

# The Twenty Millionth Ford

## A Short History Lesson



*By Jim Spawn, Editor*

### And So It Was...

Many of us in the Model A Ford hobby double-dip as part-time Ford history buffs. It sort of comes along with the package. Generally speaking, a MAFCA member can quote dates and statistics that few Americans can recall. We seem to really enjoy reading about the Model A era and seeing photographs of the days when our cars were either new or were in daily use. T'was another time, indeed.

History records that on April 14, 1931, Henry Ford with son, Edsel, at his side drove off the assembly line in the Twenty Millionth Ford. The car was specially painted with TWENTY MILLIONTH and the Ford logo on both sides and also on the top. Ford was big into aviation by then and wanted to be sure the car was recognizable from the air. This event is well documented and reported in many books and in this publication, (see *The Restorer*, Vol 18, Issue 5), too.

Henry drove the Twenty Millionth Ford, a 1931 Slant Windshield Town Sedan,

over to his Fairlane estate and parked it next to his first car, the Quadracycle. Many photographs were taken of the two historic vehicles side-by-side, with the famed industrialist and one of the richest men in the world.

Milestone cars were not new. Ford did pretty much the same thing with the Ten Millionth Ford, a 1924 Model T, and the Fifteen Millionth Ford, a 1927 Model T. These cars were used for promotion and general hype. People turned out by the thousands just to see them. The Twenty Millionth Ford was no exception. The fact that it happened to be one of the very first Slant Windshield Town Sedans was probably no accident either.

This car would gain world-wide exposure on its nationwide publicity tour and without question became the most photographed Model A in history. We've seen many of those photographs published in *The Restorer* and other publications, as well as books. For this issue, we had to pick and choose from dozens that we have access to. There are hundreds more that

could easily fill a whole issue of this publication.

Within a week, this car was the central attraction as it was taken to Ford dealerships, State Capitals and landmarks nation-wide, along with as many as twenty other 1931 models of various body styles. Sort of a rolling new car show, they began in the East and headed out West. At these stops, local dignitaries, celebrities, and dealers hob-nobbed with the press as it bestowed tons of free publicity for Ford. Many of the states presented special 20,000,000 license plates to the car and a special log book was brought along for all to sign their names as the car toured across America.

The many photographs taken of the Twenty Millionth Ford during the publicity tour are interesting to look at. They show us a time when people stopped what they were doing to come and watch a twenty-one car parade. Schools let the kids out and many towns provided a police escort and a Brass Band for the Ford caravan. The car was inducted into the Sioux



They really did bring out the Brass Band. At daily stops the Twenty Millionth Ford Publicity Tour saw huge crowds. The schools were let out and it was a big day in the lives of small town America. Petty Motor was the site of this stop in Cedar...something America. Today, we'd pay big bucks for that Ford sign and those Standard gas pumps. A Saturday afternoon matinee at The Orpheum was a highlight!

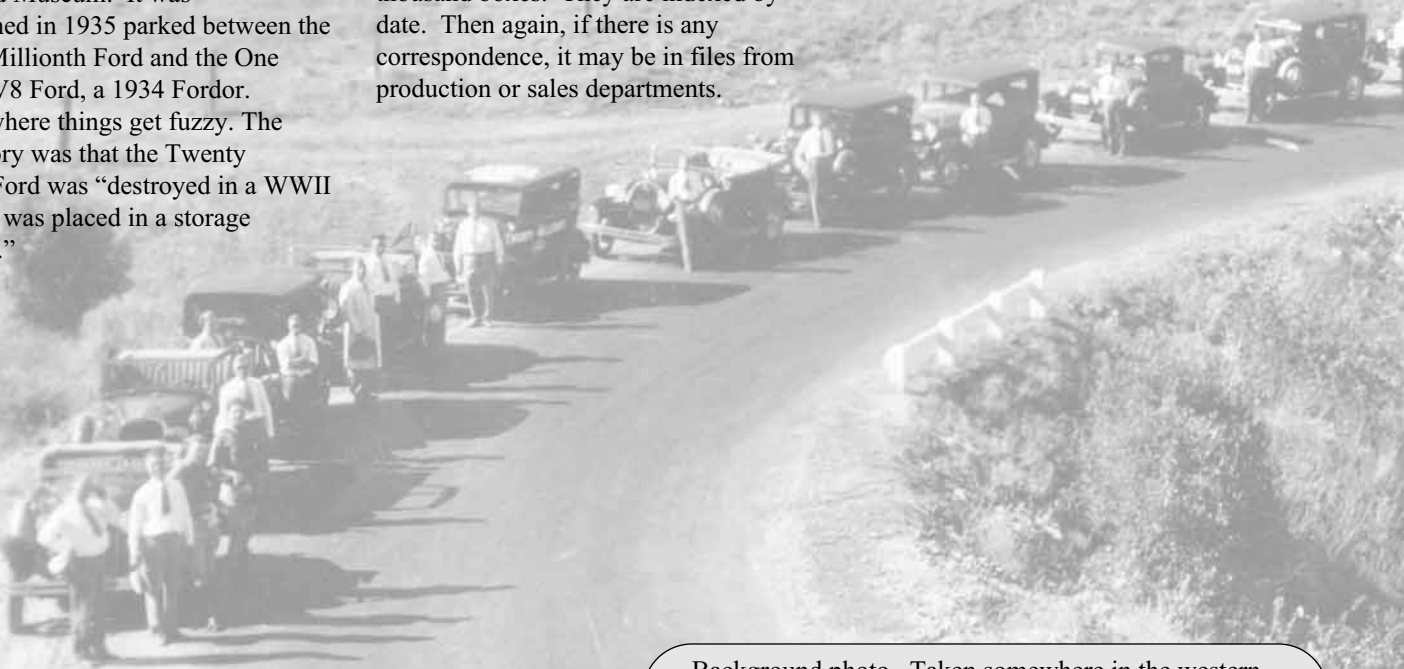
Indian tribe and received the checkered flag at the Indianapolis Speedway. Lots of famous people drove the car (in addition to Henry Ford), like Eleanor Roosevelt, Douglas Fairbanks, Admiral Richard E. Byrd, mayors, governors, and all manner of Ford dealers and management types. It became the first non-government owned car to descend to the bottom of Hoover Dam.

Upon its return to Detroit in December 1931, it was placed in the newly opened Henry Ford Museum. It was photographed in 1935 parked between the Fifteenth Millionth Ford and the One Millionth V8 Ford, a 1934 Fordor.

Here is where things get fuzzy. The popular story was that the Twenty Millionth Ford was "destroyed in a WWII fire after it was placed in a storage warehouse."

Today, Bob Casey is the curator in charge of vehicles at the Henry Ford Museum. He says that he can find no records of a fire, nor list of destroyed cars, nor evidence of a sale of the Twenty Millionth Ford. He has searched the usual records, but there are many other places that correspondence may be. "We need a point of entry," Casey says, "a date or a name to begin more research." He explained that just Henry Ford's office files alone are comprised of over two thousand boxes. They are indexed by date. Then again, if there is any correspondence, it may be in files from production or sales departments.

The log book that was signed at each stop is missing. Nobody knows where the special 20,000,000 license plates are. In fact, that beautiful bronze plaque, the one pictured on *The Restorer* cover in 1974, that the California dealers commissioned and sent to Henry Ford is not listed on any inventory at the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village. That doesn't necessarily mean none of it happened; it means there are no records.

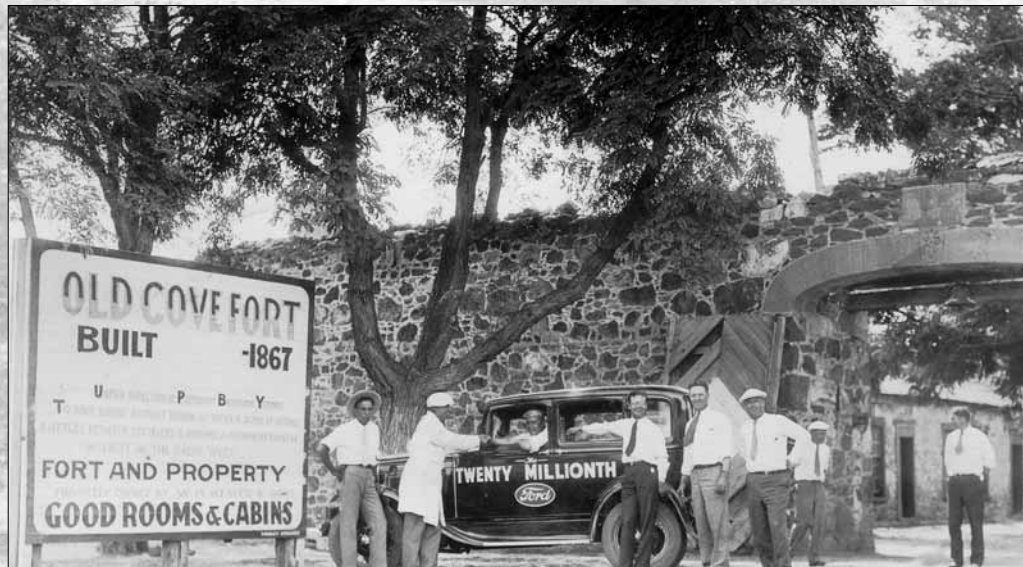


Background photo. Taken somewhere in the western states, you can see here the whole tour. Clean shirts and ties were the attire in those days. The lineup of 1931 Models was impressive, including the Town Car at the rear.

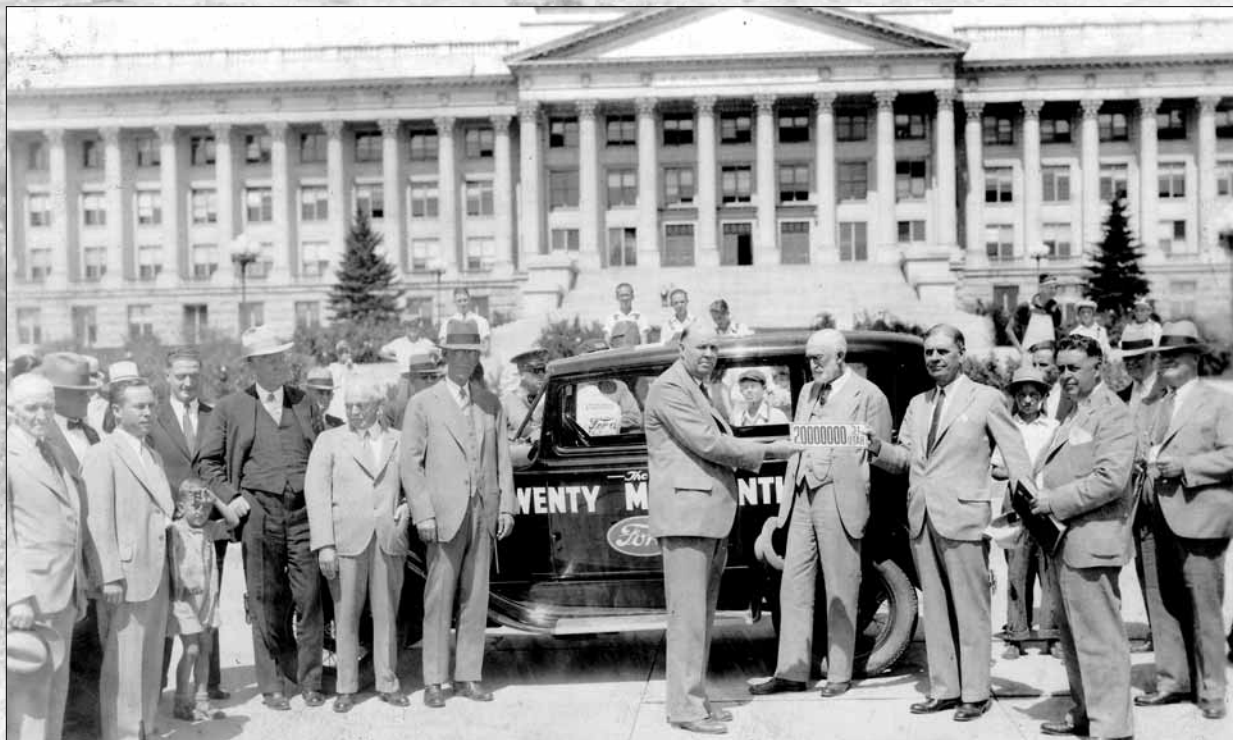
*Photographs from the Frank Cooper collection.*

We must remember a few things. The Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village is a gigantic operation. Much of the manpower is supplied by hundreds of volunteers and over the past seventy years, dozens of curators and administrators have come and gone. Administrators have been replaced and what was a high priority to one CEO may not have been to his successor. You can bet that, over the years, a few "light fingered" people have been asked not to come back. So, just like there are some holes in every local museum's recordkeeping, the Henry Ford Museum has the same potential for losing 'things'.

Exactly what happened to the Twenty Millionth Ford has been one of the great automotive mysteries. No one seems to know for sure.



In addition to dealerships, capitals and court houses, the Twenty Millionth Ford Tour stopped at various landmarks. This stop was in Utah.



Presentation of the Utah Special 20,000,000 License Plate in front of the Utah State Capital.





The state of Wisconsin presented a 20,000,000 license plate.



In Brady, Texas, the town's Twenty Millionth Turkey was put on top of the car. This Ford dealership, Curtis Norman Company is still in existence today.



Los Angeles City Hall, Peggy Hamilton, official hostess, is at right of Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. At his left is Mayor Porter. Other stars are Bill Cody and Bill Desmond. The Golden Orange was presented by area dealers.

Right: It was a high honor to have your photo taken with the Twenty Millionth Ford for not only salesmen and dealers, but mayors, governors, celebrities and common citizens. This one is inscribed,  
*Remembrance of Norfolk, Neb.  
 Taken at Noon, Aug 20, 31.  
 Best Wishes Always.  
 Hal Shields*



This image shows the Kentucky and Tennessee special 20,000,000 license plates.



Another stop, another photo. Here's real 1931 fashions complete with bare feet and bib overalls.



Ford didn't miss any detail, painting the special lettering on the roof so aircraft could recognize the Twenty Millionth Ford.



*Remembrance of Norfolk, Neb.  
 Taken at Noon Aug 20, 31.  
 Best Wishes Always  
 Hal Shields*

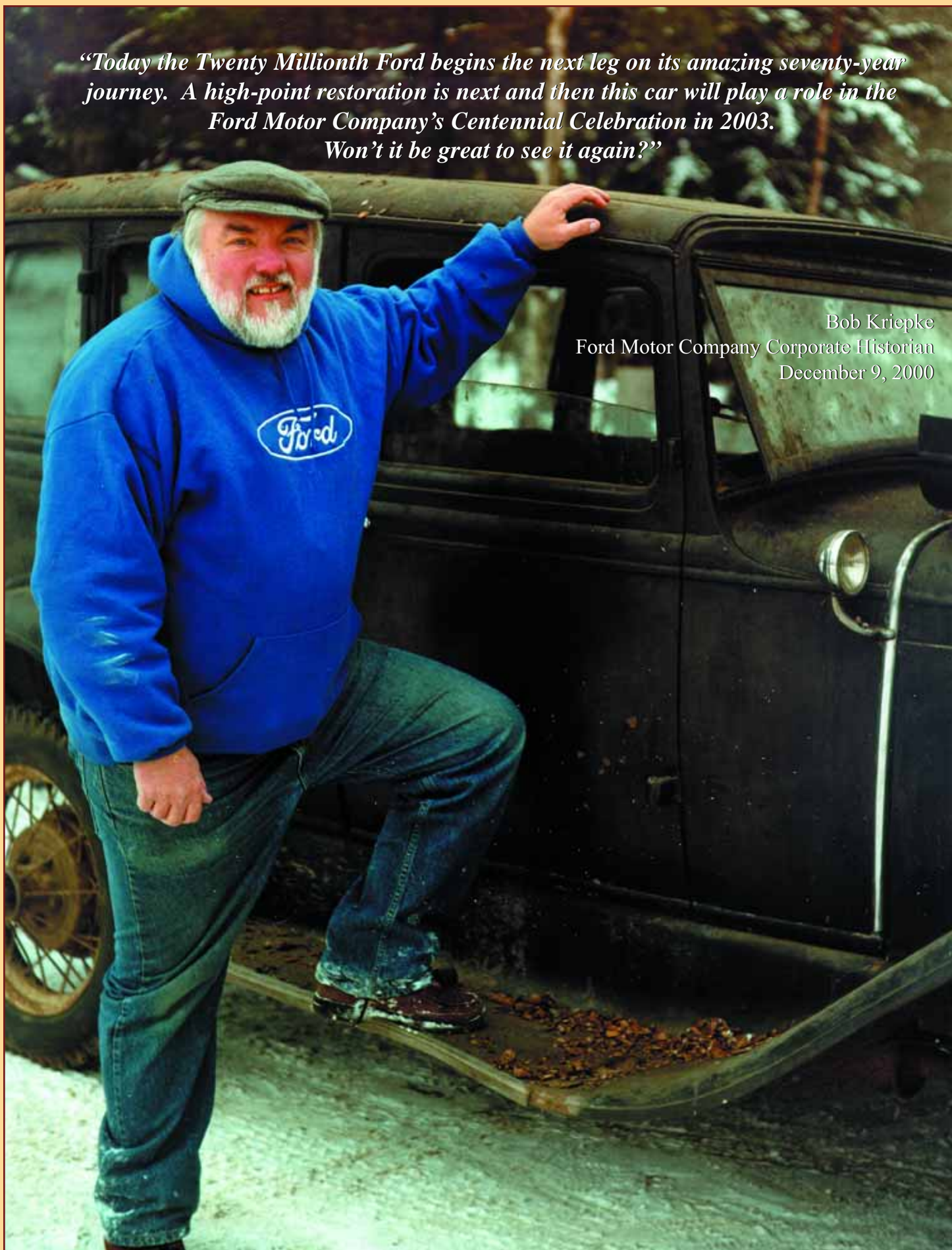


**For those of us who mourn the loss of the Twenty Millionth Ford, there has been a wealth of very interesting photographs and stories. However, you can't help wonder each time a barn or garage door opens and there lies a 1931 Slant Windshield Town Sedan Model A Ford...what if the fire story wasn't true? What if it had just been sold like many other Ford Museum pieces? What if...?**



*“Today the Twenty Millionth Ford begins the next leg on its amazing seventy-year journey. A high-point restoration is next and then this car will play a role in the Ford Motor Company’s Centennial Celebration in 2003. Won’t it be great to see it again?”*

Bob Kriepke  
Ford Motor Company Corporate Historian  
December 9, 2000



# It Was Sold In 1940

## The Twenty Millionth Ford Found

By Jim Spawn, Editor

### My Dad Bought The Car...

Rod Liimatainen lives in Chassell, Michigan. Population, 730 hearty souls. Chances are you've never been there. It is in the very extreme northern part of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. It was, and still is, a rugged remote harbor town on Keweenaw Bay off of Lake Superior. Some parts of Chassell still don't have electricity and there are still many dirt roads. Coincidentally, this area is steeped in Ford history. Henry Ford's summer home, The Bungalow, is nearby and the Ford Sawmill was re-opened in 1998 for tours.

Rod's true-life story about his 1931 Slant Windshield Town Sedan, serial number A20,000,000, re-writes Ford history as we 'thought' we knew it.

"My dad, Carl Liimatainen of Aura, Michigan, bought the car in 1940 from a dealer in Detroit," begins Rod. "Actually, my dad bought the car for his dad, Charles Liimatainen, my grandfather. Dad owned a Standard Service Station then and worked on cars. My grandfather was a homesteader who immigrated from Finland. In those days it was common for people to drive long distances to go car buying in Detroit. There was ample selection and some competition among dealers. Selection and competition were both missing in Upper Michigan. Dad had heard from his uncle that Ford was going to sell a 'brand new' Model A car. So off he went on the 550 mile journey to Detroit to find this 'new' Model A. Model A's were the preferred vehicle in Upper Michigan. The roads either had

snow or mud on them most of the year and the Model A was great for getting around in all that.

Family legend has it that there was only so much room for displays at the Ford Museum, Rod said, so the Twenty Millionth went up for sale. Rod's mom believes that Carl paid \$550 for the car, which was comparable to the price of a new 1940 Ford. Carl had to charm the car away from the dealer who had promised it to a local Detroit area doctor, and in the end he left with the Model A. He and his sister, Helvi, drove the car back to Upper Michigan.

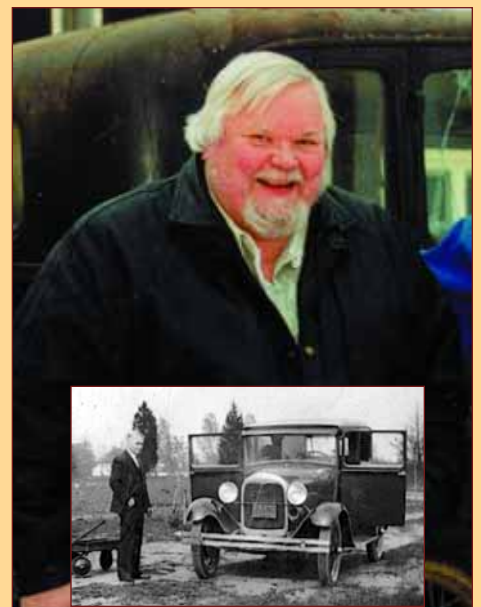
"The car was titled to my grandfather with an understanding that when he was through with it, my dad would get it back. Charles drove it as his transportation until 1956 and then gave it back to his son, Carl. Somewhere along the line it was decided that when my dad was finished with the car, I would get it," Rod remembers.

Carl passed away in 1958 and the car became Rod's. He had just learned to drive and knew the car was special. He was afraid he'd tear the car up, so in 1960 Rod took the Twenty Millionth Ford to his mother's place and put it in her garage on blocks.

### Forty Years Fly By...

For his own reasons, Rod kept quiet about the car. Locals knew about his special car, but the antique car hobby in general continued to mourn the fiery loss of the Twenty Millionth Ford.

In the spring of 1999, Bob Kreipke, the



Rod Liimatainen.  
His dad, Carl (inset) preferred Model A's.

corporate historian for the Ford Motor Company, was in Upper Michigan doing research for the company's upcoming 100th anniversary in 2003. Kreipke was a featured speaker at the American Legion when one of those locals met him and mentioned the famous vehicle.

Kreipke was skeptical, but naturally intrigued. He mentioned it to Ford Chairman of the Board, William Clay Ford, Jr. They decided to go have a look in September 1999. They found the lost milestone safely stored near the Standard Service station where Rod's dad worked on cars and where his mom, Kathryn, 93, still lives. William Clay Ford, Jr. is Henry's great grandson. He came to see the car and visit with Kathryn. She had worked as a cook at Henry Ford's summer home, The Bungalow, and had stories to tell William about Henry Ford.

Rod had no desire to sell his car. But he knew it was special and was willing to share it. A ten-year lease was arranged with Ford Motor Company. Ford would completely restore the car and show it. They would use it as part of their 100th Anniversary Celebration in 2003. Then it would go on display at the Ford Motor Company World Headquarters. At the end of the lease, the car will be returned to Rod.

So on December 9, 2000, Bob Kreipke and a special truck, normally used to haul Ford's clay models, arrived to pick up some very precious cargo...the Twenty Millionth Ford.



Liimatainen family moves to Upper Michigan, circa 1927. (L-R) Charles Liimatainen; Uncle Bill Harma; Carl Liimatainen; and Uncle Mike Simula.





Ninety-three year old, Kathryn Liimatainen meets with William Clay Ford, Jr. She cooked for Henry Ford at his summer home, "The Bungalow," and shared stories about his famous great grandfather.

Deters Restoration, Temperance, Michigan, was awarded the restoration project. Owner Terry Deters is well known in the Model A hobby. He restored Bruce Bone's A400 for the MAFCA Best of Show Award in 1992, plus many other high-point restorations. The guy knows his stuff.

"I'm no different," Terry says, "I want to see proof that this car is indeed the real Twenty Millionth Ford. When the car arrived and I looked at the engine serial number, it was clear that this was a replacement engine. It was stamped with A20,000,000, but they were 3/8" numbers, not the 5/16" as was used on the Model A's. Sure, engines were changed, but still this engine was not compelling evidence for me," Terry added.

"We paid close attention as we dismantled the car. It was obvious that



Chassis number A20,000,000.

this body had never been off this chassis. All the body bolts were original and correct. Many had some original paint on them. We could find no hint of anything that would suggest this body had ever been removed."

When the body was lifted and left front fender removed, Terry immediately looked for the chassis number. With wire brush in hand, it only took a moment to find the undisputable evidence. Chassis number A20,000,000 with both stars. This is a correct stamping, in the correct location, and there are no other marks of grinding or filing. This chassis had been stamped only once and it is A20,000,000!

The most common question asked is about the lettering on the doors. Was there any evidence of that? Terry explains that, again, great caution was used as they sanded the car. They found five layers of paint: 1) original primer. 2) original paint. 3) a heavy layer of primer. 4) second layer of color. 5) the last coat was applied with a brush. Terry says, "This agrees with the story that Ford removed the lettering and repainted it prior to selling it." The last coat probably was done by Charles or Carl Liimatainen.

The Ford Motor Company is making a documentary film about the Twenty Millionth Ford's rediscovery and restoration. Terry has a film crew to work around and they make him repeat work for

### ~ The Timeline ~

April 14, 1931 ~ Henry Ford drives off the assembly line in the 1931 Slant Windshield Town Sedan designated as the Twenty Millionth Ford. The car begins a nationwide publicity tour starting in the east and heading west.

December, 1931 ~ Twenty Millionth Ford returns to Detroit and is placed in the Henry Ford Museum.

1940 ~ Carl Liimatainen buys the car from a Detroit dealer for his father, Charles. Drives the car home to Upper Michigan. Charles drives the Model A as his main transportation.

1956 ~ Charles stops driving and gives the car back to Carl.

1958 ~ Rod Liimatainen inherits the car when his dad Carl passes away.

1960 ~ Young Rod knows he has a 'special' car and doesn't want to tear it up, so he parks it in his mother's, Kathryn, garage.

December 9, 2000 ~ Twenty Millionth Ford is leased to the Ford Motor Company for a ten year period. Begins complete restoration.

'retakes.' He estimates that it will take a year to complete the restoration. "We have most of the chassis stripped and are now starting to prime things. We'll begin replacing bushings and bearings next.

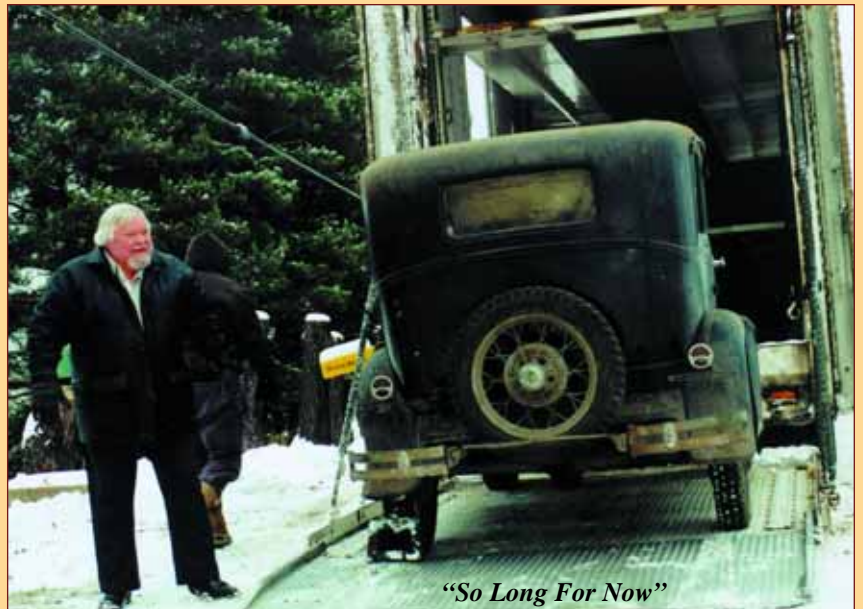
Rod Liimatainen stashed away a piece of important history for the Model A Ford. Now he can watch as the car that has been in his family for sixty years takes on a new life. He plans to join MAFCA soon.

What's next for the Twenty Millionth Ford? You can be sure that Ford will present their film in some manner. That and all the other plans for their Centennial Celebration are still being worked on. Perhaps we'll see it at a MAFCA Show or on display at the Ford Motor Company. Better yet, maybe they'll recreate the 1931 tour and you can see it at a Ford dealer near you!

And so it was.



**December 9, 2000  
Moving Day for Twenty Millionth Ford.**



*"So Long For Now"*



Together Rod Liimatainen and Bob Kreipke are insuring that many more generations will get to see and enjoy the Twenty Millionth Ford!



MAFCA members, Dave and Marcy Cella, L'Anse, Michigan. They knew the Model A hobby would be amazed by this story. Thanks to them for calling *The Restorer* and sharing the news.

**~ The Cast ~**

Rod Liimatainen, owner of the Twenty Millionth Ford since 1960.

Carl Liimatainen, Rod's father who bought the Twenty Millionth Ford in 1940 for his father, Charles.

Charles Liimatainen, Rod's grandfather, who drove the Twenty Millionth Ford from 1940 to 1956.

Kathryn Liimatainen, Rod's mother. 93 years old and sharp as a tack. She cooked for Henry Ford and others at "The Ford Bungalow" in Upper Michigan.

Bob Kreipke, Ford Motor Company Corporate Historian. His efforts have resulted in the 'rediscovery' of the Twenty Millionth Ford.

Terry Deters, Temperance, Michigan, professional auto restorer. Awarded restoration contract on the Twenty Millionth Ford.

Dave and Marcy Cella, L'Anse, Michigan. MAFCA members who photographed the car being picked up and called *The Restorer*. Dave is also restoring the carburetor for the Twenty Millionth Ford.

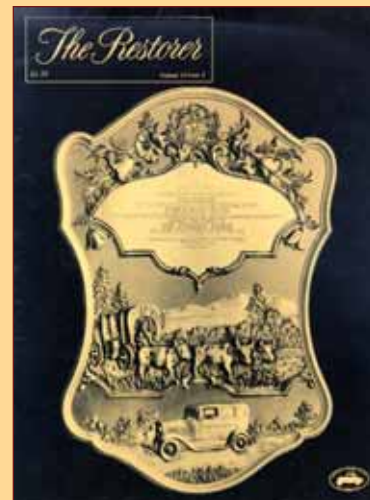
William Clay Ford, Jr., Chairman of the Board, Ford Motor Company and Henry Ford's great grandson.

Bob Casey, Curator of Vehicles, Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village.





The Twenty Millionth Ford begins its restoration. The fascinating tale of this milestone vehicle will continue when, after complete restoration, it plays a role in the Ford Motor Company 100 Year Anniversary. Ford has a unique web site with 360 degree cameras that you can use to take a close look at the Twenty Millionth Ford. <http://www.ecarlinx.com/>



Commemorating the Twenty Millionth Ford production achievement, Ford dealers in the San Francisco Bay Area commissioned a bronze plaque to be designed, cast and engraved. It was then mounted on a piece of native redwood burl and sent to Dearborn for presentation to Henry Ford. Shown on the cover of *The Restorer*, Vol 18, Issue 5, the plaque contained the State Seal of California on a field of poppies (the state flower); a westward movement covered wagon scene; a sprinkle of stately California Redwood trees and an excellent rendering of the 1931 milestone Model A Ford. The whereabouts of this plaque today is unknown, as is the log book signed during the 1931 publicity tour. If you have knowledge of any these items, contact *The Restorer* editor.

### Want To Know More About The Twenty Millionth Ford?

- The Ford Motor Company has a great web site about the restoration of the Twenty Millionth Ford. <http://www.ecarlinx.com/>
- *The Restorer*, Vol 18, Issue 4.
- *The Legendary Model A Ford*, by Peter Winnewisser (p152-153).
- *Ford 1903 to 1984*, by Lewis, McCarville, Sorensen (p86).
- *90 Years of Ford*, by George H. Dammann (p157).



### Other Famous Model A Fords

If you have photographs of the Twenty Millionth Ford, we want to see them. Perhaps we can run a follow-up to this story as the Twenty Millionth Ford completes its restoration. Also remember that many other Model A Fords found their way into the hands of fame.

*The Real McCoys* TV show featured Walter Brennan as Grandpa and he drove this Phaeton. Where is it?

Will Rogers received his Model A on December 23, 1928. The Will Rogers Museum in Claremore, OK, says they don't know where it is. Do you?

Franklin Roosevelt had a Model A when still governor of New York. Do you know where it is?

If you have information, correspondence or photographs about these or other well-known Model A's, please contact me. Perhaps we can work on an interesting article. By the way, Jim Bob Walton's 1929 Roadster, from the TV show, *The Waltons* is for sale in our classified ad section.

*Photographs courtesy of  
Leigh Austin collection  
Marcy Cella, L'Anse, Michigan  
Frank Cooper collection  
Ford Motor Company  
Rod Liimatainen, Chassell Michigan*

Jim Spawn  
Editor