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100 Years of the American Auto: Millennium Edition

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The American auto industry celebrated its centennial in 1996, 100 years after brothers Charles and J. Frank Duryea began series production of the horseless carriage they had built in 1893. The Duryea brothers didn't invent the automobile. They were simply among the more successful of the hundreds of tinkerers who were striving to develop vehicles that could travel under their own power.

100 Years of the American Auto: Millennium Edition begins amidst these pioneers, and races right up to the 2000 model year. There's no tale quite like that of the American automobile—it's culture, its characters, and most of all, its wonderful cars. Told in a lively picture/caption format and supported by historical timelines and insightful chapter introductions, this is the full story of that unique saga.

By 1900, the U.S. could claim an active auto industry that was still debating whether steam, electricity, or gasoline would be the favored source of power. A relatively standardized form soon emerged, based on the French Systeme Panhard: front-mounted internal-combustion engine driving the rear wheels via a gearbox and driveshaft.

The towering automotive figure of the first half-century was Henry Ford, a tinkerer who changed the world. His Model T was sturdy and dependable, and as sales increased, its price decreased. Millions rolled off the assembly line, itself another revolution from the mind of Henry Ford.

On Ford's heels came Alfred P. Sloan of General Motors. He staged his own automotive revolution in 1921, laying the blueprint for a colossal company that instilled in American an appetite for newer, grander cars. GM nurtured that yearning with ever-changing styling and a clear marque hierarchy then satisfied it with a model for every taste and budget.

The Twenties proved the beginning of the end for most of the smaller automakers, and The Great Depression made the Thirties a battle for survival. But adversity brought inventiveness. The finest Classics were built as their makers expired, and streamlined styling took hold.

After serving as the backbone of American's industrial war machine, car companies emerged from World War II to a seller's market. Supply caught demand by the early Fifties, and Detroit turned to its designers, who conjured up some of the most flamboyant cars ever—big, colorful, powerful, and finned.

A cooled economy in the early Sixties ushered in the first wave of compacts. But American's pocketbook strengthened, and by mid-decade, it was the age of the muscle car. That seemed to end as quickly as it had begun. If newfound concerns for the environment and automotive safety didn't put Detroit on the ropes, an indifference to quality and the fuel crises of 1973 and 1979 certainly did. Seizing an opportunity, the imports rushed in.

The Big 3 battles back, building modern small cars and improving quality. By 1990, they were poised to capitalize on a new revolution, as American turned to trucks. Pickup trucks, mini-vans, and especially, sport-utility vehicles, spread across the land. By the late Nineties, light trucks accounted for one of every two vehicles sold in the United States.

As the new millennium dawned, Ford was stronger than ever. GM seemed to constantly be adjusting its

management structure in an effort to stem its sliding market share. And Chrysler had proven itself resilient and innovative enough to be gobbled up by Germany's Daimler-Benz AG, which promptly created a new automotive giant, Daimler-Chrysler.

It is a fascinating, ever-changing story. And it's all here, in 100 Years of the American Auto: Millennium Edition.

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