



## **Objectives:**

Students will gain an understanding of the history of the automobile industry in the 1930's, including methods of production, popular design materials, economic influences, political policies, and the cultural and social impact on American society.

Students will be able to answer critical thinking questions about the automobile industry and its impact on the decade.

## **Illinois State Social Studies Standards:**

**SS.6-8.H.1.Mc:** Evaluate the significance of historical events to multiple groups and the relationship to modern day movements and events.

**SS.9-12.H.1:** Evaluate the context of time and place as well as structural factors that influence historical developments.

**SS.9-12.H.2:** Analyze change and continuity across historical eras and identify what perspectives have typically influenced how historical eras are constructed.

**SS.9-12.H.4:** Analyze how people and institutions have interacted with environmental, scientific, technological, and societal challenges.

# **The Automobile Industry in the 1930s: Resilience and Reinvention**

The 1930s were a decade of significant transformation for the automobile industry, marked by challenges from the Great Depression, advancements in technology and design, and shifts in consumer behavior. Despite economic hardships, the automobile evolved in ways that would shape American culture and infrastructure for decades to come. This article examines the key aspects of the automotive landscape during the 1930s, including production methods, materials, popular makes and models, economic impacts, and the broader cultural implications of automobiles during this tumultuous era.

*Right: Some families were forced to live out of their automobiles during the Great Depression, photo by Horace Bristol*

## Methods of Production

The assembly line method, which had been perfected in the previous decade, continued to dominate production in the 1930s. However, automakers faced the need to adapt to a declining market due to the Great Depression, which forced many companies to innovate and streamline their operations. This era saw the introduction of flexible manufacturing systems that allowed companies to produce a wider variety of models without significant downtime (Culley, 2022).



Companies like Ford and General Motors began adopting more automated processes, which improved efficiency and reduced labor costs. The introduction of new machinery and technologies, including improved welding techniques and hydraulic presses, enabled manufacturers to produce more complex and aesthetically appealing vehicles (Gordon, 2021).

## Popular Materials

The materials used in automobile production during the 1930s reflected both economic constraints and innovations. While steel remained the primary material for frames and bodies, the use of aluminum increased, particularly for engine components and lightweight bodies. This shift was driven by the need for better fuel efficiency amid rising gasoline prices (Duffy, 2019).

Additionally, the incorporation of plastics began in this decade, with manufacturers experimenting with materials like Bakelite for dashboard components and interior finishes. These changes allowed for greater design flexibility and contributed to the aesthetic appeal of cars (Hagley, 2020).



## Popular Makes and Models

Several makes and models became iconic during the 1930s, showcasing innovation and design:

- **Ford Model A:** Released in 1927 and continuing through the early 1930s, the Model A was praised for its reliability and affordability, helping the Ford Motor Company maintain its market position during tough economic times.
- **Chevrolet:** The 1932 Chevrolet was notable for its advanced engineering, including a new six-cylinder engine, which provided a significant performance boost.
- **Packard and Cadillac:** These luxury brands introduced models that emphasized style, comfort, and technological advancements. The Packard Twelve and Cadillac V16 were symbols of opulence and engineering prowess during this decade.
- **Chrysler Airflow:** Launched in 1934, the Airflow was one of the first cars designed with aerodynamics in mind, featuring a distinctive streamlined design that influenced future automotive aesthetics (Miller, 2022).

Racing also remained popular, with events like the Indianapolis 500 continuing to showcase the performance capabilities of American automobiles, driving innovation in speed and technology (Miller, 2022).

## Economics of the Automobile Industry

The Great Depression had a profound impact on the automobile industry, leading to significant declines in sales and production. By 1933, automobile production had fallen to just a fraction of its peak levels, with many companies facing bankruptcy. However, the industry began to recover in the latter half of the decade, aided by government programs aimed at stimulating the economy (Gordon, 2021).

The automotive sector's resilience was further bolstered by the emergence of installment plans and financing options, which made car ownership more accessible to consumers. By the end of the decade, production numbers began to rise again, setting the stage for post-war growth (Culley, 2022).



*Above: As easily as cars came in the 1920's due to the availability of credit, they left just as easily as most had to sell their cars after the stock market crash*

## Cultural and Social Impact

The automobile's influence on American culture during the 1930s cannot be overstated. Cars became symbols of freedom and mobility, allowing individuals to travel for work, leisure, and exploration. The rise of the family road trip as a popular pastime was facilitated by the growing network of highways and roadside attractions, which began to flourish during this era (Hagley, 2020).

Moreover, the automobile helped shape the landscape of American cities and suburbs. The need for parking spaces and road infrastructure led to urban planning that prioritized car travel, fundamentally changing how people lived and interacted within their communities.

The 1930s also saw automobiles play a role in social dynamics. Car ownership became a symbol of success and independence, especially for women, who increasingly took to the roads. The car culture that emerged in this decade contributed to the burgeoning youth culture, where young people sought adventure and autonomy (Duffy, 2019).



## Political Implications

The government recognized the significance of the automobile industry for economic recovery and infrastructure development. In 1936, the Federal Aid Highway Act was enacted, paving the way for extensive road construction across the country. This initiative laid the foundation for the modern highway system and facilitated the growth of suburban areas (Hagley, 2020).

## Conclusion

The 1930s were a defining decade for the automobile industry, marked by challenges and innovations that would have lasting effects. Despite the economic difficulties of the Great Depression, the automotive sector demonstrated resilience through technological advancements, changing consumer preferences, and new production methods. The impact of automobiles during this era reshaped American culture, society, and infrastructure, setting the stage for a post-war boom that would further solidify the car's central role in American life.

### References

- Culley, M. (2022). *The Evolution of Automotive Manufacturing: Innovations in the 1930s*. Journal of Industrial History.
- Duffy, M. (2019). *Automobile History: The Role of Materials and Manufacturing*. Automotive History Review.
- Gordon, S. (2021). *The Great Depression and the American Automobile Industry*. Journal of American History.
- Hagley, M. (2020). *The Automobile and American Society: Infrastructure Development in the 1930s*. Transport Studies Quarterly.
- Miller, R. (2022). *The Indianapolis 500: A History of Racing and Innovation*. Sports and Society Journal.



## Other Historical Highlights

Between 1930 and 1939, the United States faced the challenges of the Great Depression, which began with the stock market crash of 1929 and continued throughout the decade. Herbert Hoover's administration struggled to address the economic crisis, leading to widespread hardship and unemployment. In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt took office and implemented the New Deal, a series of programs aimed at economic recovery, while his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, emerged as a strong advocate for social justice and human rights. The decade also saw the rise of notorious figures like Bonnie and Clyde, whose criminal exploits captivated the nation. In sports, German boxer Max Schmeling's 1938 victory over American Joe Louis sparked intense national interest, symbolizing the political tensions of the time. Meanwhile, the 1939 release of "Gone with the Wind" marked a significant moment in Hollywood history, showcasing the era's cultural aspirations and escape from reality, while baseball legends continued to inspire hope and unity during tough times.

## Critical Thinking Questions

1. How did the Great Depression affect automobile production in the 1930s, and what strategies did automakers use to adapt to the economic downturn?
2. How did the introduction of new car models like the Chrysler Airflow influence the design of future automobiles, and what does this reveal about consumer preferences and technological trends in the 1930s?
3. How did government policies, like the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1936, contribute to the development of the highway system and suburban growth? What was the long-term impact of these policies on American infrastructure?





## **Bring this lesson to the museum!**

Help students connect their learning to real-world contexts by exploring these related vehicles on display at Klairmont Kollektions:

- 1932 Duesenberg Dual Cowl Phaeton
- 1934 LaSalle Convertible Coup
- 1939 Rolls Royce Wraith Hearse