

Four-Year Wonder

Ford re-invents itself after the Model T.

BY BRAD BOWLING / PHOTOS BY CHARLIE SELF ■

IT WAS FORD MOTOR CO.'S SECOND MASS-PRODUCED MODEL WHEN INTRODUCED AT THE TAIL END OF 1927, BUT THE "A" REPRESENTED MANY FIRSTS FOR HENRY'S EMPIRE.

Resistance to unnecessary annual styling changes made the Model T the cheapest and most successful car in the world during its 19 years of production, but even stubborn Henry Ford knew his better idea had run its course by May 25, 1927, when the T's retirement and replacement were announced.

With more than 15 million satisfied Model T owners on the road, Ford had the potential to either make a giant mistake or enjoy enormous success with its follow-up design. No one was more aware of this gamble than the folks at Ford, especially Edsel Ford, who had been campaigning to modernize the company's offerings since assuming the role of president in 1919.

The Model A's debut through Ford's network of dealers on December 2 was a frenzy of excitement and interest that in modern times would only be matched by The Beatles' Ed Sullivan appearance or the release of the final Harry Potter novel.

Fortunately, the Model A was enough like the old T that it attracted Ford loyalists, while being different enough to appeal to first-time buyers looking for modern transportation. The family resemblance between T and A was enhanced by a new radiator (with V-shaped dip), rounder fenders, and a higher belt line. Some accounts from the time credit the A's appearance improvements to Edsel's eye for beauty and the influence of Lincoln, which he had acquired from Henry Leland in 1922.

Press material from the period reveals the Model A was composed of 6,800 individual parts versus the Model T's 5,000. A big chunk of that difference was found in the L-head cast-iron four-cylinder engine, which grew from 176.7 cubic inches in 1927's T to 200.5 inches in the A. Compression rose from 3.98:1 to 4.22:1, valve lifters changed from solid to mechanical units, and a water pump provided consistent engine temperatures. The improvements doubled the available horsepower, raising it from 20 @ 1,800 to 40 @ 2,200 for a claimed top speed of 65 miles per hour. Torque increased from 83 lbs-ft at 900 rpm to 128 lbs-ft at 1,000 rpm. The magneto was replaced by a battery and ignition system.

Ford conformed to the rest of the world's opinion about driver input with the Model A, abandoning the T's unconventional and sometimes confusing system of levers and pedals. The T's planetary gearbox was replaced by the A's three-speed sliding gear setup.

Ford's four-wheel, mechanical internal expanding brakes debuted on the Model A, giving a badly needed upgrade to the T's system of rear-only brakes. The A's wheelbase grew 3.5 inches



ENGINE: The Model A's L-head cast-iron four-cylinder engine displaced 200.5 cubic inches and featured 4.22:1 compression. It produced 40 horsepower at 2,200 rpm for a claimed top speed of 65 miles per hour.



CAP: Radiator caps just don't have the same flair they once did.



HORN: The Spartan horn was standard equipment on the Model A.



IDENTIFICATION: After nearly 80 years, this Model A still wears its service I.D. badge. It was originally sold at Apperson-Lee Motor Co. in Lynchburg, Virginia.



SUSPENSION: Although still primitive by today's standards, the Model A's suspension and steering equipment were much improved over the Model T's.



CLUSTER: The Model A driver had more information than ever before at his fingertips. By 1930, the dash cluster included gauges for measuring fuel, amperes, oil pressure, mileage, and trip mileage.



STORAGE: The Model A's interior was made of more refined materials than that in the Model T. This pocket was useful for storing maps and other paperwork.

(up from the T's 100 inches) and double-action hydraulic shock absorbers debuted with the A, bringing a smoother, more civilized ride than the go-anywhere T.

Twenty-one-inch welded wire wheels became standard equipment on the 1926 Model T, and that same diameter carried into the '28 A, which wore 4.5 x 21-inch tires. Two-piece bumpers were similar to what had appeared on the '27 T, and the crossbar joining the A's headlights was

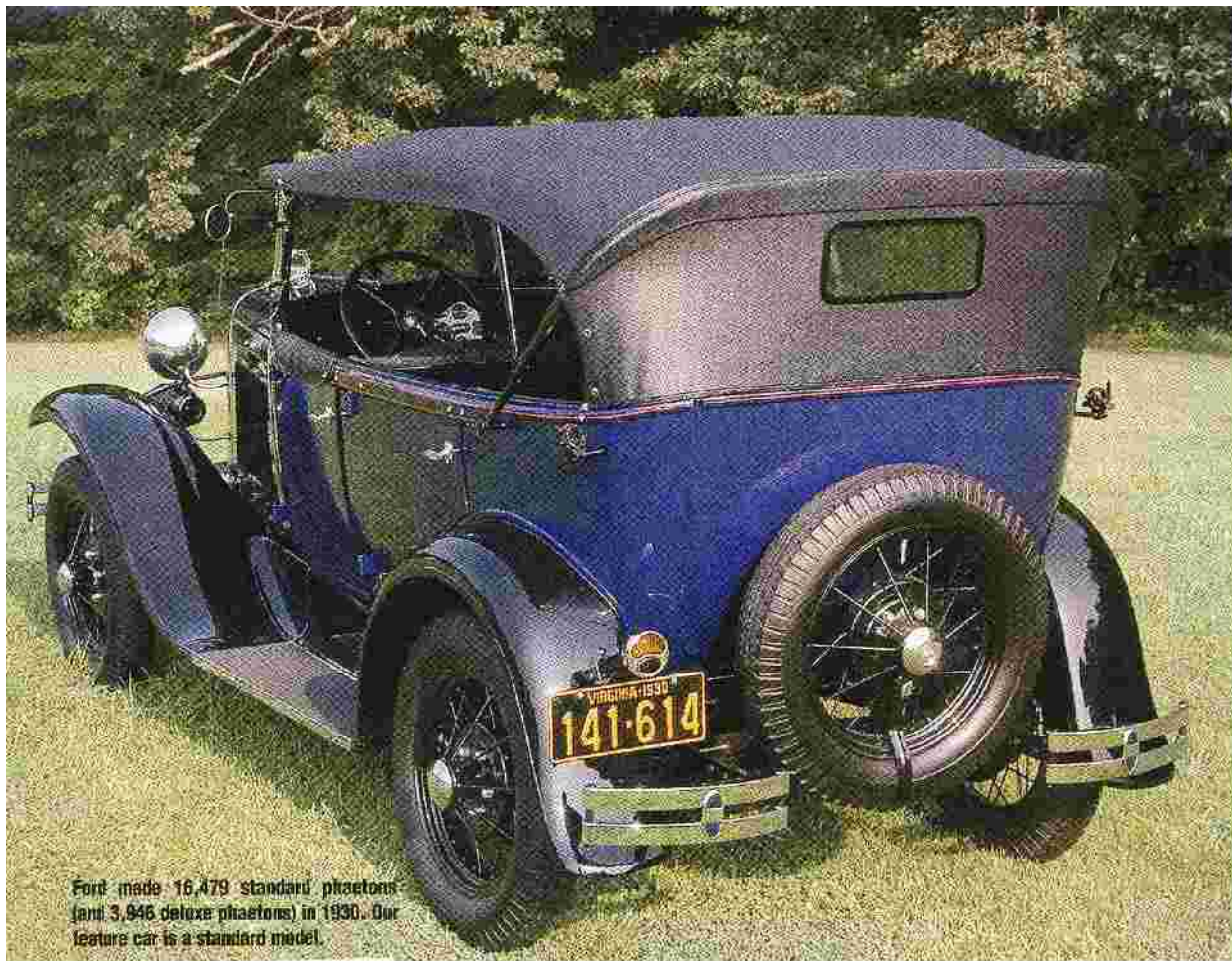
gently curved on some models.

The Model A's standard equipment list was very attractive when compared to what other manufacturers offered, and it included a starter, front and rear bumpers, Spartan horn, speedometer, gasoline gauge, windshield wiper, and spare tire. Ford began using laminated safety glass in all of the A's windows and windshield.

Greater mechanical complexity meant

added weight. A four-door 1927 Model T sedan weighed an advertised 2,004 pounds; the equivalent Model A tipped the scales at 2,386, but with those extra pounds came a quieter ride and greater comfort.

During its first year of production, the Model A was available in several two- and four-door body styles, including roadster, phaeton, business coupe, Tudor, and Fordor. Prices ranged from



Ford made 16,479 standard phaetons (and 3,946 deluxe phaetons) in 1930. Our feature car is a standard model.



\$460 for a four-door phaeton to \$600 for a taxi.

As expected, the Model A was Ford's new success story. On February 4, 1929, Ford turned out its one-millionth A; on July 24 of that same year, the company produced its two-millionth Model A. By the time it was replaced with the Model 18 V-8 and Model B four-cylinder in 1932, the Model A had sold 3,572,610 units in the United States alone.

Our editorial attention was recently caught by one of those 3.5 million Model As — an early-build 1930 four-door phaeton convertible owned by William Hoskins, of Lynchburg, Virginia. It is an AACA Senior National winner that was assembled in Norfolk and has matching numbers. Considering it was sold to its first owner in Lynchburg and only has 50,000 miles registered, it is entirely possible it has never left the state of Virginia.

What stands out about this car is the overall quality of its restoration, a multiple trophy-winning effort performed

by previous owner C.E. Williams. Williams prepared for the day he would restore old cars by spending his working life as a mechanic, and it shows in every detail.

The LeBaron-Bonney interior and top add a luster to the phaeton that probably didn't exist in the factory-delivered version, as does the gloss paint on the underside of the fender wells and on the frame. Put knees on the ground, and a quick look verifies this was, indeed, a frame-off restoration. The deep blue body color is a perfect complement to the gleaming black fenders and polished stainless steel bumpers, radiator surround, and headlamps. Williams did the spraying himself, claiming it made such a mess in his shop that he was still cleaning it up months after the fact.

While some might dare to call this level of attention "over restored," we prefer to appreciate it for what it is: the car Edsel Ford dreamed his company could make, the Lincoln that every working man could afford. ■