

Henry Ford: A Penchant for Fiddling

By Matt Merta



Photo courtesy of The Henry Ford

Henry Ford examining a violin, c. 1939

When one hears the name Henry Ford, it conjures up images of miles of assembly lines putting forth an endless supply of automobiles, as well as employing thousands of people and providing an endless supply of jeeps, trucks, and bomber planes during World War II. While his mind was continually looking toward the mechanized, industrialized future, his heart was always in the past, when farming was done with the simplest of tools, and entertainment was live old time music performed by family members or neighbors at a local gathering. He created the Greenfield Village Museum in 1929 (now known as The Henry Ford) to educate the public on the early innovations of agriculture and technology. As for his love of old time music, he did a lot to please himself as well as get his workers and community involved.

Ford loved the fiddle music that emanated from the dances during his youth. He even saved up enough money to buy himself an inexpensive violin and learn a few tunes. To relax after a full day of work, he would scratch out “Turkey in the Straw” or some other square dance tune on his fiddle. Fast forward 40 years: After he had developed the Quadricycle and created the assembly line at his factory in Highland Park, Michigan, to build his Model T automobiles and become one of the richest men in the country, Ford still valued the simple life. This included hearing country dance tunes on the violin. Now in his 60s with money being no object, he began to purchase a small collection of classical violins during the 1920s to not only please himself, but to make them available for use to promising musicians in the Detroit area.

Ford sought the help of Rudolph H. Wurlitzer, a society friend who was the son of the founder of the Wurlitzer Company, best known for theater organs and jukeboxes. The company also had a small department that dealt with rare stringed instruments. Ford would eventually secure five rare violins through Wurlitzer, some of which are the most prized pieces in the musical world. Two others were acquired through Ole H. Bryant, the principal repairman for the Boston Symphony Orchestra at the time.

Among these treasures are two from Antonio Stradivari. The 1703 model, “The Rougemont,” has curled-grain back and sides, and a straight-grain spruce top with a brown-red varnish finish. This is among Stradivari’s most artistic period. The 1709 model, with its plum-red finish, is known as the “Russian” or “Siberian” Strad due to it having spent much of the 19th century in the hands of an amateur violinist in Yekaterinburg, Russia. Both had passed through many hands in Paris, London, and the U.S. before landing in the hands of Ford.

Ford also secured a 1740 violin from famed luthier Carlo Bergonzi of Cremona, Italy. Made with a maple back and sides and a spruce top, it is considered one of the best Bergonzi had ever produced. The collection also includes a piece made by Nicolo Amati in 1647, as well as a 1744 piece, known as “The Doyen,” made by Giuseppe Guarneri del Gesù.

Once received, Ford would keep them either at his office at the



Examples of violins in Ford's collection, now at The Henry Ford:
left: "The Rougemont," by Antonio Stradivari, 1703;
right: Violin by Nicolo Amati, 1647.
Photos: Courtesy of The Henry Ford.

Engineering Laboratory for occasional fiddling while at work, or at his Fair Lane mansion nearby. Upon Ford's death, the violins were moved to the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan (now known as The Henry Ford).

Curators at The Henry Ford have long felt that these masterpieces of violin craftsmanship should not just be hidden in some temperature-controlled vault, but rather appreciated by interested visitors. They have created an exhibit within the museum that displays these gems along with other unique violin models. This includes a 1772 violin made by Jacob Ford of London, England (Wurlitzer jokingly stated that he secured this model because it was made by one of Henry Ford's ancestors); a mid 19th-century Moses Tewkesbury piece; and a fiddle made in 1932 by Ford employee Clay Speegle that is constructed entirely of parts from a 1923 Model T. A late 19th-century George Gemunder model that was originally thought to be made by Joannes Guaragnini in 1775 and was played exclusively by concert violinist Maud Powell, while part of the collection, is not currently on display.

Ford was proud of his collection, and while he knew that he was no master on the violin, he appreciated fine musicians, often loaning his instruments out for use at local and national concerts. This included lending the 1709 Stradivari to Beatrice Griffin of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in 1930, and violin prodigy Grisha Goluboff being allowed to tour the U.S. and Europe from 1934 to 1938 with the 1703 Stradivari. That tradition is still carried on today. Jeanine Head Miller, Curator of Domestic Life at The Henry Ford, states (as of this writing), "The Guarneri is currently being exhibited in New York City, and a Stradivari is currently on loan for exhibition in Cremona, Italy." A search of YouTube will pull up classical violinist Gareth Johnson performing at the museum with the 1709 Stradivari.

Beginning in 2010, a partnership between the museum and the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit allowed for a number of the violins in the collection to receive CT (Computer Tomography) scans in order to study not only the materials and designs in relation to the quality of sound, but also look at previous repairs performed during the instruments' life spans. According to Miller, "Some repairs performed over a hundred years ago were so well done, they cannot be discerned by the naked eye."

Ford's love for the violin was not limited to the instrument itself. He was an avid fan of hearing others perform old time dance music as well as participating in those dances. At a time when jazz was becoming popular with young folks, Ford promoted older traditional fiddle music by sponsoring fiddle contests at his dealerships around the country in 1926, and established Henry Ford's Old-



Time Dance Orchestra to perform at various company functions and dances. He promoted contra and square dancing as part of physical education curricula in local schools, and “encouraged” his staff to partake regularly in dance classes he offered.

Ford kept an open ear to any word-of-mouth information on old time fiddlers from friends, employees, and dealership representatives around the country. During a camping trip in 1923 with Thomas Edison and Harvey Firestone near Paris, Michigan, Ford was told by a local dealer that a skilled fiddler lived in the area. He arrived at the house of Jasper “Jep” Bisbee, spent a few hours there listening to Bisbee play, and eventually funded a trip for Bisbee to visit Edison’s studios in New Jersey to record a number of fiddle tunes. Bisbee would later lead a small orchestra and make a substantial living performing at dances in the western Michigan area until his death in 1935.

Similar relationships with Ford and follow-up fame were experienced by a number of other fiddlers. John L. “Uncle Bunt” Stephens made his way through the local and regional Ford fiddle contests to win the “World Champion Fiddler” award personally presented by Ford at a company banquet in Detroit. Stephens was supposedly awarded \$1,000, a Lincoln car, and was entertained at the Ford mansion for a week, although there are conflicting reports of this award. Stephens would later appear on the Grand Ole Opry and make some recordings in Chicago and New York. Also at that Detroit performance was the one-armed fiddler Marshall Claiborne. Ford was so impressed with Claiborne that he helped with the fiddler’s future medical expenses.

Then there is the story of Mellie Dunham, a snowshoe maker and sometime fiddler from Norway, Maine. Thinking that a letter from Ford was just an order for snowshoes, he put it aside to be opened when time was available. Even after opening and reading it days later, he replied to Ford that he was too busy with farm work to formally visit and perform for the auto maker in Detroit. The letter eventually got the attention of local newspapers, and it took the state’s governor to persuade Dunham to make the visit. Dunham departed Maine in December 1925 to fanfare in a Pullman railroad car provided by Ford. After his trip to Detroit, Dunham formed a band that toured the vaudeville circuit making as much as \$1,500 per week until he eventually went back to his snowshoe business in Maine.

Along with dealership fiddle contests and creating his own orchestra, in 1926 Ford also published *Good Morning*, a book showing the steps for various contra and old time square dances. One of his most famous moves was to buy out the contract of dance instructor Benjamin Lovett from the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts (rumor being that Ford purchased the Inn to secure Lovett) so that Lovett would be able to instruct and lead dances for Ford back in the Detroit area. Lovett was paid by Ford to also provide dance education in local public schools and develop programs for colleges around the country. Ford would later build a hall on the grounds of Greenfield Village that was specifically designed for old time dancing. The hall remains at the museum, now known as Lovett Hall.

Henry Ford was a man of many passions. While he strived to make manufacturing ideology progress in the best and quickest

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Emma and Mellie Dunham leaving Maine to visit Henry Ford in Dearborn, Michigan, 1925.

way possible, he strived to have people use their quality free time appreciating the past. It took an automobile magnate like Ford to keep the fascination with old time fiddling alive and well in Michigan for years to follow.

For additional information on Henry Ford's violins, be sure to visit The Henry Ford website's Explore blog (thehenryford.org)

explore/) as well as the museum's YouTube channel, Innovation Nation (youtube.com/user/TheHenryFord). For more information, visit the museum's website at thehenryford.org.

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Henry Ford playing fiddle, second from right, with his Old-Time Dance Orchestra, 1933.



Photo courtesy of The Henry Ford