

## Chapter One – Walter P. Chrysler

The fun I had experienced in making things as a boy was magnified a hundredfold when I began making things as a man. There is in manufacturing a creative joy that only poets are supposed to know. Some day I'd like to show a poet how it feels to design and build a railroad locomotive.

— Walter P. Chrysler, *Life of an American Workman* (1937)

For the American automobile industry, 1908 was a watershed year. Henry Ford introduced his Model T; William C. (Billy) Durant formed the General Motors Company; and the Locomobile became the first American auto to win the Vanderbilt Cup Race against European competitors.

It was also the year Walter P. Chrysler bought his first car.

Anyone who knew Walter Chrysler from his early years would not have been surprised by his decision to purchase the vehicle, a shining new Locomobile. Born April 2, 1875, on his parents' fourth wedding anniversary, in Wamego, Kansas, some 35 miles west of Topeka, Walter grew up in a railroad family. Throughout his life, he was always fascinated with the workings of machinery.

Walter was the third child of Henry Chrysler (1850–1916), always known as Hank, and Anna Marie Breymann Chrysler (1852–1926), more commonly called Mary. Hank Chrysler worked as a locomotive engineer for the Union Pacific Railroad his entire adult life, and the family lived in several Union Pacific railroad towns. In 1879, the Chryslers moved from Wamego to Ellis, Kansas, after Hank Chrysler was given the Junction City (Kansas) to Ellis run. Located about 170 miles west of Wamego, Ellis had large Union Pacific repair shops. These shops were Walter Chrysler's true boyhood home.

### *Working on the Railroad*

An inquisitive child, the young Chrysler was also willful and early on developed a burning ambition.

Like many working families, the Chryslers supplemented their household income

with domestic enterprise. As a boy, Walter sold calling cards and silverware door-to-door in Ellis. His mother also ran a milk business, and Walter was pressed into service delivering milk and cream to about 20 homes. He worked as a delivery boy for a local grocery store one summer and then returned there briefly after finishing high school in 1892.

Walter's dream, however, was to work for the railroad like his father. Older brother Ed had already entered the Union Pacific Railroad's apprentice machinist program in Ellis, and Walter yearned to follow in his footsteps. But Hank would have none of it. Wanting at least one son to go to college, Walter's father refused to sign the necessary papers giving his younger son permission to join the program.

Undeterred, Walter defied his father, applied for a job as a sweeper in the machine shop and went to work cleaning floors rather than attending class. So diligently did he apply himself to the less-than-glamorous job, he soon attracted the attention of the shop's master mechanic, Edgar Esterbrook. It would be Esterbrook who, impressed with Walter's work habits, convinced Hank Chrysler to relent in the test of wills between father and son and allow Walter to enroll in the machine shop's four-year apprenticeship.

As an apprentice, Walter's knack for the mechanical quickly became manifest. He made his own tools, beginning with a set of calipers and a depth gauge. At age 18, he built an operating 28-inch model of the locomotive his father ran, complete with a tiny steam whistle. He operated the locomotive on a set of tracks he laid behind the family home in Ellis.

During his apprenticeship, he tried to understand every operation and machine he saw. In the shops, he worked closely with more experienced machinists, a number of whom remarked on his intelligence and diligence and agreed to serve as his mentors. The most important of these was Walter Darling, an experienced and grizzled mechanic at the Union Pacific's Ellis shops.

Darling taught Chrysler how properly to set a locomotive's slide valves, which controlled the steam intake and exhaust. This was a prized skill, because the slide valve settings determined how much power the locomotive would develop. Although locomotive manufacturers set "port marks" on the valve gear showing the location of the piston at the very end of the stroke, these marks were often inaccurate due to wear and tear on the valve gear.

From Darling, Chrysler learned to create his own port marks before setting valves — and to trust only those he made himself. Following Darling's advice, the young machinist soon developed a reputation for setting valves quickly and accurately. For the rest of his life, Walter Chrysler could tell by the sound of an operating locomotive if its slide valves were properly set.

In these years, Chrysler's intellectual drive became increasingly evident. At the turn of the century, *Scientific American* was a source of scientific and mechanical information for young amateurs and eccentric tinkers alike, and Chrysler was an avid reader of the magazine. He mailed scores of questions to the periodical's question-and-answer column and enrolled in dozens of correspondence courses covering topics ranging from drafting to mechanical and electrical engineering.

Outside his enthusiasms, however, Chrysler was hardly studious and certainly no bookworm. Known in his teens as something of a hellion, he often displayed well into his 20s a very hot temper (or, as he called it years later, "a short fuse"). This feistiness, combined with his intelligence and his growing ambition, produced a young man so confident in his own abilities that he was sometimes cocky, if not arrogant.

By the end of his apprenticeship, Chrysler was looking for opportunities beyond those offered in Ellis. In later years, he would become known as a corporate risk-taker. But when he left his hometown in 1897 at age 22, he was already willing to move into new endeavors in new places, sometimes at less pay, in order to advance his career.

Chrysler seemed to enjoy the itinerant mechanic's vagabond life, with the rugged fellowship of its volatile and open society, as he moved through more than two dozen jobs involving locomotive repair work over the next decade.

A big man, hale and bluff and sometimes profane, he fared well with the folks he encountered on the road. One measure of the impact he had on them was the way he quickly advanced to positions involving more and more responsibility. His first job after leaving Ellis was as a journeyman machinist for the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad at its shops in Wellington, Kansas. Walter bounced between a dozen short-lived jobs, including a brief stint back at the Union Pacific shops in Ellis, before taking a position as roundhouse machinist for the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad in Salt Lake City during 1900.

Although he enjoyed the freedom and challenges of wandering from job to job on the western railroads, the young man, however driven, was often lonely. Walter

missed his family in Ellis and more important, he missed Della V. Forker, his childhood friend and sweetheart. He later wrote:

I knew the answer to my lonesomeness: Della Forker. We exchanged letters faithfully. She never wavered during that time when I was a wandering mechanic; she knew why I was roving, knew that she was completely interwoven with my ambitions.

Walter and Della had been engaged in 1896, but he was in no position to marry her at a time when he was earning only \$1.50 a day and striving to make his way in a wider world. Having garnered an apparently steady job in Salt Lake City, Chrysler now felt comfortable returning to Ellis to marry Della. The two were wed in the town's Methodist church on June 7, 1901.

In a sense, Chrysler had settled down, and the birth of the couple's first child, Thelma Irene, on February 13, 1902, instantly turned him into a dedicated family man who took his responsibilities seriously. But, as the son of a railroad man, Chrysler certainly knew there would be frequent and future moves, and marriage had not changed the essentials of his character. Neither had it changed his burning need to dominate his working world nor his willingness to gamble on change for the chance of advancement. Throughout Walter's roller-coaster career, Della would support his dreams, go along with his gambles and always believe in him. He, in turn, would often credit her with his success and, ultimately, would dedicate his autobiography, *Life of an American Workman*, to her.

In short, a married Walter Chrysler was only that much more determined to get ahead. His reputation as a "can-do" mechanic and his quick promotions to better and better jobs marked his work for the Denver & Rio Grande Western in Salt Lake City. There, in the fall of 1901, he displayed just what the combination of careful mastery of skills, drive and innate ability could accomplish. A locomotive that returned to the roundhouse with a blown back cylinder was needed for an important run to Denver in three hours. Normally, this repair job would take at least five hours to complete. John Hickey, the master mechanic, asked Chrysler to do the impossible. He confidently agreed to take on the job, and the locomotive was repaired and ready to run on time. As a reward for this and other such work, the railroad made Walter Chrysler roundhouse foreman in February 1902, putting him in charge of 90 men at the Salt Lake City

roundhouse, with a salary of \$90 a month.

Chrysler left the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad in the spring of 1903 to become the general foreman for the Colorado & Southern Railroad shops in Trinidad, Colorado, at age 28. In less than two years, he was the division master mechanic for the company, earning \$160 a month.

Walter Chrysler's wandering days, however, were by no means over. He spent 1905 working as the general foreman of the mechanical department for the Fort Worth & Denver City Railroad in barren Childress, Texas. In December 1905, while Chrysler was still in Childress, John Chisholm of the Chicago Great Western Railroad offered him the job of master mechanic at the railroad's state-of-the-art locomotive repair shops in Oelwein, Iowa, at a salary of \$200 a month. Chicago Great Western would prove to be the last railroad at which Walter Chrysler worked.

Chrysler took the job in early January 1906, and on April 4, 1906, Della gave birth to their second child, Bernice. By May 1907, less than two years after moving the family to Oelwein, Walter became general master mechanic for the entire railroad. In December 1907, the Chicago Great Western Railroad named the 32-year-old Chrysler superintendent of motive power for its entire system, making him the youngest man to ever hold this post. With the job came the responsibility of managing all the railroad's locomotives and supervising about 1,000 men, including locomotive engineers and firemen and all the men working at the roundhouse and repair shops. His responsibilities covered locomotives and other equipment worth millions of dollars. The railroad paid him the respectable salary of \$350 a month.

The following year, Chrysler bought the Locomobile.

### *Of the Track*

Walter Chrysler set eyes on the fascinating machine for the first time at the 1908 Chicago Automobile Show. He had traveled to the Windy City on a business trip, and, as he later described the moment:

That is where it happened. I saw this Locomobile touring car; it was painted ivory white and the cushions and trim were red. The top was khaki, supported on wood bows. Straps ran from that top to anchorages on either side of the hood. On the running board there was a handsome tool box that my fingers itched to open. Beside it was a tank of gas to feed the head

lamps; just behind the hood on either side of the cowling was an oil lamp, shaped quite like those on horse drawn carriages. I spent four days hanging around the show, held by that automobile as by a siren's song.

No question Chrysler longed to buy the car, and not simply to ride it around Oelwein. "I wanted the machine," he said, "so I could learn all about it." But the Locomobile carried a price tag of \$5,000, and Chrysler's repeated inquiries revealed there was no room to bargain. He had only \$700 in savings (and that monthly salary of \$350), so he turned to a friend, Ralph Van Vechten, who came from a prominent family of Iowa bankers and was now vice president of the Continental National Bank of Chicago. Before the week was out, Chrysler had badgered Van Vechten into helping him buy the Locomobile. Van Vechten agreed to lend Chrysler the \$4,300 he needed, but only after William Causley, a Chicago Great Western Railroad official, promised to cosign the loan.

Chrysler had no idea how to operate the vehicle when he bought it. Even if he had, given the primitive condition of the roads, he would not have been able to drive it back to Oelwein. He had the automobile shipped home by rail and then pulled out to his house by a team of horses. Della was waiting, wild with enthusiasm, but Walter refused to take her for a ride. Instead, he moved the Locomobile into the barn behind the family home and spent the next three months taking it apart, studying its mechanical systems and reassembling it. He scoured automobile catalogues and technical literature to help him better understand his expensive new toy. He worked every evening and every weekend studying the sleek machine. When he finally took the car out for a spin, he drove it off the road and into a neighbor's garden and had to have a team of horses pull it out of the mud. Walter and Della Chrysler then headed for town, where he nearly ran over a cow on the main street. By the end of that day, sweaty and exhausted, Walter Chrysler had learned to drive a car.

A scant three years later, Walter would himself enter the auto business. They would be three tumultuous years, partly because of Walter's own restlessness. On May 27, 1909, Della gave birth to the Chryslers' third child. Walter, his wife, his daughters, Thelma and Bernice, and his new son, Walter P., Jr., could look forward to living comfortably in Oelwein. Walter had a good job, an important one that put him in charge of anything that moved along the railroad and anyone who moved it and making sure it moved on time. By the standards of Oelwein, the family was successful: if not rich, they

were at least secure. Unlike most of the other young couples they knew, the Chryslers even owned a car. But though Walter was the mechanical head for the entire Chicago Great Western system, he knew that one of the unwritten but inflexible laws of railroading was that a mechanic never reaches the top, never gets to sit in the executive's chair. He might indeed be "learning plenty," as Walter claimed to be, but he was also, he admitted, "still seething with ambition." So, when trouble came at the Chicago Great Western, it was not just that his temper got the better of him, which it did, but even more that he was already thinking about his next career move.

In 1908, the railroad had come under the control of new management, who moved the headquarters from St. Paul, Minnesota, to Chicago and named Samuel Morse Felton as president. Walter described him as a man of "gouty disposition," who certainly was hard to please. Determined to get along, Chrysler had been working 19 hours a day and spending four nights a week on the road.

At home in Oelwein one night in mid-December 1909, he got a midnight summons to appear in Chicago the following morning. When he dragged himself the next day into Felton's office, his boss seemed momentarily to forget why he had called Chrysler in. Then, digging through a pile of papers on his desk, Felton came up with a report that a "hot box," or overheated wheel bearing, had made one train three minutes late. He demanded an explanation of the trivial problem, and Chrysler, enraged and insulted, responded with some quite colorful language. Felton began to rant and rave. When Chrysler reached into his pocket, Felton fell quiet. Chrysler pulled his batch of railroad passes, the symbol of his job and authority, from his wallet, tossed them on Felton's desk and stomped out. "That," he wrote, "is how I became an ex-railroad man."

Chrysler immediately telegraphed Waldo H. Marshall, an old friend and president of the American Locomotive Company (ALCO), asking for a job. He accepted the position of general foreman of ALCO's Allegheny shops in Pittsburgh, where the company manufactured locomotives. The salary of \$275 a month was less than his railroad pay of \$350 a month, but Chrysler, in typical fashion, saw this as only a temporary setback, since the job opened up more important long-range prospects. In a year and a half, he was works manager of the Allegheny shops and had turned the operation around, making it profitable for the first time in three years. By spring 1911, Chrysler was earning \$8,000 a year, more than \$650 a month, when James J. Storrow, a director of ALCO and of the General Motors Company, offered him the opportunity to

work in the automobile industry.

Storrow was the president of Lee, Higginson and Company, one of the largest investment banks of the time. From his position on the board of ALCO, he knew of the genius Chrysler had shown in profitably manufacturing locomotives and wanted to bring his talents to General Motors. Specifically, Storrow wanted to make Chrysler works manager for the huge Buick plant in Flint, Michigan. Chrysler discussed the possibilities with the investment banker at his New York office and agreed to meet later with Charles W. Nash, the tight-fisted president of the Buick Motor Company. Chrysler and Nash had lunch in Pittsburgh, and they agreed that Chrysler would come to Flint to visit the Buick plant. In the meantime, James McNaughton, a vice president at ALCO, offered Chrysler a salary of \$12,000 a year to keep him in Pittsburgh.

Walter Chrysler visited Flint in the fall of 1911 and spent a couple of days checking out the Buick plant. What he saw was a remarkably backward, inefficient manufacturing operation where craftsmen were hand-building automobiles much the same way they had built fine horse-drawn carriages decades earlier.

In his bones, Walter felt a challenge calling. He had, he knew, the opportunity to make an immediate impact at Buick. He told Nash he would take the job. Nash learned that Chrysler had been offered \$12,000 to stay at ALCO but could bring himself to offer him only \$6,000 to come to Buick — which was not only half what Chrysler had been promised if he stayed but also \$2,000 less than of times before in his career, promptly accepted the cut in pay, banking on his talent and drive to bring him success, even fame, in this freewheeling new automobile industry. Nash formally offered Chrysler the position on November 10, 1911, but Walter did not move to Flint until late January 1912. He had an important project to attend to and an important event to celebrate first — a large order at ALCO for 25 locomotives for the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad, plus the birth of his fourth child, Jack Forker Chrysler, on January 7, 1912.

### *The Buick Years*

Walter Chrysler's tenure as Buick works manager from January 1912 through June 1916 was a smashing success by any measure. He applied many of the operating practices he had perfected at ALCO to the manufacture and assembly of automobiles.

The most important of these was basic cost accounting. When he first came to Buick, he asked the plant clerk for a schedule of piecework rates paid to the various

categories of workers and found that no schedule existed that would permit him to determine production costs. He noted:

In the Allegheny works of American Locomotive, we had to bid \$40,000 or so on a locomotive job; bidding low enough to get the job and still make a profit. The only way we could do that was to know to a penny what it was costing us to drill a hole and what it cost us to make an obscure little casting.

At Buick, Chrysler found skilled craftsmen assembling one car at a time on fixed benches, applying multiple coats of paint on areas of the car that nobody would ever see. He reduced chassis assembly time from four days to two by getting rid of the unnecessary painting. He later cut the paint drying time in half by raising the temperature in the drying ovens.

In the main assembly building, a forest of thousands of vertical posts placed close together hindered production. Chrysler installed a roof truss of superior design, allowing for the removal of most of the posts. By simplifying the assembly process, Chrysler removed much of the excess clutter of parts and components from the factory floor and greatly increased the productivity of men and machines alike.

Experimenting along the same lines as Henry Ford at his factory in Highland Park, Michigan, he also introduced a crude assembly line at Buick, where workers pushed the unfinished chassis along tracks through the assembly area. Using the same factory floor space and workforce, Chrysler immediately expanded Buick production from 45 cars a day to 75 and eventually to more than 200. In 1912, Buick had built 19,812 vehicles at its Flint plant, but in 1916 — under Chrysler's leadership — production jumped more than six-fold, to 124,834 cars. The quality of the product also improved thanks to the system of instant rolling changes and improvements introduced by Chrysler, a system that would become characteristic of his own company in the 1920s and 1930s.

Chrysler's salary at Buick, however, failed to reflect his accomplishments. Three years after leaving ALCO for Buick, Chrysler was still earning his original salary of \$6,000 a year. He went to see Charlie Nash, demanded an increase to \$25,000 a year and threatened to quit if he did not get it. A reluctant Nash, who had become president of General Motors, consulted with James Storrow and, pushed by the banker, granted Chrysler his raise. Brazen and confident as ever, Chrysler then warned Nash that he would ask for \$50,000 the following year. Nash gave him that raise as well, for he was

sold on Walter Chrysler. The man was worth every penny, considering the millions of dollars in profits he generated for Buick.

Meanwhile, change was in the wind at GM. The company had been founded in 1908 by Billy Durant, one of the more colorful executives in automobile history. A salesman and a schemer, Durant loved to dream big. His attempt to purchase every automobile company and every parts supplier he could lay his hands on had gotten General Motors into financial straits, and, as a result, the volatile Durant lost control of his company in 1911 to a collection of bankers led by James Storrow. In September 1915, Durant managed to regain control of GM, but he waited until June 1916 to take the position of president back from Charlie Nash.

The maneuvers that took place between the two executives created a dilemma for Walter Chrysler. First, Storrow, ousted by Durant, tried to buy Packard Motor Car Company early in 1916, hoping he could get Nash and Chrysler to run it. But Storrow's bid for Packard failed, and instead he bought the Jeffery Company of Kenosha, Wisconsin, in June 1916. Storrow set up Nash as its president, and both men wanted Chrysler to join them. But Billy Durant made Chrysler an offer he could not refuse — he would become president of Buick and be paid a salary of \$500,000 a year for three years. Chrysler stayed.

Billy Durant's and Walter Chrysler's very different personalities guaranteed conflict between the two. Although he was not averse to taking risks when they made sense, Chrysler was also a careful planner and stickler for detail, a man who took the time to understand the business — and its products — thoroughly. He wanted to follow well-thought-out and consistent plans and policies. Durant was more a shoot-from-the-hip man, one who operated on inspiration, even whimsy, and who often changed his mind (and his policies) several times a day. Durant agreed to give Chrysler complete autonomy at Buick, with no interference from above, but he simply could not stick to his promise. He consistently second-guessed Chrysler and interfered with his running of the company.

Not that Durant failed to recognize Chrysler's talent; Billy knew what he had in Walter, and the freewheeling president pushed his clever, clear-eyed junior executive up the corporate ladder. Late in 1918, Durant named Chrysler first vice president of General Motors, with broad responsibility for all GM operations. Among other things, in April 1919 Walter Chrysler launched the Modern Housing Corporation, a GM subsidiary that would

build 1,000 homes for housing-starved GM workers in Flint. It was the kind of program that Durant, lacking Chrysler's connection to the ordinary reality of the working world, could hardly have conceived.

For most of his tenure at General Motors, Walter Chrysler was able to work around the chaos created by Durant's management style and accomplish a great deal precisely because of his nuts-and-bolts, take-charge approach to problem solving. For example, in the fall of 1917, after the United States had entered the First World War, Chrysler went to Durant's office in New York to discuss possible war contracts with him. The waiting room was so full of hangers-on that Chrysler decided instead to go directly to Washington, D.C., to the office of Colonel Edward Deeds, who was in charge of aircraft production for the U.S. government. Within three hours, Chrysler emerged with a contract for 3,000 Liberty engines for airplanes and a roll of blueprints. Two weeks later, Chrysler's Buick manufacturing staff, headed by master mechanic K. T. Keller, had completed the tooling needed to start production. The deal was done, signed, sealed and delivered before Durant had a clue as to what was going on.

The inevitable split between Chrysler and Durant finally occurred in the summer of 1919. Walter Chrysler was about to sign a contract with the A. O. Smith Company of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to supply Buick with all of its frames over a five-year period, an arrangement that would save General Motors about \$2 million a year. Although Durant was kept fully informed about this contract, he nevertheless sent a telegram to a Flint Chamber of Commerce luncheon announcing that Buick was going to build a \$6 million frame plant in Flint. Chrysler, who was at the luncheon meeting, stood up and announced that this would never happen while he was at General Motors. He and Durant fought openly at the GM board of directors meeting the next day. Chrysler argued that not only would purchasing the frames be cheaper, it would represent no capital cost for GM and required no addition to Flint's crowded workforce and inadequate housing supply. Durant could not say the same for his plan. The disagreements between the two only got larger and more bitter in the weeks to come. Chrysler opposed Durant's decisions to buy a tractor company in Janesville, Wisconsin, and to build the \$20 million General Motors Building in Detroit.

Walter Chrysler soon announced his decision to quit GM and stuck to his guns, despite numerous efforts by several GM directors to get him to change his mind. He resigned effective October 31, 1919. For all the contentiousness of Chrysler and

Durant's working relationship, the two men would remain lifelong friends. In 1939, Durant began writing an autobiography that he never finished. Durant dedicated his manuscript to "Walter P. Chrysler, the best friend I ever had" and several other people, including Charles S. Mott and Alfred Sloan, Jr. Chrysler reportedly wept when he read the dedication.

Once he left General Motors, Walter Chrysler was anxious to sell off his substantial holdings of GM stock. During his years as Buick president, Chrysler drew an annual salary of \$500,000, but only \$120,000 of that was in cash and the remaining \$380,000 was in stock. Because the stock had gone up during the time Chrysler held it, the value was much greater than the purchase price of \$1.14 million. Early in 1920, Billy Durant offered Chrysler \$10 million for his stock, and he accepted the offer, even though the market value of the shares was even higher. Chrysler was grateful to Durant for his past generosity. The former machine shop sweeper left General Motors at age 44 with \$10 million in cash, at a time when \$1 million was still real money even to automobile executives.

Flint's major professional and business groups — the Rotary, Kiwanis and Exchange Clubs — hosted a testimonial dinner for Walter Chrysler at the Flint Country Club on January 22, 1920. Various community and business leaders offered testimonials to this man who had become an important community leader as well as businessman. Among those praising him were Charles Stewart Mott representing General Motors and John North Willys from the Willys-Overland Company. The *Flint Weekly Review*, a labor newspaper, published a lengthy tribute written by the Reverend J. Bradford Pengelly, pastor of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Flint and a close friend of Walter Chrysler. Pengelly praised Chrysler for his fair treatment of all of his employees and his efforts to provide them with adequate housing, medical care and social services. In ending his tribute, Pengelly said of Chrysler:

He is a big, honest, human-hearted man who has worked up from the ranks to the management of one of the biggest factories in the U.S.A. He has never forgotten that he was once a private and has never put on airs of a general or a grand mogul. He is as honest as the day is long, and as square as can be. I would take his word as quickly as his bond.

The article struck an important chord in Chrysler's story. As Vincent Curcio,

Walter Chrysler's biographer, has noted, Chrysler alone among the major figures who built the automobile industry had firsthand experience with every aspect of an industrial worker's life. For the first 30 years of his life, he was basically a blue-collar mechanic, and he understood the day-to-day realities of working men, the "cold, hunger, penury, and the vagabond existence when the work ran out." That Chrysler knew the nature of work as well as the science of machinery explains his success at ALCO and Buick as much as his outsized personality — his seething ambition, his intellectual drive and his knack for the mechanical. Clearly Chrysler never stopped learning from experience, and because he always put what he learned to work elsewhere, perhaps the direction his career took next should come as no surprise.

Following his departure from General Motors, Walter Chrysler maintained an office in Detroit and went there every day from Flint. He threatened to retire at age 44 but drove his wife Della to distraction with a constant stream of visitors to their Flint home.

Sometime in late 1919, his old banker friend Ralph Van Vechten, who had financed Chrysler's purchase of the Locomobile in 1908, came to Walter with an interesting proposition. He wanted him to take over the management of the Willys-Overland Company to save it from bankruptcy. Chrysler agreed to do so, but only under certain conditions. He would receive a two-year contract that would pay him \$1 million a year; he could live in New York City and manage Willys from its plant in Elizabeth, New Jersey; and he would be given the power to make any changes he felt were needed.

By 1920, the man who had earned one dollar a day sweeping floors in the Union Pacific Railroad shops in Ellis, Kansas, had become a "million-dollar-a-year man" capable of rescuing bankrupt automobile companies — perhaps even of creating his own.