind of work a mortal can do. And just because it is hardest, the higher rewards are reserved to it. Thinking calls for facts; facts are found by digging; but he who has gathered this wealth is well equipped for life.*



- Henry Ford