

FORD MODEL A 1931 DeLuxe Phaeton

BY JOHN R. BOND
PHOTOS BY MARVIN LYONS

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The last Model T came off the line on May 26, 1927, and its engine bore serial No. 15,000,000. This was at the old Highland Park plant where production of Model T engines and parts continued for some time after May 26.

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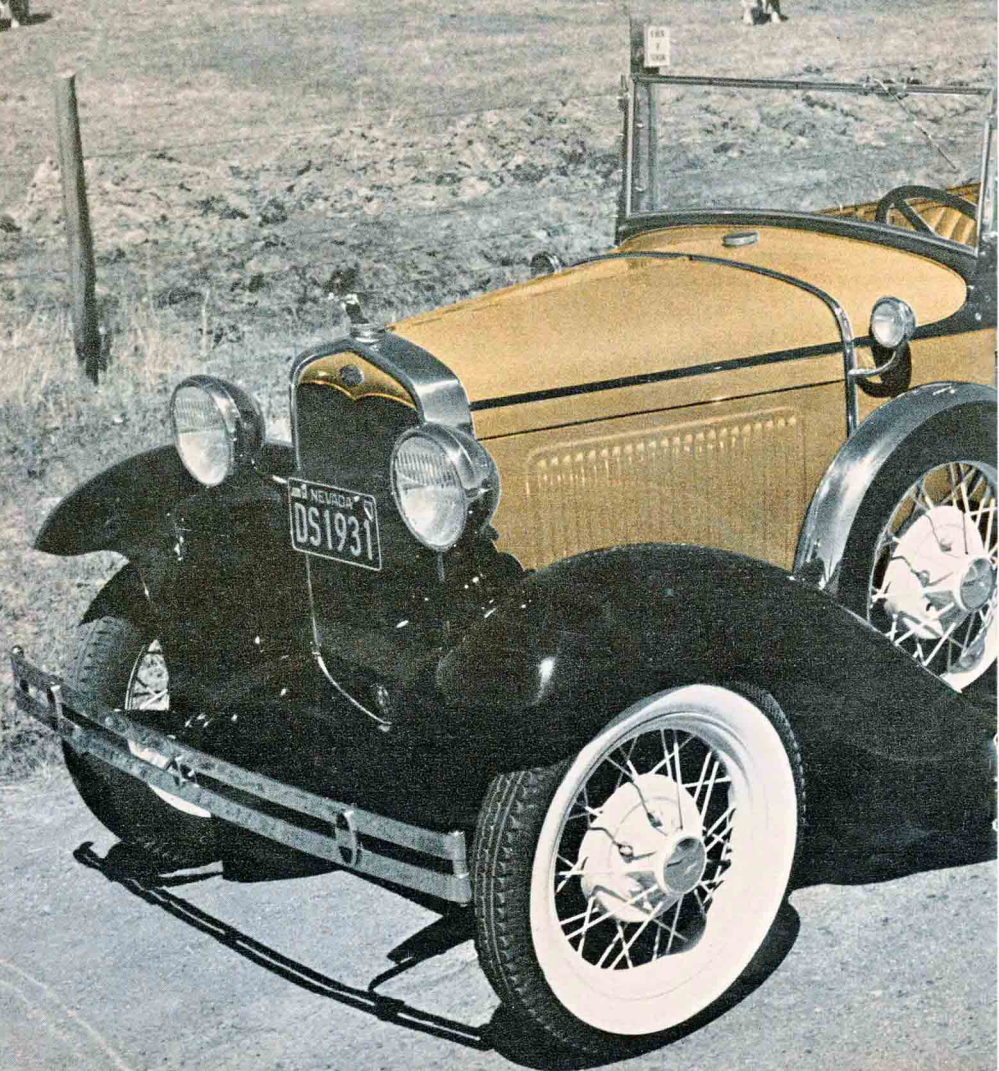
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The official announcement day for the Model A was Dec. 2, 1927, and it has been estimated that more than 10 million people jammed Ford salesrooms throughout the country in the first few days of the A's appearance. Many dealers had no cars until early in 1928 but in the 4.5 years of Model A production some 4.5 million cars were produced. Production stopped on March 9, 1932, and on March 22 the Model B (4-cyl.) and the Model 18 (V-8) were introduced.

While we like to think that the Model T was produced for 19 years without change there was, actually, a very large number of changes—generally made as running changes without disturbing the production cycles.

And so it was with the Model A. Late in 1928 the multiple-disc clutch was replaced with a much simpler and better single-plate unit. The fender stays were changed from forgings to pressed steel. The connecting rods were changed in cross-section from a \perp -section to a more conventional I-beam. There were many other changes too, but the biggest surprise

CAR LIFE CLASSIC



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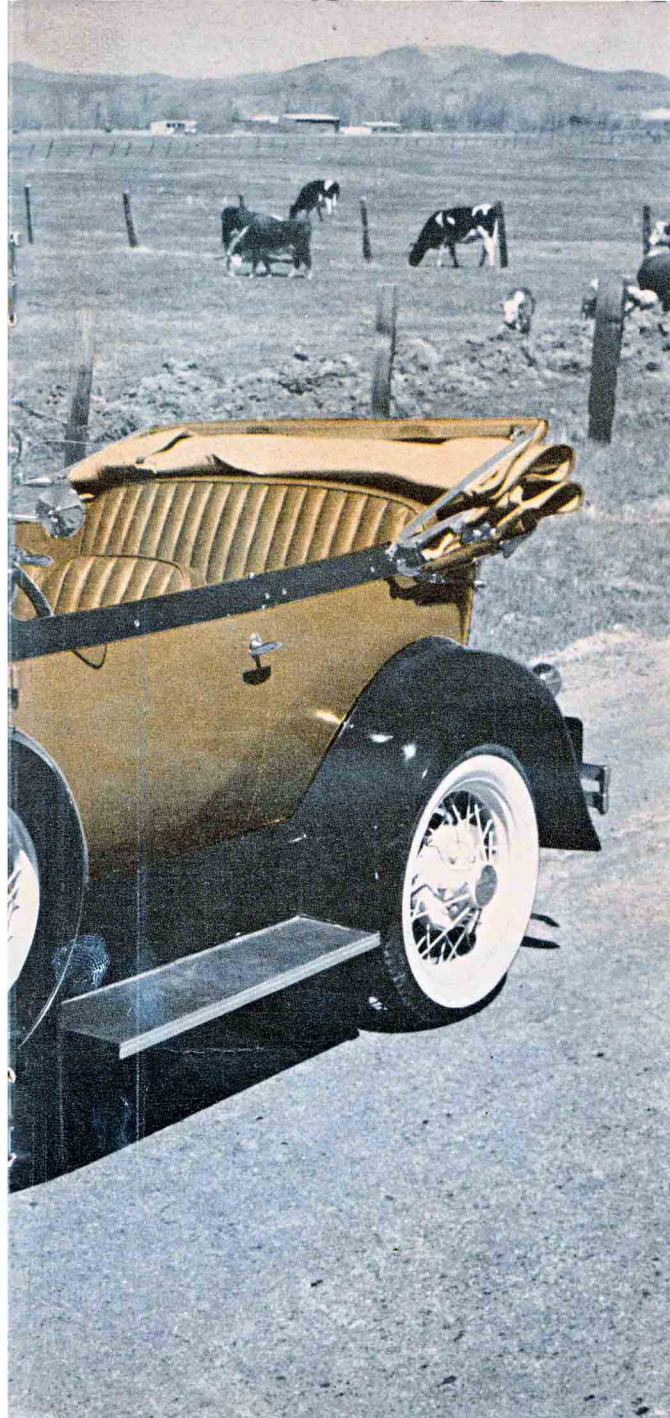
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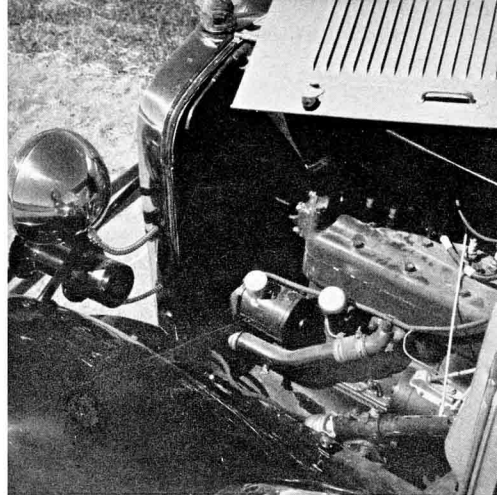
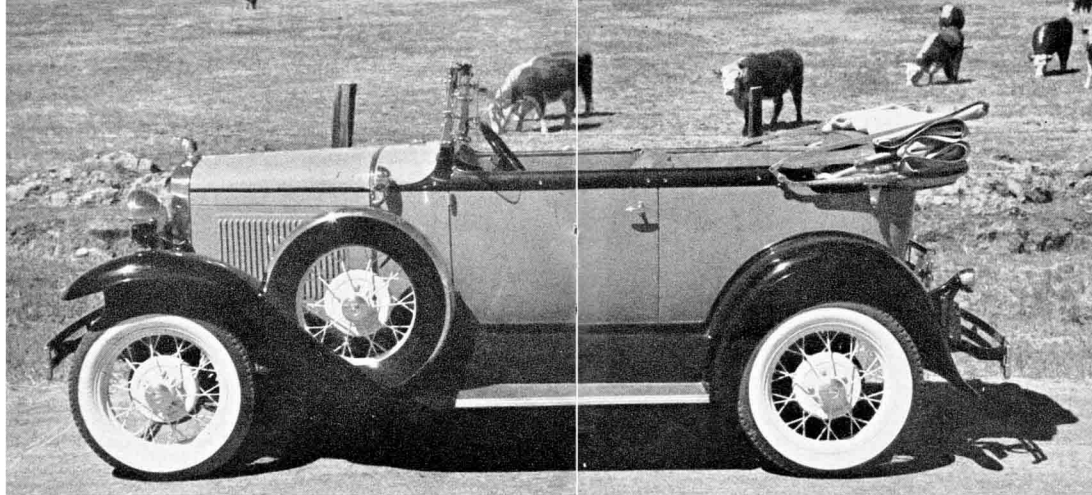
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came in the fall of 1929 when Ford completely restyled the car.

Actually, the first Model A didn't look much different from the last Model T. It had 21-in. wheels, 9.5-in. ground clearance and the cowl section failed to sweep out enough to cover the front corner posts of the body. The second series Model A brought modern styling. Larger tires on smaller wheels (4.75-19) lowered the chassis. New, wider fenders were more graceful. But the biggest change was in the radiator hood and cowl sections. The Ford was now "streamlined" in the modern manner—the cowl now covered the corner posts.

An important change in the 1930 Ford was the use of stainless steel for the radiator shell and headlamps. This

change gave Ford an important sales advantage but some headaches, too. Stainless steel alloys were expensive, along with being very difficult to form. When the material was stretched or drawn in dies, it tended to spring back more than normal "deep-draw" type steel. Ford obviously licked the problems, though it is not recorded how much was spent on tooling.

In retrospect, it is unfortunate that the original Model A gearing was not retained in the 1930 and 1931 models. The first series had a 3.70:1 rear axle and 4.50-21 tires. This gave a road speed of 60 mph at only 2500 rpm, with an honest top speed of 65-68 mph. The new smaller wheels of 1930 were accompanied by an axle ratio change in the wrong direction—to

3.77:1. Thus 60 mph meant 2700 rpm from the engine, which still peaked at only 2200 rpm. Performance was better, but fuel consumption was heavier and the honest top speed dropped to 57-60 mph. One of the big selling points of the 1929 Model A was that it was faster than the Chevrolet 6—the Ford would even do 45 mph in 2nd gear. But, in 1930-31 the Ford would barely reach 40 mph in 2nd and the Chevrolet gained a 3-4 mph advantage in top speed in high gear.

Ford tried another tack in 1931. The radiator shell was formed with a relief effect, generally conceded to have been a genuine improvement in looks, and a host of new body types were added. Some of these bodies had slanting windshield posts, some did

not. Our records do not show the total number of body styles but we believe there were at least 14.

In view of Ford's earlier policy of simplification, the multiplicity of body types and styles offered in 1931 seems more than an anomaly.

Of the open type bodies offered in 1931 there was a standard roadster, a de luxe roadster, a 4-door touring car and a unique 2-door, 5-passenger, de luxe phaeton.

That 2-door phaeton was one of the sharpest looking cars on the road in 1931. Chevrolet had some good-looking open models in 1931 too, complete with wire mesh radiator guard, folding windshield, side mounts and luggage rack. But the Ford phaeton had some special touch even if it wasn't quite

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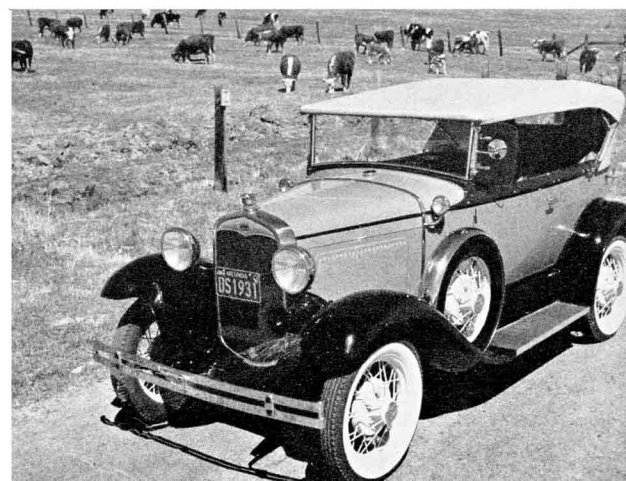
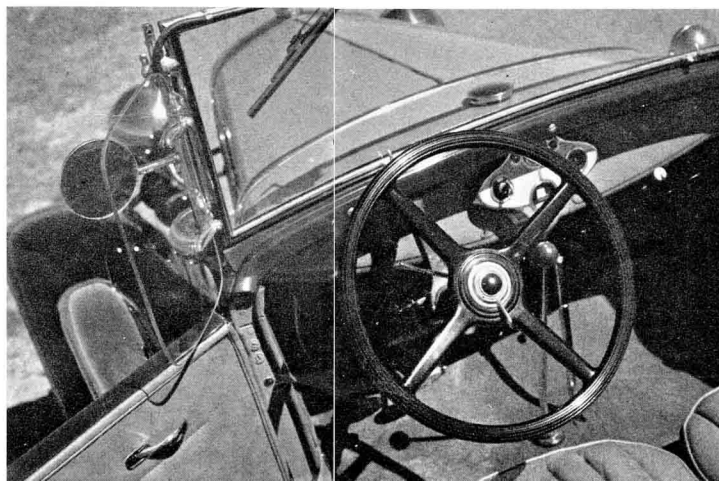
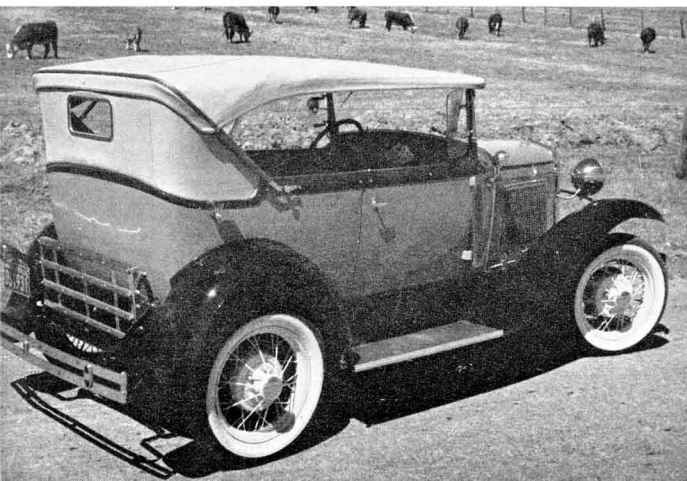
And the Ford was a lot more fun to drive, even if it didn't ride as well as the Chevrolet. There's something about a big, slow-turning four that makes it feel peppy. The Ford was smooth running, especially if you installed one of several types of rubber engine mounts offered by the accessory stores. (There was one by Skinner that equaled Plymouth's highly-touted floating power.) If you put the two cars (throttle and spark) to full up position, the A would chug along on retarded spark at 5 mph. The exhaust system had a pleasing note, yet wasn't intrusive at high speed. Around town, the brisk performance through the gears was great fun and a Ford in traffic was livelier than many cars

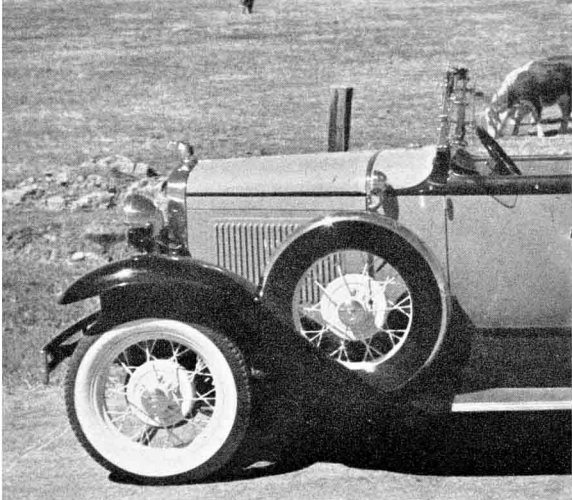
costing 3-4 times as much.

Accessories galore were available for the Model A, although it was a much more complete package than the T. Its original equipment hydraulic shock absorbers, alone, put several dozen firms out of business. High-compression cylinder heads were especially popular for the A and even overhead-valve heads were made.

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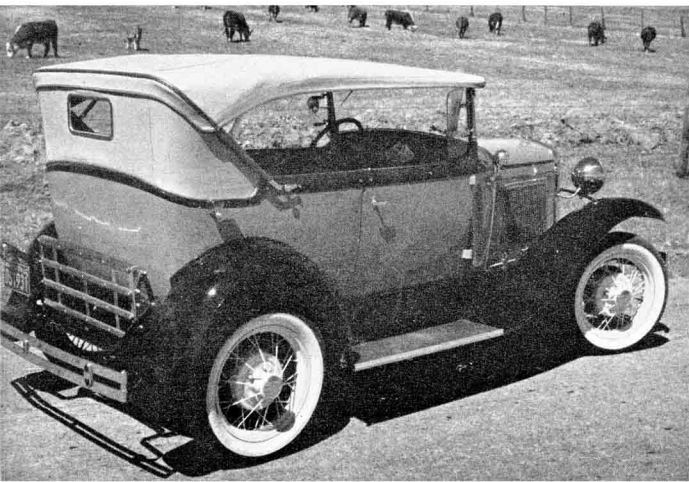
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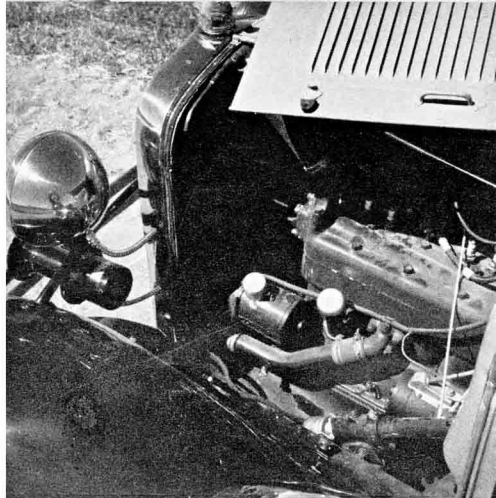
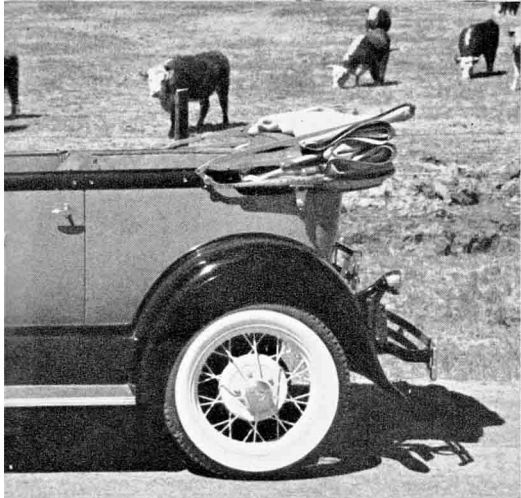
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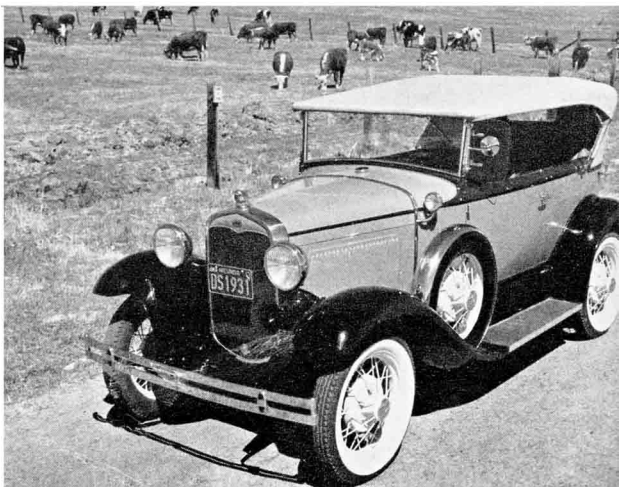
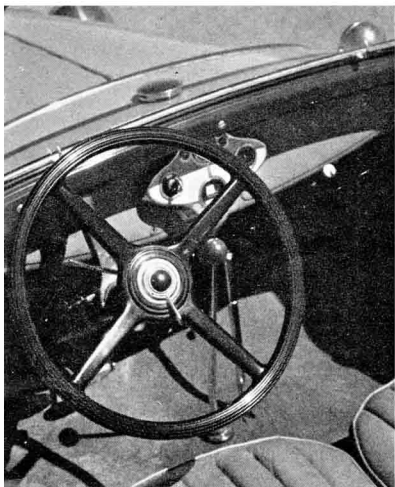
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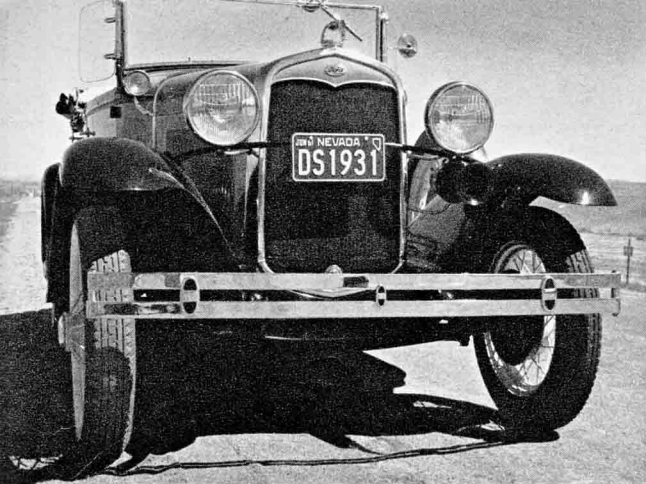
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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS
1931 Model A Ford

1st price (DeLuxe Phaeton).....	\$625
Curb weight, lb. (est.).....	2300
Wheelbase, in.	103.5
Tread, front/rear, in.	56.0
Tire size	4.75-19
Engine type	4-cyl. sv
Bore & stroke	3.875 x 4.25
Displacement, cu. in.	200.5
Compression ratio	4.22:1
Bhp @ rpm.....	40 @ 2200
equivalent mph	49
Torque @ rpm (est.).....	114 @ 1200
equivalent mph	26.6
Gear ratios	
3rd (1.00).....	3.78
2nd (1.85).....	6.99
1st (3.12).....	11.8
Speed in gears	
3rd (2800).....	.62
2nd (3500).....	.42
1st (3500).....	.25
Brake lining area, sq. in.	225
Ground clearance, in.	9.0
Steering ratio	16:1
Turning circle, ft.	34.0
Cu. ft. ton mile.....	120
Engine revs. mile.....	2700
Piston travel, ft./mile.....	1920
Car Life wear index.....	51.9

FORD MODEL A 1931 DeLuxe Phaeton

in William Harrah's Auto Museum at Reno, Nev.

Some Personal Notes

AT ONE TIME or another, I owned four different Model A Fords. All were purchased second-hand in the mid-

Thirties and the prices paid may be of interest to those now looking for a Model A to restore: 1928 roadster (\$75), 1929 coupe (\$125), 1930 coupe (\$175), 1929 coupe (\$15).

Looking back at the Model A in the light of more recent experience, it was a wonderful car for its time, but a little archaic for the period in which I owned them (1934-39). As a matter of fact, the 1932 Model B was as big an advance over the A as the A was over the T.

The worst fault of the A was its terrible ride; it was a very tiring car to drive long distances. A run of 200 miles was about the limit of endurance, although I did do 400 miles in a day on several occasions.

The steering was heavy and the car

had very poor directional stability. Cruising speed was limited to about 50 mph; you couldn't hold it on the road at much over that and, anyway, the brakes weren't too good. Oil consumption tripled if you tried to cruise at 55.

The biggest engine problem was pistons and rings. The stock pistons were extremely light for such a large bore, only 17.9 oz. Special aluminum pistons were available, heavier and with an extra oil ring groove for a total of four rings. These licked the oil consumption problem but made the engine very rough running, even at only 50 mph. Obviously, the light pistons were necessary for smoothness, but they were of a split-skirt design and tended to collapse.

The cooling system, which Ford de-

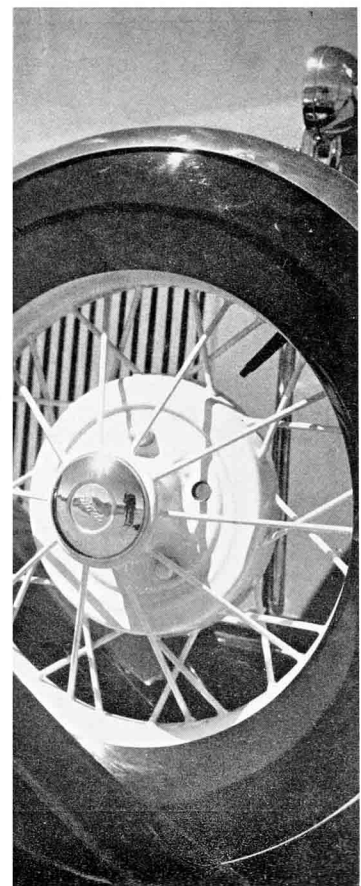
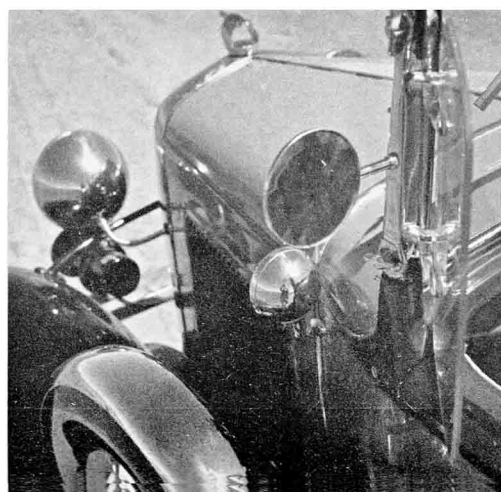
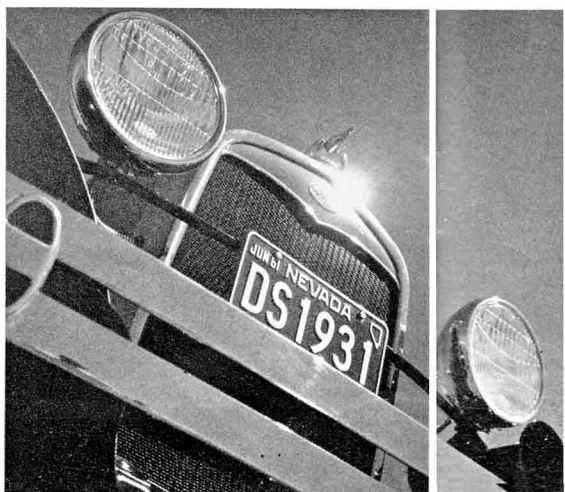
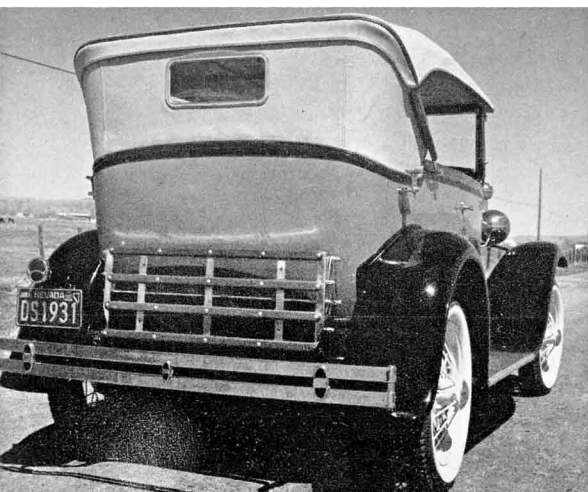
scribed as "thermo-siphon with pump assist," was designed so that cool water entered the middle of the engine block where most of it was then directed across and over the center main bearing area. This uneven cooling, plus siamesed cylinder bores, caused distortion and uneven bore wear; cylinders 2 and 3 always showed much more wear than 1 and 4. The export, English, version of the Model A had a smaller cylinder bore, only 3.0625 in., as compared with 3.875 in. in the U.S., and had water around each cylinder barrel. It undoubtedly was a far more satisfactory engine in every way.

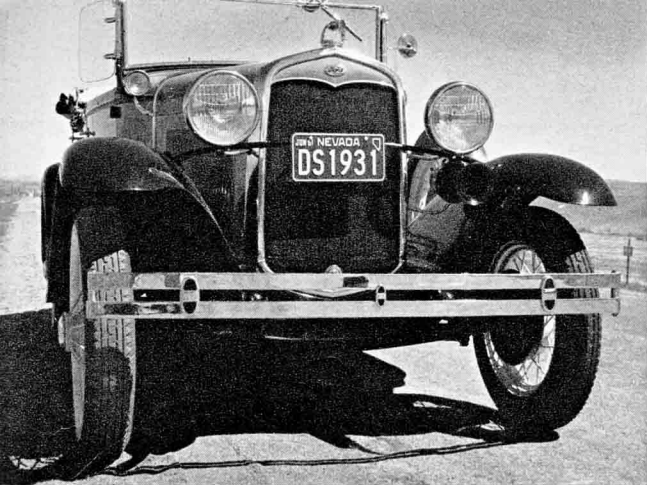
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The B engine got much larger main and rod bearings, which were needed with a higher compression ratio, as the A crank and rods didn't stand up at all if you tried one of the available "5:1" heads. For 1933 Ford finally did the bottom end right with counterweights added on the Model C crank. However, the "C" engine was offered only on trucks in 1934 and was discontinued after that year. The B engine with C crank is still popular today with the hot-rodders, and deservedly so.

As with the Model T, a major selling feature of the car was that anyone who knew which way to turn a nut to loosen it could work on it. It was simple, sturdy and economical transportation. ■





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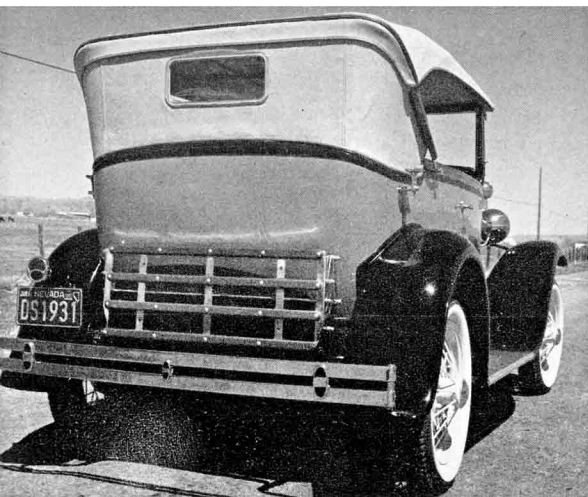
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