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A car for the  
common man.

# JAY FOLLET'S

## MODEL T

By Dan Sanders

“WHY, IT'S THE MODEL T FORD MADE THE PEOPLE WANT  
TO GO, WANT TO GO, WANT TO GET UP AND GO . . .”

From *The Music Man*, words  
and music by Meredith Willson

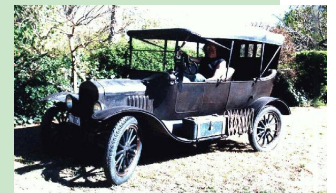
On a busy street just north of Los Angeles, I'm riding in the car Jay Follet was killed in. This Model T's first home was in Kentucky, less than a hundred miles from the Knoxville of *A Death in the Family*. It left the Ford factory in 1917, just two years after James Agee's story, and is virtually identical to the car that takes the life of Rufus' father in the book.

We had our pick of Model T's at Bryan Ostegren's home in Northridge, California, because he owns five of them. Ostegren's lineage with the T is pure. His grandparents honeymooned in one, crisscrossing the country. His father collected them, and now they are his.

The day is a fine one, Pacific sun without heat or smog, and it's easy to see just what Jay loved about this automobile. The cars we know strive to cocoon us from the world outside. This, though, is open-air motoring: a car without windows; you aren't insulated

from the elements, you're hurled through them. Everything in that last Tennessee night – fog, crickets, a scared skunk in the road, summer wind – would have been part of Jay's last moments. You feel the smallest bump in pavement far better than “these awful roads” Agee describes near the Follet farm, and the car shimmies with its yelping little motor, and there's a strong smell of gasoline.

Bryan knows better than to let me try driving it. The controls would stump any modern motorist, and all the amenities we take for granted in the humblest of today's cars are nowhere in sight. There are no gauges whatsoever – no speedometer, no fuel or temperature gauge, nothing. The throttle is a lever on the steering column. Another lever there controls engine timing. There are three pedals on the wood-plank floor: brake,



Bryan Ostegren with one  
of his five “flivvers.”



With no instruments, driving the Model T required a sort of sixth sense.

reverse, and low gear. Fully throttled, the ancient car is doing perhaps forty. There's no telling just how fast we're going, but with no seat belts it's more than enough to kill you like it did Jay Follet. Bryan hasn't read *A*

*Death in the Family*, but when I tell him Agee's story of a man who loses his life in a T, he doesn't bat an eye. "Yeah, the Model T club I belong to, one of the founding members was killed in his car," he yells, lurching into a turn.

## THE PRICE OF PROGRESS

In its purest form, genius is simple. What will last longer, Microsoft Windows or the safety pin? The greatest inventions amaze with their simplicity, not complexity.

Some nicknamed it "Tin Lizzie," others "Flivver." Its engine boasted twenty horsepower, about what a small motorcycle turns today, but forty miles per hour was a miracle in 1915. The Ford Model T weighed just 1500 pounds, not even half that of a Toyota Camry. The T's light weight was a huge advantage, because it could get through mud that swamped heavier cars; it could also be pushed out of trouble easily. Another prime asset was its simple, rugged construction. Stories abound of radiators repaired with chewing gum, or engines held in place with hay-baling wire.

Deaths like Jay's were becoming common in 1915, but the awful millions of road casualties and lawsuits from automobiles were yet to come, so safety in the Model T was barely an afterthought. The car was started by turning a crank that was prone to nasty kickbacks if the engine-timing lever wasn't set right; it could, and often did, break the driver's arm. Seat belts were unknown, air bags were

science fiction, as was safety glass; to go through its windshield was to be diced as if by a great Cuisinart. Its brakes were uncertain, a primitive system attached not to the wheels but the transmission. The driver sat three feet off the ground – on top of the gas tank – and the car was as prone to tip-overs as an SUV.

Yet there is more to the T's role in the early part of the book than an energetic young man who "drives like hell broken loose" in a newfangled contraption. Agee is telling us about a vanishing way of life in the America of his boyhood; by the time of his own death in 1955 (like his real-life father, in an automobile), the clock will move too fast for most men to water their lawns and take their sons to the moving-picture shows. More than anything else in the book, the Model T that kills Jay is a symbol of the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The car was wrought by a quirky, bitterly driven small-town man who had the greatest influence on America of anyone in the last hundred years.

## THE MAN BEHIND THE MACHINE

By the time of *A Death in the Family*, continental America was in its final form, with a brand-new forty-eighth state called Arizona. It was still a nation, however, of far-flung towns loosely joined by terrible roads. Henry Ford forced the change of all that. Many people today think he invented both the automobile and the assembly line. Neither notion is true. What he *did* do was get people off horseback and onto wheels. That was, in the scope of human history, far more important.

Born in Michigan during the Civil War, Henry Ford had just a sixth-grade education, and as a young man he worked as a machinist. He was a late bloomer: at age thirty Ford was a man of lean accomplishment, considered an average mechanic with a dim future. What no one discerned were his astonishing

mechanical instincts, his obsession with endless tinkering, and his express-train determination. In 1896 he took an axe, chopped a hole in the wall of his workshop, and emerged with his first automobile. Two early automotive ventures he was involved in failed, but by 1903 he had founded the Ford Motor Company.

Cars in those early days were exclusively for the rich. Henry Ford's quest was to create a car for the common American. It had to be not just affordable, but easy to drive, easy to fix, and durable. Long years of trial and error passed before the Model T was ready. Like another epoch-maker of a century ago, Thomas Edison, Ford had a great team around him who never got the credit they should have for his company's innovations. But most accomplished men are sure they know everything; only a few have the confidence to really listen to their employees. Ford was such a man, and by 1908 his company had created the car that would put America on wheels.

Before the Model T, cars routinely cost five thousand dollars – a decade's wages to the working class. Ford's first T's cost less than a thousand dollars, and by the time Jay Follet would have bought his car, the price had been chopped to half that. Henry Ford liked to brag that for every dollar he could bring the price down, he would sell another thousand cars. His innovations to make the T affordable were some of the most brilliant in history. Early cars had been hand-crafted by a few highly skilled laborers, an expensive and impractical process. Ford perfected assembly lines, in which a worker performed one specific task before passing the new car off to another worker responsible for the next step in its manufacture. In 1913 Ford saw Chicago meat packers using a conveyor belt, which allowed the workers to stay in place while doing their assigned jobs. He tried the same principle at his factory and increased efficiency nearly tenfold. For the first time, the cost of an automobile was below that of a

horse-drawn wagon. Across the United States, Ford dealers readily accepted horses and buggies as trade-ins for the Model T.

The car changed every aspect of American life. Millions of people who had never been more than twenty miles from their homes could now experience leisure and business travel. Millions more, like Jay Follet, emigrated from the farms of their youth to the cities and used the Model T for visits home. At its peak, Ford's company was producing ten thousand Model T's a day, and they would eventually sell *fifteen million* of them. Annual company profits were in the tens of millions – in an era with an income tax rate of one percent.

In time Henry Ford became the world's richest man, but of course that wasn't enough. His public life had none of the surefootedness of his business life. His ideas on geopolitics struck most people as either naïve or odd. The very year that *A Death in the Family* takes place, Ford chartered a ship to Europe in a vain attempt to get its governments to solve their differences without bullets. After World War One, he tried and failed to win a seat in the U.S. Senate. Henry Ford didn't like Jews, and published a newspaper that said so. He was far more successful as a philanthropist, opening a hospital and starting a charitable foundation that exists to this day. His death in 1947 was wreathed in a splendid irony: a bad spring storm had knocked out the power to his mansion, so he died by the meager light of kerosene lamps and candles, bits of the simple old life he had done more than any other American to destroy.



*"This cotter pin had fallen out . . ." The small loop of wire at center is the type of pin that works loose and kills Jay in the story.*

## “AT THE EXACT POINT OF THE CHIN, A SMALL BRUISE”

After awhile Bryan stops the Model T on a side street, and a little crowd quickly forms. As always, someone wants to see the engine, so Bryan removes the cowl. No wonder these cars were so reliable – there’s barely anything under the hood to go wrong, just a naked motor block and a dozen-odd components. One of them is the steering gear, rods slender as cigarettes running down to the front wheels, and I look at it for clues to what killed Jay Follet.



*The throttle was worked by hand on the T. Note the large -- and lethal -- bolt topping the steering column.*

“This cotter pin had fallen out, that held the steering mechanism together.” There they are, a dozen of them, cotter pins that are no more than thick wire. A dozen ways to disaster. “He must have hit a loose rock with one of the front wheels.”

Chances are, Jay never saw it. Headlights on early T’s were an option; even if one had them, they were notoriously inferior. Finally, I sit behind the Model T’s wheel. “There was just one mark on his body . . . Right at the exact point of the chin, a small bruise.” The steering column is set surprisingly high, and topped by a walnut-sized bolt with a domed point. There is no padding over it. When I lean forward as Jay would have done when thrown onto the steering wheel suddenly and hard, the bolt arrives – precisely – on my chin.

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## QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

1. Why do you think James Agee made the Model T an important part of *A Death in the Family*? Take into account what America was like in 1915, as well as Agee’s own personal life.
2. Consider the sort of changes that Henry Ford’s innovations led to in America. Now consider the changes fostered by the innovations of Microsoft’s Bill Gates. How are they the same, and how are they different?
3. What aspects of its design gave the Model T advantages over earlier cars?
4. What are some shortcomings in the Model T’s design and construction that might have led to the death of Jay Follet in the story?
5. How does Agee use Jay’s Model T as a way of telling the reader what life was like in 1915, and how America was changing?



