

# Walter Percy Chrysler

**O**ne exciting technology caught the imagination of the American public at the beginning of the twentieth century: automotive design and construction. There have been more than 4,000 brands of automobiles offered for sale worldwide, with about 2,500 of them produced in the U.S.A. Some European manufacturers use acronym names like BMW, for Bayerische Motoren Werke in Germany, or Fiat, for Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino, in Italy. But most American companies were named after people. Two examples are David Buick (1855-1929) and Louis Chevrolet (1878-1941). Buick designed the chassis for his first automobile in 1903. He left the business in 1906 to work for gold-mining companies. Chevrolet helped design his company's first 1911 automobile. Then, he worked on racing cars. One he constructed, driven by his brother Gaston, won the 1920 Indianapolis 500 mile race.

Other designers stayed with their companies for many more years. No one controlled an automobile company longer than Henry Ford (1863-1947). He established the Ford Motor Company in 1903 and held a leadership position for more than 40 years. An equally colorful and long-lasting automobile pioneer was Walter Chrysler. Like Ford, he was one of the few industrial leaders who came from the ranks of manual labor.

Chrysler was born into a rough-and-tumble environment in what was then the American West. His hometown was a prairie railroad shop town and Chrysler's father drove a locomotive for the Union Pacific Railroad. Father and son occasionally took rides together in a locomotive cab and the father encouraged Chrysler's interest in machinery. The younger Chrysler turned down a chance to attend a nearby college and took a job as a machinist's apprentice for five cents an hour



Courtesy of Chrysler Corporation

**Walter Chrysler shown in a 1924 publicity photograph with the first Chrysler automobile, a hand-crafted, five-passenger sedan**

in the railroad shop. Even as a teenager, he demonstrated an unusual characteristic that served him well his entire life. Chrysler was willing to take risks for the possibility of a distant and ill-defined future reward.

Chrysler loved his work as a machinist and built a 28-inch-long operational locomotive in his spare time. He always spoke fondly of his experiences in the railroad shop, but he left to learn more about machinery. The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad hired him as a journeyman. He arrived with such outstanding references that the company offered him its highest pay rate. But Chrysler was not satisfied to stay in one place and miss other opportunities for advancement. For eight years, he moved from one place to another, developing a reputation as a capable and gifted machinist-mechanic.

While working in Salt Lake City, Chrysler saw a steam locomotive limp into town one

**Born:**  
April 2, 1875, in  
Wamego, Kansas

**Died:**  
August 18, 1940,  
in Kings Point,  
Long Island,  
New York

day with one of its two cylinders not working. He repaired it in record time, keeping the train on schedule. He was promptly made roundhouse foreman at the age of 26. Now, with reasonable career possibilities in hand, he returned home to marry his childhood sweetheart, Dell Forker. It was an ideal marriage and she willingly accepted his inclination for risk taking. Chrysler said his wife deserved 70 percent of the credit for any success he may have achieved.

Always successful, Chrysler rose through various management levels at several companies. Because he had worked at so many

manual jobs, he also understood the problems of the workers and had their respect. He moved to Chicago and then to Pittsburgh where he served as plant superintendent for the American Locomotive Company.

Chrysler became an automotive enthusiast after he saw a red and white Locomobile at the 1908 Chicago Automobile Show. He persuaded a friend to co-sign a

loan and bought it. His main interest was in the car's construction. In 1912, the opportunity came to work as production manager for the Buick Motor Company in Flint, Michigan. Buick offered him \$6,000 per year. He was then earning \$8,000 at American Locomotive and the company offered an increase to \$12,000 if Chrysler would stay. Amazingly, he chose to go to Buick, even though he knew it would forever separate him from the steam locomotives he called "noble mechanisms." Neither his friends nor his wife understood his decision.

Because Chrysler's background was in locomotive production, he brought a different perspective to a company that was still influenced by fine carriage making. He introduced new processes and efficiencies

more suited to automotive manufacture. Production increased from 45 cars per day to 550 and Chrysler became president of Buick in 1916. Buick was a unit of General Motors, which had William Durant (1861-1947) as chairman. The company's management methods dissatisfied Chrysler and he resigned in 1920.

Chrysler next served as executive vice president of the troubled Willys-Overland Automobile Company in Toledo, Ohio. He had a free hand to oversee the company's two-year reorganization. He successfully reduced the company's debt and placed it on a sound financial footing. While in the middle of that job, the Maxwell Motor Company asked Chrysler to repeat the performance for Maxwell. He agreed and assumed its presidency. He suggested an entirely new car, but others did not want a new car—they wanted a reorganization. Chrysler raised money, bought the company, and began working on an innovative car that would bear his name.

That car would succeed because of the abilities of three outstanding automotive technologists: Carl Breer, Owen Skelton, and Fred Zeder. The industry later called them the "Three Chrysler Musketeers." Breer and Zeder were exceptional engine designers, while Skelton's strength was in transmission and axle design.

Chrysler wanted to build a moderately priced car with features like four-wheel hydraulic brakes and a powerful six-cylinder, high-compression engine. Breer, Skelton, and Zeder delivered the product. The first car to carry a Chrysler nameplate came out in 1924 with a price starting at \$1,335. It had a 68 hp 201-cubic-inch displacement engine with a 4.7:1 compression ratio, considered high compression at the time. The engine had innovative features like aluminum pistons, a seven-bearing crankshaft, and pressurized lubrication.

Chrysler had three preproduction automobiles made and displayed them at the 1924 New York Automobile Show. The exhibit brought in 5,000 orders and the company sold more than 32,000 Chrysler cars its first year. Chrysler introduced four models the following year, the 50, 60, 70, and Imperial 80. The numbers referred to the vehicle's maximum miles-per-hour velocity on a level road. At the time, these were almost unbelievable speeds for moderately priced cars.

Courtesy of Chrysler Corporation

**Walter Chrysler in a 1932 Plymouth advertisement. Floating power referred to a new way to bond synthetic rubber to steel. It allowed Chrysler to make improved engine mounts that reduced vibration.**



Six-cylinder Chrysler roadsters took third and fourth places at the 1928 international Le Mans race. A far more expensive Bentley came in first, followed by an equally costly Stutz.

Car sales increased and the company needed more production space. Chrysler purchased the Dodge Brothers Company in 1928 to acquire its nameplate and manufacturing facilities. Shortly afterward, he introduced the Plymouth and De Soto automobiles.

To test vehicle aerodynamics, Breer had a wind tunnel constructed in the late 1920s. The company used his data to design and construct a streamlined unit body Airflow model under Chrysler and De Soto nameplates. The car was introduced in 1934 at \$1,345, and only 11,000 sold that year. It was too far ahead of its time. Sales dropped to below 5,000 in 1937, its last year of production. Although not a financial success, the Airflow showed that Chrysler had not abandoned his willingness to take a risk.

To serve as headquarters for corporate offices, the 77-story 1930 Chrysler Building was constructed in New York City. Walter Chrysler initiated the project and personally chose the marble for the corridors and the veneers for the original elevators. The Chrysler Building is a beautiful traditional skyscraper, complete with medieval gargoyles. It was once the world's tallest building.

When Chrysler retired in 1935, the company was out of debt and its production was second in the industry. Chrysler then spent his time boating, fishing, and collecting penny banks. He wrote his biography and helped his son take over the business. He died at his

estate on Long Island.

The full force of the Great Depression caused some financial cutbacks at the Chrysler Corporation. One department that never experienced a reduction was the company's research department. Chrysler knew that innovations were important to technology. That heritage continued right into the 1960s with the company's introduction of 50 gas-turbine-powered automobiles for consumer testing. The vehicle

never went into production, but it showed the company's continued willingness to test a new technology. The Chrysler Corporation was the only automobile



manufacturer to be a prime NASA contractor for the Apollo moon landing program. It built the first stage of the uprated Saturn I booster. Walter Percy Chrysler's influence lasted well past his lifetime.

## References

- Birth of the Chrysler Corporation and Its Engineering Legacy* by Carl Breer, edited by Antony J. Yanik, Society of Automotive Engineers Publications, 1995.
- Life of an American Workman* by Walter Chrysler, Dodd Mead, 1937.
- Seventy Years of Chrysler* by George H. Dammann, Crestline Publishing, 1974.

**1934 Chrysler DeSoto Airflow sedan. Though a beautiful automobile, its aerodynamic style never caught on with the public.**

**1964 Chrysler experimental gas turbine car. A total of 50 were constructed and turned over to randomly selected consumers in a unique two-year market survey. It showed the research heritage left by Walter Chrysler.**