

The Car that put SA (and much of the world) on the road

By LEO KRITZINGER

SOUTH AFRICA'S love affair with Ford motor cars didn't start with the Model T, but rather five years earlier in 1903 with the T's predecessor when a Johannesburg businessman, Arthur Youldon, walked down Broadway, New York and spotted a young Henry Ford demonstrating his first production car in a dealer showroom -- a Model A. Youldon was so impressed, he gladly paid the hefty sum of \$850 and had the car shipped to SA. This apparently was Ford's first export order. For many years this little 8 hp two-cylinder runabout was the only Ford in the Union -- today this rare historical piece of American Africana resides in the Franschhoek Motor Museum.

Henry Ford had just founded the Ford Motor Company in Detroit, Michigan on June 16, 1903 -- seven years after he had singlehandedly built his first automobile, the Quadricycle. Three years later, in 1906, he acquired full control over the company, after buying out the other investors. This gave Ford free reign to do what was to become his mission in life: to build an affordable car for the masses.

It took Ford and his co-workers five years to develop the components that would lead to the Model T. During this time he produced 20 000 of the `alphabet series' motor cars ranging from the first A right up to the S models. On 1 October 1908, the T was ready for full production. A simple, lightweight automobile with a vanadium steel chassis for rugged durability, and parts that could be inexpensively mass-produced. The car featured a 20 hp 4-cylinder engine, planetary transmission operated by floor pedals, flywheel magneto, 30-inch wooden-spoke wheels for high road clearance, and a brass radiator. This simple recipe would, over the next twenty years, become the success story of all time.

After Youldon's first Model A, private enthusiasts in the Union of South Africa were importing Fords (Model Ks and Model Ns) unofficially -- until Henry Ford appointed Arkell & Douglas of New York and their branch in Port Elizabeth as official importers and agents in 1905. Incidentally, Ford first offered the Ford agency to Paul Henwood of Henwood's Hardware, Durban -- but he turned it down on the grounds that these ``newfangled automobiles" wouldn't fit in with his agricultural equipment business!

By 1908, there was a "Ford Motor Depot" in Rutger Street, Cape Town, while B.J. Penney ran the Ford dealership in Johannesburg. Holmes Ford of Kimberley was appointed official agents in 1912 by Charles Wessinger, MD of Arkell & Douglas. Harold Holmes placed his first order of six Fords that same year -- but had to wait six months for delivery!

At first, South African buyers were anything but impressed with Ford's Universal Car. The spidery, flimsy-looking, bare-bones car could never survive the Union's notoriously bad roads, local motorists reasoned. Our sandy coastal roads, the bone-rattling corrugated surfaces, the

many drifts and rivers -- all designed to test the mettle of superior makes -- would surely reduce the Tin Lizzie to a heap of useless scrap in no time. For goodness sake! It only had two transverse springs between the body and the axles! Other cars had four or more -- and some even equipped with shock absorbers! Only two forward gears -- other makes had three, some even four. And the T's pedal-operated planetary transmission -- even back then -- was considered, well, somewhat outdated.

But as soon as the spindly little Fords were demonstrated at agricultural shows and various other venues around the country, the initial scepticism gave way to gradual acceptance -- and finally wholehearted enthusiasm for Henry Ford's Universal Car.

In spite of its flimsy appearance, the T proved to take the poor local road conditions in its stride. And poor they were. In an interview the Prince of Wales' chauffeur stated categorically that South Africa had some of the worst roads in the world -- and he'd chauffeured the Prince in India, China, Japan and Australia!

The car's high ground clearance made it the perfect vehicle to negotiate those notorious undercarriage-mauling middelmannetjies (hog's back ridges) found on most farm and minor roads. And once you'd mastered the tricky starting sequence of the T, the car was mechanically simple to maintain. It was (jokingly) said that you could repair just about anything on a Model T with a pair of pliers and a length of fencing wire!

In those early days, when motoring in SA was still in its infancy, service stations and dealerships were few and far between, so owners, especially those living in the platteland, were forced to do their own emergency roadside repairs. Before the days of asphalted highways, Shell Ultra-Cities and satellite navigation, a typical trip between Cape Town and Port Elizabeth was a major undertaking, lasting the better part of a week. Motorists had to negotiate rutted road (ox-wagon tracks, really), ford rivers and drifts (bridges were few and far between), open and close a multitude of farm gates (public roads still ran through farming property then), negotiate precipitous mountain passes, carry their supply of fuel in cans on the running boards, and repair several punctures along the way. If your car broke down and you couldn't get it going, the nearest farmhouse was usually your only salvation.

To illustrate the ruggedness of the Model T and the hardships it had to endure under South African conditions, let's look at an article that was written by the SA correspondent for the British motoring magazine *The Motor* in the 29 October 1935 issue: "I was standing outside one of the principal garages in Pietermaritzburg, Natal when a very old Ford car drew up for petrol. It was driven by a Dutchman [a rather typical condescending reference by an Englishman to the Afrikaners at that time -- Ed.], about 40 years of age, whose hair was long and unkempt. In it were the driver's wife and mother-in-law -- both women topping the 200 lb. mark, I am sure -- and four young children, while lying on the wings on each side were two burly youths, both devoid of coats and tanned as only the African sun can tan. The passengers, apparently from the backveldt, appeared scared and gazed about them in a dazed manner.

"Piled on the running boards were pots and pans and various crude articles of furniture, such as small tables, chairs, bowls, mattresses; and, in addition, spades and pick-axes, rope and many sundries were sandwiched in as ballast and packing. Inside the car, among the passengers, were further bundles of commodities -- obviously 'not wanted on the voyage' -- the nature of which could not be determined by a mere cursory glance. The whole of the baggage was packed to a height well above the top of the body of the car, and protruding beyond its width by at least 18 inches.

"The car was minus a windscreen, the two front wheels were buckled and the tyres were stuffed with grass. The back wheels had several of the spokes missing, and both tyres were flat.

"I questioned the driver and gleaned that they had come from the Orange Free State, and were en route to Durban (a distance of some 300 miles) -- where he hoped to obtain employment. He said that they'd had a very bad passage, with three mishaps. There were no brakes on the car, and in one case, while negotiating adrift at the bottom of a decline, the car overturned into a stream where they lost the collapsible hood and the windscreen.

"The whole party had only 1/9d [17.5 cents] between them, so they took in one gallon [4.5 litres] of petrol at 1/6d [15c], leaving them with 3d [2.5c] on which to complete the remainder of the trip. At least three gallons would be needed, so it was left to guess how the balance of the petrol required would be obtained.

"Having 'filled up', the party started off. The two youths pushed the car from the parking place beside the petrol pump. When the engine commenced firing they threw themselves into position along with the wings of the car, one on each side. As the car drew out, squeaking, rattling and creaking, I could see the front wheels wobbling from side to side, greatly out of truth, while the tyres on the back wheels spread out on both sides of the rims -- as flat as pancakes.

"I never heard of any mishap to the party, although I scanned the newspaper for several days later, so I can only assume that the ramshackle vehicle and its queer freight reached the destination without any further serious trouble."

During the first two decades of the 20th century, most first-time buyers had never driven a car in their lives, so it was up to the Ford dealer or salesman to show newcomers the ropes. This meant driving around the block a couple of times -- then having Oom Gert sit behind the wheel and following the salesman's instructions. One must remember: people like these were unfamiliar with the newfangled contraption called an automobile, having known only ox-wagons and horse-buggies for most of their lives. It was the equivalent of an older person today coming to grips with a computer for the first time. Driving a motor car was indeed an unfamiliar and life-changing experience.

One old Karoo sheep farmer had decided to buy a Peddel-Fordjie after a, particularly profitable wool season. He walked into the local Ford dealership in the small Karoo dorpie one morning, placed a bundle of ten-pound notes on the salesman's desk, and requested a test drive in the

New Ford Car. The youthful salesman (hardly an experienced motorist himself) eagerly cranked up a brand-new T, while the oom settled into the passenger seat. They then drove down the main street with the old farmer concentrating with a furrowed brow as the young man enthusiastically demonstrated the car's controls. Then, as the salesman turned a corner -- just a little too wide -- he sideswiped a tree on the roadside, bringing the Ford to a sudden, jarring halt.

The old farmer -- though somewhat shaken, but still with his wits about him -- turned to the embarrassed young man and asked, ``Tell me, boet -- how do you stop this damn thing when you don't have a tree to run into?"

It is a challenge to learn to drive a Model T Ford well, especially in today's traffic. The Model T doesn't accelerate or brake quickly. The brakes operate via bands which constrict the transmission, unlike a modern car. The T doesn't handle that well by today's motoring standards although it navigates dirt roads and washboard surfaces like nothing else. In fact, these are precisely the road conditions it was designed to cope with.

There are three pedals on the floor, two levers on the steering column, and one lever on the floor to the left of the driver. The car is in neutral when this lever is in the upright position, second gear when in the forward position, and on hand brake when all the way back.

The left pedal engages first gear while depressed, second gear if the floor lever is forward when released. The middle pedal is reverse gear and the right pedal is the brake. The right lever on the steering column is the accelerator, and the other lever is the spark advance. Confused? Once you drive for a month or so, it gets easier. If you really get into trouble, you can just step on all three pedals and that will stop the T pretty quickly. By doing this, the bands in the transmission lock up the drive train. The best thing to remember while driving a Model T is to plan ahead!

One of the Model T's idiosyncrasies was the fuel supply to the carburettor: The fuel tank is situated under the front seat and uses gravitational flow to reach the carb. When the tank is full the system works well, but as the level drops, so does the flow of petrol. When negotiating a steep incline the flow can stop completely -- that is why T owners quickly learned to steer the car in reverse. By turning the car around, gravitation draws the petrol far more efficiently -- the only drawback is that cooling is correspondingly impeded!

But in spite of its limitations, the T's ruggedness and durability became legendary. It is told that one American owner had so much faith in his Tin Lizzie, his last wish was to be buried with the car. When asked why he explained, ``My Ford has always been able to pull me out of a hole -- why not this one?"

Because of the high demand for Ts in North America, the factory in Dearborn was running at full capacity -- and the task of building right-hand-drive models for export was assigned to the Canadian subsidiary (established 1904) in Windsor, Ontario. These models were shipped to the Commonwealth countries such as India, Australia, New Zealand, the Rhodesias, and South

Africa. Since our country and Canada were both members of the British Commonwealth back then, favourable import concessions made it possible for Wessinger to land the Model Ts relatively cheaply. He also appointed dealers throughout the Union (even in smaller towns), and once the Model T had proven itself, it became the country's top seller. In fact, Fords became so numerous on SA roads that the term `Ford' and `motor car' became virtually synonymous.

By 1919 Ford was without a doubt the most well-known automobile brand in SA, paving the way for other American makes -- and by far outselling British and European-built vehicles. Atkinson's Motor Garages in Bloemfontein, who were supplying the Free State market with Ford cars and trucks as well as Fordson tractors, claimed in their ad in The Motor Weekly of 6 December 1919: ``The Ford One-Ton Truck can carry 12 bags of mealies a distance of 60 miles on one tin of petrol'', while the ``Fordson Tractor could easily plough 4 morgen in one day''.

Because the T was such a basic no-frills vehicle, several companies offered non-authorized aftermarket accessories for the Ford. Bumpers, shock absorbers, speedometers, vulcanizing tyre repair kits, steering wheel hooter buttons, dash oil gauges, steering and radius rod anti-rattlers, oiling systems, petrol gauges and Motometers were some of the many items on offer to the Ford owner who wanted to upgrade his T and make it stand out from the rest of the crowd.

By 1920 the Canadian plant could no longer keep up with the export orders for assembled cars -- so in 1923 Charles Holmes and Axel Stockelbach left for Canada to discuss the possibility of establishing an assembly plant in the Union of South Africa. An agreement was reached and in November 1923 the Ford Motor Company of South Africa (Pty.) Ltd. was founded.

An old disused wool shed situated in Grahamstown Road, Port Elizabeth, was converted into an assembly plant -- and in February 1924 the first South African built Ts rolled off the assembly line. The cars were shipped in wooden crates from Canada as CKD (completely knocked down) units to PE, where they were assembled, painted and upholstered by 70 factory workers. Initially, twelve Models, Ts rolled off the assembly line every day.

A government survey published in 1925 proved the overwhelming popularity of the T. The survey noted that there were 18 118 Fords registered in the Union, while the number of Chevs were estimated at 6 798. Dodge held the third position with 5 223 units.

Those were the days when a prospective buyer could drive away in a Model T Roadster or Tourer for 155 pounds -- and he could choose one of four colours: grey, blue, brown, and of course, black. By then the brass radiator had been replaced by one with a nickel-plated finish. Other standard features included: spare tyre and tube, rearview mirror, spotlight, windscreen wiper, and electric lighting. A self-starter was considered an extra accessory.

But, alas, by 1927 the Model Ts age was beginning to show -- it was almost 19 years old! Sales of the once-popular Ford had declined to such an extent that Chevrolet was becoming the top seller in the US and in the Union. Other makes had more to offer in looks and luxury -- and by

then Henry Ford's T had become a byword. People were joking about the ageing Tin Lizzie, A Model T is like a bathtub -- everybody needs one, but no-one wants to be seen in one!"

Even so, 15-million Fords were sold worldwide -- around 19 000 in South Africa alone. It would be several decades before another make would surpass the Model T as the Universal Car.