**Let's Not Forget Our Roots**

The growth of Colonial North America from the 1600s through our 1776 Declaration of Independence from the British mother country was a snail's pace compared to what came next. The Industrial Revolution started spreading to America from England in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Craftsmen and manual labor with draft animal power began shifting to machine-based manufacturing. Mechanization began primarily in textile mills. Steam power was being harnessed to replace horse power. Horse and wagon transportation began being replaced with canals and boats. Iron-making techniques were refined, which led to more production machinery, and the race for improving manufacturing technologies was in full swing by the 1850s. Mechanization coupled with out-of-the-box ideas, a powerful work ethic and commerce led the way. Man was able to harness not only the power to replace labor but he was also able to harness his ideas for progress. And so has been the history of the United States from our earliest years.

Here we are in 2009, some 200 years since the ripples of the Industrial Revolution started lapping at our shores. Has our progress hit a plateau? Have we run out of ideas? Have we lost our powerful work ethic and our pride? Has our progress stalled? Let's reflect on how we built the foundations of the largest manufacturing economy in the world.

Farming in Colonial times up through the early 1800s was basically for family subsistence. Very few large farmlands existed along the coast and the rivers. High transportation costs made commercial crops and the movement to market too costly. Most of our settlements were within 200 miles of the Atlantic coast and along the major rivers and tributaries. Water was the primary means of long-distance transportation. What changed?

The Erie Canal, completed in 1825, was perceived as a "Big Ditch," only four feet deep and spanning 363 miles from Albany, New York, a major inland port city on the Hudson River to Buffalo, New York, on Lake Erie. This controversial, yet visionary project launched the earliest mass emigration of settlers and pioneers from New York and New England to the Northwest Territories of Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. It truly opened up the Great Lakes to commerce.

The Erie Canal made travel to the then "western reserves and territories" considerably more convenient than wagon and stage coach travel, and at a considerable lower cost. And, not only for the transportation of passengers but for ever increasing goods for trade in the populated east coast region. A pioneering family could book discounted passage on canal boats and head to Buffalo. From there, a steam-powered paddlewheel boat would make the voyage along the shores of Lake Erie to the budding town of Cleveland and Port Lawrence (Toledo), Ohio then on to Detroit, Michigan. With this influx of easterners, Detroit's population grew from less than 1,000 people in 1817 to 2,200 in 1830 to over 9,000 by 1840.

Of those thousands of early settlers who traveled to Detroit via Lake Erie in the 1830s, many continued moved southwest a short distance to harvest the vast dense oak forests and clear the fertile and level farmlands in southeastern Michigan. They followed the Great Sauk Trail made by several early Native American Tribes in the area. This trail grew into cart paths, then corduroy and plank roads, to graveled roadways by 1836—all the way from Detroit to Fort Dearborn (today's Chicago). Many farms and homesteads grew up along the Sauk Trail as it was a pleasant place to live, raise a family, build communities, and produce crops and livestock for easy transport to growing markets for a living.

Other early settlers in this region built inns and stagecoach stops, stores, and wagon works along this major route. Manufacturing started out with wagon and wheel making and cooperage for barrels for shipping and storage. Blacksmiths were established to tend the ironwork needs of horses, wagons, and tools. Hardware stores provided the needed supplies, tools, implements and other sundries of progress in the frontier. Woolen mills were built to process sheep's wool into textiles. Grist mills were then built to process flour grains. These small settlements grew into villages and then towns along the roadways and rivers in southeastern Michigan in the early 1800s.

Early settler occupations in the mid 1800s included inn keepers, farmers, millers, sawyers, coopers, wheelwrights, millwrights, boatwrights, milliners (seamstresses), black smiths, shop keepers, barbers, preachers and teachers. Because skilled trades were critical to every era in our nation's growth and development many a youngster would learn their trade from their fathers, uncles, or family friends who were accomplished journeymen and masters. Skills and knowledge were passed on from generation to generation. That's how our early settlers built America.

Then came the railroad. The Erie and Kalamazoo Railroad**,** built from Toledo, Ohio to Adrian, Michigan in 1836, was the first railroad west of the Alleghenies and was only 33 miles long. Railroads began their transportation growth in 1840 with only 3,000 miles of track in the U.S. By 1850 there were 10,000 miles of railroad tracks and by 1860 over 30,000 miles. The United States had five-percent (5%) of the world's population and 50-percent of the world's railroads. We truly harnessed our vision for progress and made things happen.

Commerce developed and flourished in rural America. Shipping costs were reduced 95-percent because of the canals, Great Lakes shipping, and the emerging railroad networks of transportation since 1800.

But progress was hampered by some seemingly insurmountable barriers. Railroad tracks were laid with 13 different gauges (the width between the rails). These gauges ranged from 3 feet, to 4 feet 8½ inches, 4 feet 10 inches, 5 feet, 5 feet 6 inches, and 6 feet. "Union" stations sprouted in populated areas to allow goods and passengers from one train to be transferred to another train to continue the journey. Loading facilities, grain elevators, and interchange yards grew along up high volume routes to transfer goods from one railroad line to another—all due primarily to non-standard rail gauges and the growing needs for transportation.

In 1886 in an attempt to further streamline commerce and transportation, the United States established 4 feet 8½ inches as the standard railroad gauge. This led to another rapid growth of railroad transportation across America. Not long after the railroad boom in America, another huge transportation industry was emerging.

In 1893, 30-year-old Henry Ford began experimenting with gasoline engines while working for Edison Illuminating Company in Detroit. By 1896, he had built his first successful automobile. After meeting Thomas Edison in 1896, he was encouraged to continue his automobile experiment. By 1898, Henry Ford built his new and improved automobile. After a rocky start, he established Ford Motor Company in Dearborn, Michigan in 1903. By 1913, he was mass producing Model T Fords in the first moving assembly line in Highland Park, Michigan. By 1914, Ford was producing more than 250,000 cars. The vision, the action, the harnessing of talents launched another era of manufacturing unique in the world.

Henry Ford's manufacturing plants had easy transportation to all of the major population centers: Great Lakes shipping, a nationwide network of railroads, modern highways emanating from the Detroit area. He had a growing need for talented people to sustain and grow his automobile manufacturing enterprise, so he began developing community trade schools in southern Michigan often starting in the 5th grade. He developed small rural hydroelectric power plants to help small communities outside of the Detroit area grow and thrive. His River Rouge Plant, developed from 1917 to 1928, became the world's largest industrial complex: from iron ore to automobile in 81 hours! Henry Ford sparked the imagination of thousands who worked with him and for him and who learned of his developments. But it took the talents, skills and knowledge of thousands of people to make all of this happen. Henry Ford could not have accomplished this by himself.

All of these breakthroughs in transportation, farming, manufacturing, and commerce would not have been possible without the pioneers and early settlers willing to pool their talents to make new lives for themselves, their families and their communities.

This story is also about my ancestors. My third great-grandfather, Isaac (born in 1791), his wife and his sons and daughter travelled the route described earlier from Albany, New York to Buffalo, to Detroit, Ypsilanti, and Clinton, Michigan to the frontier in Lenawee County, Michigan in 1836. They were farmers, carpenters, coopers, grocers, and later on their sons and grandsons became farmers, coopers, carpenters, mechanics, and manufacturers in southeastern Michigan. As I study what they accomplished in their challenging times, I am humbled by their vision, their work ethic, and their will to succeed as early settlers, and I am reminded of a saying carved in a 17th century church in England:

> "Action without vision is drudgery.
> Vision without action is merely a dream.
> But vision with action is the hope of the world."

Our nation was founded by hard-working people who, at times, disagreed with their rulers and their governments. They worked together to build a new nation that prospered beyond their dreams. Let's not forget our roots as we move ahead. Yes, we are living in challenging times. But I can't believe that our challenges are worse than those experienced by our forefathers as they plowed new ground that led to our great nation's growth and prosperity. We can survive these troubled times. But we must be willing to look inside ourselves and ask the same big question that John F. Kennedy asked in his inaugural address on January 20, 1961: "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."


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