Chapter Six – Trouble and Triumph in the Thirties

> Chrysler Corporation has pioneered many of the fundamental and lasting engineering advances in automobile design and construction in the last ten years. Its newest development, the Airflow design of 1934 Chrysler and DeSoto models, has already met with an enthusiastic public response.
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> —*Ninth Annual Report of Chrysler Corporation, Year Ended December 31, 1933.* February 9, 1934.

For the Chrysler Corporation, the years from 1934 through 1940 were more traumatic and troubled than the early Depression years. Three events clouded the exuberance the Company otherwise evidenced with the success of the Plymouth, which was so handily helping it to survive the Great Depression. These were the introduction of the Airflow, the struggles accompanying the birth of the United Auto Workers and the retirement and death of Walter P. Chrysler.

The most celebrated of the three was the serious miscalculation called the Airflow. Certainly most accounts of the Company's fortunes in the mid-1930s center around Chrysler's introduction of this revolutionary car in 1934 in its Chrysler and DeSoto lines. Walter Chrysler, the engineering trio of Zeder-Skelton-Breer and most of the Company's top executives believed that the Airflow would make Chrysler the industry leader, surpassing not only Ford, which it had already done, but also General Motors. Instead, the Airflow models were a huge sales disappointment, and the Airflow could well have sent the Company to its grave between 1934 and 1937, just when the rest of the auto industry was enjoying an economic recovery.

The second disruption in Chrysler's operations came in 1937, when its hourly employees organized under the banner of the United Automobile Workers (UAW)-CIO and won a contract with the automaker. A long and bitter strike followed in the fall of 1939, further souring management-labor relations.

No less significant than these two, was Walter P. Chrysler's withdrawal from day-to-day management in 1935, when he gave up the position of president and became chairman of the board. His active involvement entirely ended three years later following a stroke in 1938. Walter P. Chrysler died in 1940.

On the eve of the Second World War, Chrysler Corporation had clearly changed, and changed dramatically, since the beginning of the Great Depression.

Surviving the Airflow, 1934-1937

The Airflow's roots extend back to August 1927, when engineer Carl Breer was driving his family north from Detroit to Port Huron, Michigan, where they planned to enjoy a sandy beach on Lake Huron. Breer spotted what he thought was a small flock of geese flying low to the ground. As they came closer, he could see that they were not geese, but a squadron of fighter aircraft returning to nearby Selfridge Field. He noted that the planes' streamlined design, much like that of geese, allowed them to fly at low speeds and low altitudes. Breer began thinking about how the flow of air around an automobile might affect its performance. Breer's intellectual curiosity set in motion a series of events that eventually led to the introduction of the Airflow cars in 1934.

Carl Breer soon asked William Earnshaw, a Chrysler engineer working at the Company's Dayton, Ohio, plant, to investigate the impact of auto body design on a car's motion. Earnshaw consulted with Orville Wright, who happened to live in Dayton. Orville and his brother Wilbur were, of course, the first two men to create a practical heavier-than-air flying machine and the first to make a piloted, powered, sustained and controlled flight in the history of mankind. There was hardly anyone better Earnshaw could have consulted. Wright suggested that he build a wind tunnel and test various shapes with models, following the practice of the aircraft manufacturers.

Earnshaw built the wind tunnel, which he operated in Dayton from November 1927 through October 1928. At the end of 1928, a new wind tunnel went into operation at Chrysler's engineering complex in Highland Park, and the Dayton staff moved there to continue their work. At least 50 scale models had undergone testing at the Highland Park wind tunnel by April 1930, including all of the thencurrent body styles used on Chrysler vehicles. On the basis of these experiments, Chrysler's engineers concluded that the front-end styling of cars was the main factor determining wind resistance. The tests showed, in terms of aerodynamics, it might be better just to run conventional cars backwards, since doing so cut wind resistance by 30 percent.

This initial interest in streamlining led to the development of the Airflow's unique design. The Airflow cars incorporated three distinct and interrelated design elements that set them apart from contemporary vehicles — aerodynamic body styling, an innovative suspension system and a "unit-body" design for the body and frame. First, Breer and his staff adopted a smooth, streamlined body with a rounded hood and a tapered rear end. By eliminating the traditional square back end, the engineers were forced to move the rear seats forward. As a result, they moved all the other chassis components forward as well, including

the front seat and the engine. This made the new design “front-heavy,” with 54 percent of the load carried by the front tires. The good news was that when they installed larger leaf springs, the new design made for a much smoother ride. They also created a combination body/frame structure consisting of steel truss members welded together to create a ribbed cage structure that encased the passengers. They then welded body panels to the frame, yielding a stronger, more rigid frame than found in conventional cars.

Breer and the Chrysler engineering staff developed the Airflow design only after years of testing models and road-test prototypes. The earliest known Airflow prototype was finished in September 1932 and road-tested in late 1932 and for much of 1933. They dubbed it the “Trifon Special” and registered the car in the name of Demitrion Trifon, a mechanic-driver who worked in the Chrysler road-test garage. The Chrysler name appeared nowhere on the paperwork of the prototype. The Chrysler engineers moved the Trifon Special by van to an isolated area in the northern part of lower Michigan for testing. They secretly rented garage space and living quarters on the Strubble farm north of Grayling and ran the prototype on the area’s rural back roads. The testing aroused some curiosity from the locals but no publicity.

Breer’s team spent most of 1933 producing about two dozen full-scale models in clay, wood and metal, featuring various stylistic variations of the grille, headlamps and trim. They produced at least 10 road-test prototypes by the end of 1933, including distinct vehicles for the Chrysler and DeSoto versions of the Airflow. Breer’s engineers also designed “compact” versions with an eye toward a smaller wheelbase Airflow for the Plymouth line. Walter Chrysler traveled to the Grayling area in the fall of 1933 to test drive the prototypes, and he gave his final approval for Breer to go ahead with production.

Chrysler introduced its Airflow cars at the New York Auto Show on January 6, 1934, expecting the same success it had achieved a decade earlier with the Chrysler Six. The Airflow was to be a celebration of Chrysler’s 10-year anniversary. The Company struck a bronze metal for the occasion, with one side portraying the 1924 Chrysler Six and carrying the inscription, “10th Anniversary of the Chrysler Car,” and the other side showing the 1934 Chrysler Airflow with the proclamation, “A Century of Progress in a Decade.”

Chrysler had a handful of Airflow show cars to display at the New York Automobile Show, but production was still months away. Why the rush to market, especially with a car that was so different from anything Chrysler had ever made? The decision was in part a response to reports Walter Chrysler had received that General Motors was on the verge of introducing its own streamlined models. Besides, Chrysler, Breer and company were certain they would soon have the car into quantity production. By all reports, the Airflow

cars *were* the stars of the auto show, and Chrysler's sales people took thousands of orders.

But the automaker had committed a monumental blunder in introducing the Airflow cars so long before it had any to sell. The delays in getting quantity production underway had much to do with the fact that building Airflows was more complicated and expensive than building conventional models. Assembling the unit body/frame design required an unprecedented number and variety of welding techniques. The body shop had 12 hydromatic welders, 12 gas welders, 31 fixed spot welders, 28 portable spot welding units and 12 indirect welders. The hydromatic welders, which did multiple welds simultaneously, completed 313 spot welds on each Airflow body. But in an announcement to its dealers in June 1934, Chrysler Corporation blamed the production delays on a die makers' strike. A strike of tool and die makers in September and October 1933, led by the Mechanics Educational Society of America (MESA), did indeed delay the introduction of new models for several Detroit automakers. The strike slowed the production of dies for the major car companies, the independent body manufacturers and the parts suppliers. Except for Ford, Studebaker and Nash, none of the Detroit companies had 1934 models to sell until January 1934.

Production, however, remained agonizingly slow in the early months of 1934. Combined Airflow production in January was only 50 cars, then jumped to 1,269 units in February. The cars did not start coming off the production lines in significant numbers until April, and by then, significant damage had already been done. Production peaked at 6,212 units in May. Even this peak level was barely sufficient to supply each Chrysler and DeSoto dealer with a single Airflow. When they finally arrived at dealerships, the early cars suffered from significant problems, mostly the result of faulty manufacturing. According to Fred Breer, Carl Breer's son, the first 2,000 to 3,000 Airflows to leave the factory had major defects including engines breaking loose from their mountings at 80 mph. The first wave of Airflow customers, along with the dealers, quickly became disillusioned.

Within six months after Chrysler introduced its Chrysler and DeSoto Airflow cars at the New York Auto Show, they were already a sales disaster. With the Airflow, the Chrysler Corporation suffered from a series of wounds, and, while some of them were self-inflicted, others were inflicted by competitors. General Motors mounted a not-so-subtle advertising campaign clearly aimed at discrediting the Airflows. The giant automaker ran a series of advertisements in the *Saturday Evening Post* in the first six months of 1934 in which it extolled the virtues of the General Motors line of cars as a whole. A common slogan appeared in all the ads — "An Eye to the Future — An Ear to the Ground" — describing the General

Motors policy “by which the public is given what it wants in better cars year after year, and yet is protected against ill-timed or dubious experiments.” General Motors offered streamlined cars, but its vehicles “did not leap full-born into being; they are the product of deliberate growth, rather than abrupt inspiration.” Its streamlined cars have styles “that say beauty as well as speed.” The car-buying public recognized that General Motors was attacking the Airflow cars through these ads.

These ads, combined with the Airflow’s slow arrival in showrooms and on dealer lots convinced many potential customers that the car had serious design defects. Then General Motors launched a negative advertising campaign clearly aimed at the Airflow cars. But the Airflow’s styling was another, perhaps the major, reason for its troubles. Most automotive historians agree that car buyers shunned Airflow in part because they did not like its looks, especially that of the front end. The stubby hood, the “waterfall” grille, headlamps and fenders were all squashed together into a massive anonymous lump. Styling historian Paul Wilson put it more brutally: “Airflow had some of the same grotesque anonymity as a human face covered by a nylon stocking. The Airflow had a lumbering, stupid look, a rhinoceros ugliness.” Potential buyers simply thought the Airflow was ugly. All these problems proved too serious for Chrysler to overcome, despite the many attractive features of Airflow.

Thus, for an automobile that was clearly superior to conventional cars in riding comfort, handling and safety, Airflow sales in 1934 were a major disappointment, bordering on a disaster for Chrysler. The automaker’s quarterly financial reports for the first two quarters of 1934 painted a rosy but false picture of the sales prospects. Chrysler reported at the end of March that it had 15,580 unfilled domestic orders for Airflow and that it would ship 25,000 Airflows by the end of July. Production figures for all of 1934 tell the real story. The Company produced 11,292 Chrysler Airflows and 13,940 DeSoto Airflows, or a total of 25,232 units. The results were especially damaging to DeSoto, which had produced 20,186 cars the previous year.

Chrysler tirelessly promoted Airflow for the remainder of 1934 but without success. The Company distributed free filmstrips to movie theaters showing Airflow’s handling abilities, the strength of its all-steel body and its safety features. The car completed several demonstrations at the Century of Progress Exhibition in Chicago, including coming to skid-free stops on wet pavement and taking sharp corners without rolling over. The Company also ran an Airflow (without a driver) over a 110-foot cliff in Ligommer, Pennsylvania. The car fell end over end and landed on its wheels. The driver stepped up, got into the car, immediately started it and drove it away under its own power. The car was apparently

unaffected by the fall.

In an effort to address customers' response to Airflow's looks, Chrysler hired Norman Bel Geddes, an internationally renown industrial designer, to change the appearance of Airflow's grille in the middle of the 1934 model year. He made cosmetic changes by replacing the original thin vertical bars with thicker ones. Stylist Ray Dietrich, who took over Chrysler's Art and Colour department in 1935, made more drastic changes for the 1935, 1936 and 1937 models. Unfortunately, the stylistic changes did not boost sales. The combined sales for the Chrysler and DeSoto versions fell from 25,232 in 1934 to 14,548 in 1935 and then further to only 11,272 units in 1936. Chrysler discontinued the DeSoto Airflow after 1936 but produced a Chrysler version for one more year and sold a disappointing 4,600 copies in 1937.

In retrospect, Walter Chrysler's gamble on the Airflow, which was a costly mistake and the only significant error of his storied automotive career, ran counter to everything he had done in the car business. Starting with the Chrysler Six, he had introduced cars that were mechanically advanced, with some stylistic flair, but with a conventional appearance otherwise. Airflow had innovative design features and offered better handling and more comfort than conventional contemporary cars, but the auto-buying public saw the Airflow, with its unconventional looks, as unacceptably ugly, even though streamlining and Art Deco styling were becoming popular at the time as representative of the "modern" look.

On the other hand, Chrysler's Engineering department had always been the key to its success in the past, and it was Engineering that drove the new design.
Some would claim that Walter Chrysler and his lieutenants became arrogant, others that they had simply lost touch with their customers. But in some ways, they were only doing what they had always done — following the lead of Engineering in producing automotive innovations and excellence. One measure of the fiasco was that Walter Chrysler never discussed Airflow in his autobiography or elsewhere. Another was the conservative approach of his successor as president, K. T. Keller, who took over just as the Airflow was bombing. Under Keller, few would be able to accuse Chrysler Corporation of being a leader in the industry — either in innovative engineering or daring design.

From a broader perspective, however, the Airflow's failure may have wounded Chrysler, but certainly not fatally. The DeSoto division sold Airflow models exclusively, and the nameplate suffered badly in 1934. Because the Chrysler division sold more conventional models in addition to Airflow, its sales were 22 percent higher in 1934 than in the previous year. With Plymouth sales continuing to boom, Chrysler Corporation sales as a whole for 1934 increased by nearly one-third over 1933, better than the industry-wide improvement of

26 percent. Chrysler unquestionably lost a lot of money on Airflow, although the Company never revealed how much. Had Chrysler enjoyed the same profits on sales in 1934 as it had in 1933 (5.1 percent), its 1934 profits would have been around $19 million, instead of its actual profits of $9.5 million. Chrysler introduced the all-new DeSoto Airstream and Chrysler Airstream models, modestly streamlined in design, in 1935. Both did very well in the market and helped Chrysler recover fully from the Airflow fiasco.

Clearly the Airflow was only a temporary glitch in Chrysler's expansion in the mid-1930s. After selling a respectable 451,734 vehicles in 1933, Chrysler's sales jumped to 597,756 units in 1934 and then leaped again to 843,599 in 1935, when the Company earned nearly $35 million in profits. Plymouth alone sold 442,281 cars in 1935, and the other car and truck lines did very well. The next two years brought even more success, with sales of 1,066,229 units in 1936 and 1,158,518 in 1937. Chrysler Corporation enjoyed profits of $62.1 million in 1936 and $50.8 million in 1937.

The Coming of Organized Labor

Walter Chrysler retired as president of Chrysler Corporation on July 22, 1935, and K. T. Keller replaced him in that post. Chrysler then served as chairman of the board until his death in August 1940, but he remained aloof from day-to-day management. In a rare break from this hands-off relationship, Chrysler briefly played an active role again in 1937 — in the Company's labor negotiations with the United Automobile Workers.

At precisely 1:30 P.M. on Monday, March 8, 1937, thousands of factory workers at nine Chrysler plants in the Detroit area stopped working and either walked away from their jobs and out of their workplaces or sat down and occupied the factories. The well-planned sit-down strike continued until March 25, when the workers evacuated the plants. Chrysler operations remained shut down until two weeks later, when Chrysler Corporation signed an agreement with the United Automobile Workers of America (UAW)-CIO. As a result, the Company lost its ability to operate in an "open shop" or non-union environment, with a free hand to change wages, hours, production standards and other working conditions at its whim. Chrysler and the UAW-CIO engaged in many more struggles in the late 1930s, during the Second World War and later, but the UAW-CIO has remained a permanent fixture in Chrysler's industrial relations ever since that Monday in 1937.

Walter P. Chrysler, K. T. Keller, B. E. Hutchinson and the rest of the corporation's executives probably felt certain — at least through 1935 — that they would never have to deal with a strong labor union representing their blue-collar workers. Detroit was a bastion of the

open shop until the early 1930s. Manufacturers had kept organized labor out of their plants through various methods, including “welfare” programs, spies and company unions. The Detroit automobile industry in general epitomized the success of the open shop movement of the 1920s, and Chrysler Corporation’s labor practices in the 1920s and 1930s were no different from those of the other major manufacturers.

Chrysler had hoped to keep unions out of its plants through increasing employee satisfaction. The Company, with its founder’s blessing, established the Chrysler Industrial Association (CIA) in June 1929. The CIA initially developed three major programs. First, it offered workers a reasonably priced combination life, sickness and accident insurance policy from the Aetna Life Insurance Company, taking advantage of group rates. Second, the CIA developed the “Good Cheer Fund,” which provided Christmas packages of food, clothing and gifts for the impoverished and cash gifts or loans to workers facing temporary financial crises, often because of unforeseen medical expenses. Finally, the organization supported athletic and recreational programs for Chrysler employees.

The Chrysler Industrial Association expanded its activities greatly after its founding. Starting in June 1935, it produced *Chrysler Motors Magazine,* a monthly employee magazine that carried news of CIA activities and employee accomplishments. A 1937 brochure described the full range of CIA programs, which included the Chrysler Male Choir, Chrysler Gardeners’ Club, Fresh Air Camps, Girls’ Clubs, Chrysler Apprentice School, various bands and orchestras, home nursing services and assistance with naturalization. Another program was the Chrysler Boys’ Tour, which allowed lower-income boys from Chrysler families to take a two-week educational tour of East Coast cities at a cost of only $15. Athletic activities supported by the CIA included baseball and softball leagues, “girl” softball teams and various other sports including boxing, soccer, golf, bowling and horseback riding.

The Company also used industrial spies to keep organized labor out of its plants, a common practice of all of the automobile companies. Spies typically identified union leaders or agitators, and the Company would then dismiss them. Chrysler mainly used the Corporations Auxiliary Company of New York to gather intelligence. Thirty-eight of their operatives worked in various Chrysler plants in 1933 alone. A U.S. Senate committee chaired by Wisconsin Democrat Robert M. La Follette, Jr., held hearings in 1936 on the use of labor spies and found evidence that the anonymous reports from the labor spies went to Herman Weckler, the Chrysler vice president in charge of industrial relations.

A third strategy used by all of the auto companies, including Chrysler, to prevent

unionization of its workers was to promote company-dominated unions as an alternative. Walter Chrysler offered an Employee Representation Plan to his workers in October 1933. The plan established Joint Shop Councils in all of the plants, with workers choosing their representatives by secret ballot. Each council would have an equal number of management and employee representatives, but a two-thirds vote was needed for any action. This system guaranteed that any proposal opposed by management had no chance of passage. The shop workers voted on the plan, and 86 percent of the 33,000 employees who voted approved the plan. Because workers believed that such ballots were not secret, the lopsided vote should not be seen as strong worker support for this particular plan. When Chrysler workers registered their preferences for a union several months later in elections supervised by the independent Automobile Labor Board, less than 1 percent chose the Chrysler Employee Representation Plan.

By the mid-1930s, national politics were beginning, for the first time in the country's history, to favor labor unions. The Depression, which brought with it very high unemployment, had created a public much more sympathetic to the common worker than in the past, and Franklin Roosevelt, whose first election in 1932 had depended in part on the vote of organized labor and who probably could not be reelected in 1936 without labor's support, had made sure his New Deal backed the growing labor movement. By early 1935, one independent labor union was already seeking to establish itself at Chrysler. The Dingmen's Welfare Club consisted of skilled metal workers who had the job of pounding out the "dings" in metal car bodies before painting. The dingmen at Chrysler and Briggs Manufacturing Company, some 260 in total, walked off the job on April 30, 1935. They complained that Chrysler was replacing them with less-skilled metal finishers. After a six-week strike, which brought them no real gains, the dingmen returned to work.

Union activists such as John Zaremba and Richard Frankensteen, who worked in Dodge Main and were elected to the Dodge Works Council, established the independent Automotive Industrial Workers Association (AIWA) in April 1935. They shifted their allegiance to the UAW-CIO in July 1936 and ran candidates for the Works Council who openly supported the UAW. In the last corporation-wide election to the Works Council, held on January 28, 1937, candidates who ran openly as UAW supporters captured 103 of the 120 seats. These representatives resigned in favor of the UAW on March 3, and Frankensteen demanded from Chrysler a national conference to negotiate a labor contract covering all of Chrysler's workers. The sit-down strike began immediately after Chrysler officially refused to bargain with Frankensteen and the UAW.

The UAW had already used the sit-down strategy successfully, winning the union a contract with General Motors following a 44-day strike at select GM plants in Flint, Michigan, earlier in the year. Chrysler went to court against the sit-down strikers, and Michigan Circuit Judge Allan Campbell ordered them out of Chrysler's plants by 9:00 A.M. on March 17. After the workers refused to leave, Campbell ordered the county sheriff on March 19 to arrest the strikers. Given the thousands of sit-down strikers within the plants and the sheriff's small force, Campbell's orders were unenforceable and all but meaningless.

Michigan Governor Frank Murphy entered the dispute on March 23, 1937, when he invited Walter P. Chrysler and John L. Lewis, the head of the Committee for Industrial Organizations (CIO) to meet with him in Lansing. The UAW agreed to vacate the occupied plants, and, in return, Chrysler Corporation would make no effort to resume production during negotiations. The UAW vacated the plants on March 25, following 17 days of occupation. Negotiations then continued and resulted in an agreement on April 6. Lewis brought three more men to help him with the negotiations, while Walter Chrysler had a retinue of six. Lewis called this management group "Chrysler's House of Lords." Most of the negotiating was carried out by Chrysler and Lewis talking one-on-one. At one point, Murphy told the rest of the group that he "had the two mastodons sitting beside each other in a lounge near his office."

The agreement would run through March 31, 1938, with both sides agreeing to drop all legal actions against each other. Chrysler promised not to discriminate against union supporters and to resume production as soon as feasible. Chrysler did *not* agree to a union shop, under which employees would lose their jobs if they did not join the union. Chrysler did promise, however, that it would not promote, finance or recognize any other labor organization. A supplemental agreement signed on April 14 covered grievance procedures, layoffs, transfers and seniority rules. Tellingly, wages were not covered in this first agreement.

Chrysler and the UAW-CIO renewed that initial labor agreement for a full year ending March 31, 1939, and the two parties agreed to a series of monthly extensions that carried the contract though September 30, 1939. After suffering substantial layoffs and pay cuts during the disastrous 1938 automobile depression that affected Chrysler and the other car companies, the UAW-CIO wanted to reap the benefits of the 1939 revival in sales and profits. The struggle over a new contract started in August 1939 as Chrysler began production on the new 1940 models. Union members claimed that the Company had introduced a "speed-up" in many departments, and they, in turn, deliberately slowed production. The UAW became more militant in its stance after winning a National Labor

Relations Board certification election held in all the Chrysler plants on September 27, 1939. The workers had three choices — the radical UAW-CIO, the rival and more conservative UAW-AFL and "no union." The UAW-CIO won nearly 82 percent of the votes cast.

The slow-downs caused Chrysler to close Dodge Main on October 11 and the UAW-CIO took a strike vote on October 15, when 90 percent of those voting authorized a strike. The union officially began the strike on October 18 and stayed out for 45 days. The two sides reached agreement on most of the issues, except for wages, by November 21, when the CIO announced it would establish a union of foremen and supervisors at the Dodge truck plant. On November 24, Chrysler began encouraging its black workers to return to work at Dodge Main, hoping at least to discredit the UAW with some of the public as racist if it could not get the plant up and running. But the effort failed either to restart the plant or to start a race riot. A few days later, K. T. Keller offered a general pay increase of three cents an hour, and the parties signed a new agreement on November 29. The various locals ratified the pact the same day, and production resumed at most of the Chrysler plants on November 30.

Both sides could claim a victory in the settlement. Chrysler recognized the UAW-CIO as the exclusive bargaining agent for its employees but did not grant a union shop or paid vacations. Production standards were now subject to the grievance procedure, a clear gain by the union. The UAW-CIO also won time-and-ahalf pay for overtime work, double-time for holiday work and a minimum of two hours' pay for workers sent home after reporting for work, all significant economic gains. The three-cent per hour pay raise went to workers earning on average one dollar an hour. None of the economic provisions were "deal-busters," and the agreement had little impact on Chrysler's profits. The additional labor costs, estimated by the Company to be $5 million a year, barely dented profits, which were nearly $38 million in 1940. Above all else, the 1939 strike was a test of strength for the UAW-CIO and a test of resolve for Chrysler Corporation. Both passed.

Despite the 1939 slow-downs and strike, Chrysler bounced back and recovered nicely in the late 1930s. Sales rebounded to 778,781 units in 1939 and 1,044,290 in 1940, and then held steady at 1,028,130 vehicles in 1941, the last "normal" year for Chrysler for many years to come.

The Death of Walter P. Chrysler

Although Walter Chrysler turned over the presidency of the Chrysler Corporation to K. T. Keller in 1935, he kept the post of chairman of the board and, in a selective way, remained

actively connected to the Company's affairs in leading the negotiations that ended the March 1937 sit-down strike against the Company. Walter Chrysler unfortunately was never able to enjoy a long, happy retirement from business. On May 26, 1938, he suffered a serious stroke that left him incapacitated. Chrysler withdrew entirely after his 1938 stroke. He left the company he had founded in excellent shape, especially considering the unfavorable conditions of the Great Depression. By July 1936, Chrysler had eliminated all of its long-term debt and was positioned to remain profitable for years to come.

A little more than two months after Walter Chrysler's first stroke, his wife Della Forker Chrysler had a massive stroke on August 8, 1938, never regained consciousness and died later that day. She was 66.

Della and Walter had married on June 2, 1901, in Ellis, Kansas. In addition to raising their four children, she had been a constant source of support and encouragement for Walter through his long and sometimes difficult career. Her death and his own incapacitation must have been devastating to Walter's normally optimistic outlook. A second stroke killed Walter P. Chrysler on August 18, 1940, at age 65. His funeral service was held on August 21, 1940, at St. Bartholomew's Church in New York City.

For more than a decade before his death, Walter Chrysler had been enshrined as an American folk hero, a 20th-century Horatio Alger figure. Chrysler consciously helped in his own enshrinement through frequent interviews with the financial and popular press. His *Life of an American Workman,* published in serial form in 1937 in the *Saturday Evening Post,* celebrated his remarkable success in the face of great adversity. That he would present his life story in a way that guaranteed many readers says much about his ego. The sections were later drawn together and published as a book of the same title in 1950. The story is heavily weighted in favor of his youth and early career, with only 28 pages of the 203-page volume devoted to his success in the auto industry after he took charge of Maxwell in 1921.

Chrysler's enshrinement as a folk hero dated from January 1929, when *Time, The Weekly News Magazine* selected him as "Man of the Year" for 1928. Chrysler's face appeared on the cover, and the article explaining the choice recounted his remarkable accomplishments in 1928 — the merger with Dodge and the introduction of the Plymouth and DeSoto lines. He was only the second man to be so honored by *Time* (the first was Charles Lindbergh, selected for 1927). *Forbes Magazine* published a lengthy article on Chrysler in January 1929 as well, based on an interview he granted B. C. Forbes, the publisher. Forbes's praise for Chrysler's accomplishments bordered on fawning. Forbes

uncritically accepted everything Chrysler told him and reprinted the interview *verbatim.* The story included the mythic tale about the 1924 New York Automobile Show and the claim by Chrysler that he spent $3 million of his own money developing the Chrysler car while employed by Willys in New Jersey, also not true.

The Walter Chrysler story appeared in less elite publications as well. A five page article in *Popular Mechanics* in 1932, entitled "The Man Who Bet on His Dreams," repeats the Horatio Alger story, but without the exaggeration of some earlier versions. On the heels of the article, *Popular Mechanics* sent a special offer to attract new subscribers through a mass mailing of one million letters. New subscribers could receive seven issues for only $1 instead of the usual charge of $1.75. The two-page letter included a one-page summary of Walter Chrysler's life and career as a self-made man. The sales pitch was simple: "If you want to be like Walter P. Chrysler, subscribe to our magazine."

Walter Chrysler also appeared in the comics. In late April 1934, *Ben Webster's Page,* a comic strip written by Edwin Alger, recounted Chrysler's boyhood days in "The Boy Mechanic." His entire life and career were summarized in a full-page comic strip written by E. and I. Geller and drawn by Max Rasmussen. This was one cartoon in a series "Sponsored by Firms Built by Free Enterprise," which recounted modern American business success stories, presumably to educate the public about the advantages of the free enterprise system. This Chrysler biographical comic strip closely followed *Life of an American Workman.*

In the days following Walter P. Chrysler's death, the expected public statements noting his illustrious career and praising his accomplishments flowed from Chrysler officials, including the board of directors, from other automobile industry leaders and in the editorial columns of Detroit's three daily newspapers. For the most part, these statements repeated the common themes: Walter Chrysler had risen from rags to riches through hard work; he remained in many respects a common workingman despite his great wealth and always felt at home on the factory floor; and he treated others with respect, whatever their social position.

There is at least anecdotal evidence of Walter Chrysler's ongoing humility. Ray Ayer, who began working at Chrysler when Walter Chrysler was still active in day-to-day management, recalled that Chrysler punched a time card just like the other workers in his office building. Despite his wealth, he wore only one piece of jewelry, a ring on the little finger of his right hand. He would always buy three suits at once, in brown, blue and gray. The only books he indulged in were mystery novels, which he read in bed. Walter Chrysler remained a popular figure among his workers, despite the labor troubles of the late 1930s. According to

Nicholas Kelley, a UAW delegation picketed the Lansing hotel where Governor Murphy, John L. Lewis and Chrysler held their negotiations in March 1937. When Chrysler appeared on the balcony above the demonstrators, they cheered.

Historian E. D. Kennedy assessed Walter Chrysler's career shortly after his death. Kennedy pointed out that Chrysler spent his career struggling against the prevailing trends in the automobile industry, making his success even more remarkable. He organized the Chrysler Corporation very late in the evolution of the American automobile industry and sold an expensive car when that part of the market was stagnant. He purchased Dodge Brothers, a move most contemporaries viewed as a major mistake, and turned the company into a profitable division of Chrysler Corporation. He then introduced the Plymouth into an already crowded field of low-priced cars, competing head-to-head with Ford and Chevrolet. Walter Chrysler managed to increase production and profits in the 1930s well above the best results of the late 1920s.

Kennedy offered the following perspective:

> If automobile history were divided into two parts, a pre-1920 section and a post-1920 section, Chrysler's name would be as noteworthy in the second half of the auto story as Ford's was in the first.

Despite the high praises of automobile industry historians and others for Walter P. Chrysler, he has generally not been honored in the usual public ways. To be sure, his boyhood home in Ellis, Kansas, is restored and serves as a museum. Only two schools were named after him, both in 1955 — the Walter P. Chrysler Memorial High School in New Castle, Indiana, and the Chrysler Elementary School in Detroit. His name remains well known in the greater Detroit area because the segment of Interstate 75 passing through Detroit was named the "Walter P. Chrysler Expressway" when construction began in 1959. The "ribbon-cutting" for the first completed section of 2.7 miles opened in June 1964 was in fact a ribbon "chiseling." Chrysler Corporation Vice President John Leary used a hammer and chisel from Walter P. Chrysler's toolbox to cut the ribbon. In time, the Chrysler Expressway ran next to the corporation's original headquarters in Highland Park, Michigan, and now extends past the Chrysler Technology Center and the Chrysler LLC Offices in Auburn Hills, Michigan. The permanent monument to his life and career is the company that bears his name.