

Fordson Model F

Dearborn, MI 1917



The story of Fordson tractors begins with Henry Ford. Born in 1863 in Dearborn, Michigan, Henry Ford's parents had moved to the U.S. from near Cork in Ireland and now ran a large farm of several hundred acres. Young Henry soon found farm work hard and preferred tinkering with machines to laboring on the farm. Fortunately, his father approved of Henry's inclination to take machines apart and put them back together. In 1903, Ford formed the Ford Motor Company using his knowledge of machinery to turn his hobby into a business, and he subsequently employed principles of mass production in one of the early such efforts to keep costs down.

Ford did not want to stop there. He wanted to mechanize the drudgery of farming, so he started work on a small, affordable tractor for the small farmer. Ford hoped to popularize small tractors by mass producing them, just as his Model T had done for automobiles. A growing need for tractors caused many small manufacturers to begin converting Ford's cars into tractors. Basing the design on a car meant the tractor would be limited in its usefulness – what was really needed was a purpose-built machine.

In 1907, Ford began the design of what today we call an internal- combustion engine for the tractor, an idea that would one day revolutionize farming. Ford was said to have built more than 50 different prototypes until the development of the Fordson F in 1917, more than 10 years after he started.

The Fordson name was selected for two reasons. First, there was already a company in Minneapolis using the name "Ford Tractor Company," trying to capitalize on the name of very successful Ford Model T by tricking customers into believing the tractor was made by Henry Ford. Second, the shareholders of the Ford Motor Company did not approve of tractor production and wanted nothing to do with it. So in 1920, Henry Ford and his son, Edsel, established an entirely new firm, "Ford and Son, Inc.," which was later shortened to just "Fordson".

Under this new company, the Model F flourished with 34,000 tractors being produced in its first full year of production. It overtook by a considerable margin all the other tractor manufacturers then in existence. At a hurriedly built factory in Dearborn, Michigan, Ford used the same assembly line techniques he had used to mass-produce the Ford Model T. It took 30 hours and 40 minutes to convert the raw materials into the 4,000 parts used for the tractor assembly.

When the Fordson was first released, each tractor sold for \$750 and cost \$567.14 to manufacture, which included materials, labor, and overhead costs, leaving a profit of \$182.86 per tractor. Originally constructed in Dearborn, the Model F production was eventually moved to a large new Rouge River plant outside Detroit with a second factory also opening in 1919 in Cork, Ireland. Another smaller plant in Hamilton, Ohio, also built the Model F for a number of years.

Ford stopped tractor production in the U.S. in 1928, choosing instead to focus on the new Model A automobile that would be replacing the Model T. However, Fordson production continued in Cork, Ireland, and later in Dagenham, England. After Fordson production was transferred to Cork, exports to the U.S. were limited to 1,500 a month, which restricted sales at Ford dealerships.

The original Fordson Model F tractor was eventually outsold by International Harvester, which offered a more efficient alternative and subsequently became market leader. Competition from International Harvester and General Motors forced Ford to reduce the price of the Model F from \$750 to \$395. To compensate for the lower price, the company had to cut costs and strive for larger-volume production.

The Model F itself did not change much during its production life. Fordson production at the Rouge factory in the U.S. dominated the tractor market throughout the world during much of the 1920s. It is interesting to note that the "Hoyt-Clagwell" tractor on the TV sitcom "Green Acres" was a Fordson Model F. It was known to randomly "explode," followed by one or both of the rear wheels falling off. Also in 1926, Fordson demonstrated a Model F converted into a snowmobile, which they dubbed the "Snow-Motor." They were used, unsuccessfully, by Richard Byrd's first Antarctic expedition.