

Henry Ford, Schoolmaster

by CHRISTY BORTH

LAST YEAR some 500,000 people visited Henry Ford's enchanting Greenfield Village just outside Detroit. Most of them thought of this 200-acre replica of early America as a unique museum — a wealthy man's hobby. Few of them realized they were actually seeing a school.

But even the rare visitor who notices the school activities that give life to Greenfield Village is surprised to discover that this is the heart of an educational system with far-flung branches and that the baffling, many-sided Henry Ford is running it all personally. Henry Ford is schoolmaster to some 2,000 pupils at the moment; more than 6,000 have been graduated from his schools — and the business of teaching has become one of his major interests. Yet only scattering hints of Henry Ford's varied experiments in education have so far appeared in print.

In England, he is teaching mechanized farming at the Henry Ford Institute of Agricultural Engineering. At Ways, Georgia, near his winter home, he is running six rural schools for negro children and a village high school and vocational training center. In Brazil, he's combatting illiteracy with schools in the jungle for rubber workers and their children. In a half-dozen little Michigan villages, he has taken over and revitalized the rural schools, delighting the pupils — as he does those at Greenfield Village — with a kind of education that is part progressive, part old-fashioned, and essentially as unconventional as Ford himself.

All this seems the stranger when you consider that, only 45 years ago, Ford was a self-educated mechanic, who, at the age of 30, had floundered dissatisfied from job to job and was considered a tinker rather than a thinker by his few acquaintances. But the tinker became a pioneer in mass production and an industrialist who revolutionized American life. And now the industrialist emerges as a schoolmaster who is

trying to bring education into step with this new American life and whose activities are so significant that famous educators come to Greenfield Village to study them.

FUN IN EDUCATION

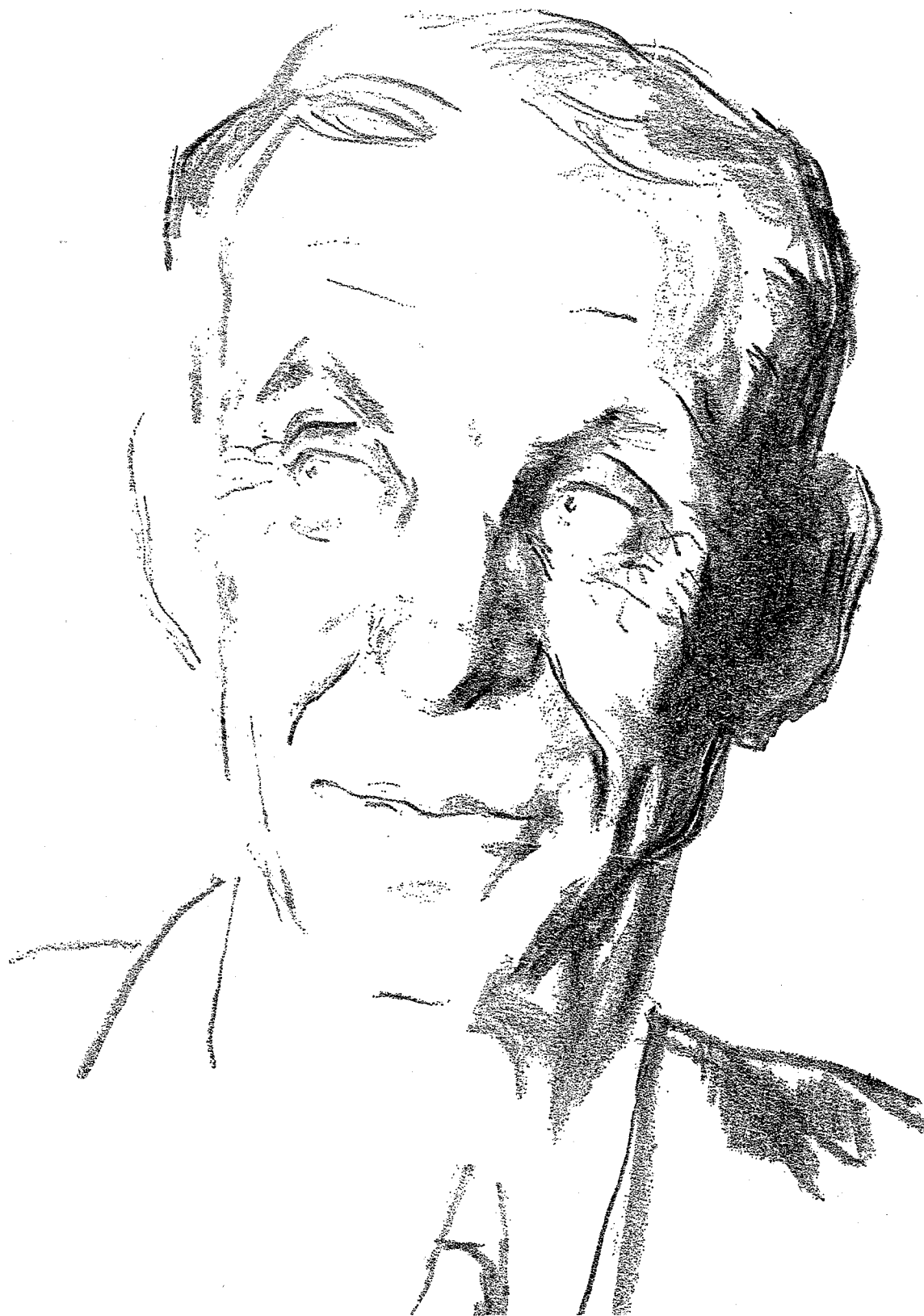
IT'S NOTORIOUSLY HARD to find Henry Ford. He has no office of his own. You have to wander around hunting for him. And nowadays the best place to hunt is not in the shops or offices of the great River Rouge plant but among his school children in Greenfield Village. He's there much of the time, usually knee-deep in youngsters, obviously enjoying himself while keeping intimately in touch with their progress and problems and enigmatically meditating on new teaching methods to meet their needs.

Observe Ford in those surroundings and you may conclude that he's shy with children. Question them about that shyness and you discover that this is exactly the thing that makes them accept him as an equal worthy of confidences. It's his way of getting answers to his questions.

The schools that Ford operates in Greenfield Village are part of the City of Dearborn's public school system; but they are unlike any public schools elsewhere. The village streets are dotted with the homes of famous Americans and with other historic structures — some reproduced and others transported here piecemeal — and the classes meet in these buildings. The 250 children come by bus from homes in Dearborn. Most of them were registered at birth for this opportunity, for the application list is long, and the rule of selection approximates one used in the Ford employment offices — *Personnel must represent a cross-section of the community.*

When the bell in Greenfield's tiny white chapel rings, it is the signal for the children's daily nonsectarian services. Thursday morn-

HENRY FORD, SCHOOLMASTER



ings, the services are broadcast over a national radio network, under the direction of high-school students who are learning radio technique. The children plan and conduct these devotions. Their lithe, silver-haired schoolmaster sits in the balcony, frequently accom-

panied by Mrs. Ford and sometimes by Son Edsel and family.

The organist is improvising as the students arrive.

Schoolmaster Ford smiles. "That boy at the organ is a natural musician. Yet improvised

THE FORUM

music was so easy for him that he wasn't interested in learning to read or write it. One day Mrs. Ford heard him improvise a lovely waltz. She asked him to repeat it. He couldn't. We all felt so badly about it that he finally solved his problem. He and his classmates built electrical equipment to record his playing, and now he's interested in sound recording as well as music."

Incidentally, the student-built sound-recording apparatus is now used to record classroom activities and correct sloppy speech habits. Thus, under the Ford policy, the students feel their own way, pursuing as far as they wish each new interest that arises.

The primary children's classes are held in a log cabin — a reproduction of the one-room school which the author of the McGuffey Readers attended as a boy. Inside, it is air-conditioned, indirectly lighted, as modern as a Rockefeller Center office. Nearby is the Play House, a child-size dwelling in which children serve their daily luncheon, setting and clearing the table themselves. They take turns being hosts and hostesses, whose duty is to encourage sensible talk and good manners. Ford believes poise and good manners are essential lubricants of life; he deplores the awkward uncouthness of the average schoolboy; and, through dancing classes and co-operative social activities among his school children, he has developed in them a courteous, confident poise that impresses all who talk with them.

To the rear of the Play House is a tiny barn, stocked with Shetland ponies and miniature farm implements. One day last fall, McGuffey classes were dismissed after Teacher announced that a surprise was waiting in the barn. The surprise was a miniature, steam-powered threshing machine, with which the children, coached by the Schoolmaster, threshed oats for the ponies.

"What benefit did they derive from that?" you ask.

"They had fun," says Ford. "Because they had fun, they probably learned something valuable."

"You seem to stress pleasure here."

"Why not? Pleasure is a big thing in life. Children know that. Grownups forget it. Life is rich with opportunities for pleasure. We encourage children to grasp them. When there's snow, play in it. If there's ice, skate on it. In summer, swim in the lakes, lie on your back and watch the clouds; listen to the birds; learn

about trees and rocks and flowers by living with them. Schools fail if they turn out boys and girls who have to buy all their pleasures."

Symbolic of the "fun" Ford provides is the authentic old stern-wheeler *Suwanee*, moored in a lagoon near the village. On occasion, Ford dismisses classes, summons everybody aboard the *Suwanee* for a cruise about the lagoon, while an orchestra plays Stephen Foster music. Incidentally, Stephen Foster's old home (music-education headquarters) stands near the lagoon.

NOT TEACHING—LEARNING

INTERMEDIATE CLASSES are held in Scotch Settlement School, a prim old 1-room building in which as a boy Ford received *all* his academic training. Moved from its original site and re-erected here, this school became the birthplace of Ford's present educational program. In September, 1929, when his first 32 students arrived, they discovered, at a rear desk, 2 men trying to recapture the flavor of an autumn day of half a century ago. Henry Ford, industrialist, and Dr. Edsel A. Ruddiman, chemist, were refurbishing with a pocket knife, behind an upended geography, the initials they had carved in the desk when they shared it as Michigan farm boys.

The class in Scotch Settlement School today is being conducted by a 'teen-age girl, while the regular teacher sits to one side. That is policy. Whenever a student shows aptitude, the opportunity to teach is provided.

"I believe children learn more easily when they teach one another," remarks the Schoolmaster. "They enjoy it, that way, and they learn best when learning is enjoyable. The minute a teacher tries to compel them to study, they rebel — if they have any spirit at all."

You watch the girl teach arithmetic, her "easy" subject. She's poised, sure of herself.

"It isn't really necessary to *teach* children," says Ford. "All you need to do is let them learn. They're trying to learn all the time. Christ understood that. We adults would find life much pleasanter if we went about it as a child does — always wanting to learn, always sharing what we've learned, never satisfied with what we know, always wondering what we don't know."

The more you try to find some semblance of form amid the scattering, diversified activi-

HENRY FORD, SCHOOLMASTER

ties going on so bewilderingly in this sprawling combination of village, museum, and school, the more you realize that the foregoing quotation is the key to it all. Ford isn't putting children through a cut-and-dried scholastic system. He is wisely providing for them every conceivable facility for learning what they *want* to learn.

Outside, you see a group heading for the woods beyond the lagoon. "Nature study," you are told, and you hear that it all started when Dr. George Washington Carver, of Tuskegee Institute, visited Ford last year. The famed negro scientist, who arises daily at four A.M., to walk in the woods and "listen to God's orders," merely reported to the children on what he had seen and heard during his sojourn in their village. A nature-study group sprang up spontaneously.

Similarly, a painting class started last summer after an artist set up his easel on the green and commenced to paint.

Observe that, as each new enthusiasm arises, Ford provides full facilities for its development.

LEARNING TO EARN

IN THE VILLAGE SHOPS, dedicated to handicraft, students of all ages are working under specialists, few of whom have a "higher" education. Most of them were discovered in the Ford factories. One such is the village cabinetmaker; another is the village potter.

In the textile mills, youngsters are weaving rugs, tablecloths, bedspreads, bolts of suiting, using threads they have previously carded and spun. Under guidance of the village seamstress, they convert suiting into clothing for their own use. Many of the girls are filling hope chests with the things they have made.

Other products of the students' shops are sold to the public through outlets provided by the Edison Institute. Often the boys build equipment to order for a department in the Ford Company's experimental laboratory. They are paid for it. Likewise, those radio students who broadcast the Thursday-morning services are paid for their work.

Here is one of Ford's cardinal ideas in education — earning should go hand in hand with learning.

"Education," he will tell you, "is not something to prepare you for life. It is a continuous part of life. And, since earning an income is a

part of life, it should be a part of education. Children should be taught to do things that are useful and hence have value. I don't believe in education merely for earning but in education that will give significance to what is earned."

The earning process in Greenfield Village actually starts in the kindergarten, where children are encouraged to participate in the gardening project. Surplus produce is sold by a student-staffed roadside market, and proceeds are divided equally.

"This year," says Ford, "each child received about forty-two dollars from the garden fund. These little children, earning money with their gardens, teaching each other the knacks they have acquired, helping each other plant and cultivate, are getting a real education. For true education consists in learning to do by doing, learning to help by helping, learning to earn by earning, learning to sustain life by sustaining it."

In the Ford experimental laboratory, adjoining Greenfield, you see high-school boys and girls engaged in practical work, for which they are paid scholarship fees.

Most girls are learning business-office details — by spending regular hours in filing and typing and other clerical work. This is not a theoretical "project." It involves actual business correspondence and records for the Ford laboratory. And, again, fees are paid for the work.

Most of the high-school boys are building machines and engines, working side by side at lathes and benches with Ford employees who are their unofficial advisers as they proceed with a project from original idea, through sketch, blueprint, wood pattern, casting, machined part, and assembled machine. If the final product passes inspection, the maker is paid for it.

The rule in the high school is that students spend four days a week in regular academic classes and the fifth day working at some task of their choice, earning their scholarship fees.

The plan works so well that, if you don't watch them, many of these youngsters will try to slip out for work when it's not their turn. Indeed, in the summer so many students come back daily to carry on their activities in the laboratory and handicraft shops that the teaching staff, one of the most highly paid in the area, is maintained on a twelve-month basis.

In what substitutes for "home economics"

classes, the girls learn housekeeping by keeping house, taking their turns at actually living in a model home, planning meals, shopping for supplies, entertaining guests.

LABORATORIES OF LIVING

THE TECHNIQUES of education that Ford is working out in Greenfield Village he is adapting for his other schools in Georgia, in England, in Brazil.

At Detroit, they are translated into action at the Henry Ford Hospital's Convalescent School and the School of Home Arts, which teaches girls the business of running a home.

In New England, they are shaking up traditions in Ford's group of rural schools near his restored Wayside Inn at Sudbury, Massachusetts.

In northern Michigan, they are bringing new life to schools Ford has taken over in formerly prosperous lumbering communities.

At the River Rouge plant, there are a half-dozen schools devoted to specialized training for students from twelve years up. These latter are under the supervision of Frederick E. Searle, who has run the widely copied Ford Trade School for twenty years. One of his most interesting duties is the direction of the Ford Industrial Forum, where undergraduates from American universities earn summertime incomes while working side by side with industrial employees and thus coming to understand a side of life ignored by academic institutions.

Thus, in lands where civilization is an old fact, a new fact, and a fact just being discovered, Henry Ford is schoolmaster. Threescore and fifteen — for most mortals an age of slippered ease and reminiscences about the good old days — is to him a time to plan for decades to come.

Where is the planning leading?

Nobody knows — Ford perhaps least of all. But there he is, absorbed in enthusiastic educational projects, striving to discover what part of education is useful and what part not, believing his quest is leading *somewhere*, feeling sure that his school is ahead of most in educational methods, certain that it is far ahead of where it was a year ago, hoping that his work will be an example to others.

"If the boys and girls of earlier years had learned in school what life is like, they would have done better with their own lives," Ford

says. "But they were put into schools that were apart from life and different from it. Here, we are trying to merge schooling and living into one uninterrupted whole, so that there will be no disconcerting break between learning years and earning years. Functional education, some call it. I call it learning to do by doing. Just so long as it turns out boys and girls competent to earn a living — and wise enough to know how to live happily — I'm for it.

"I believe in studying as close to the present as possible and as near to home as possible. In higher education, explore the whole field, if you like, but I'm talking now about the education of boys and girls still growing. Everybody goes to the primary schools; only a few to the universities. Yet even primary education has been patterned to fit into higher education, even though only a handful of boys and girls go on into the higher. Let everything they get at any age be of the highest use to them and as complete as possible, so that, even if they do not go on to higher schools, they will have accumulated definite values.

"We tell our boys and girls to learn about life from the life around them. When they wish to know why some people get along well and others do not, they look around them. From the people living on any street in America, an observant student can learn what makes some successful and happy, others miserable and broke. Lessons in health and sickness, in success and failure are everywhere, if we have the sense to read them.

"Stay close to life! That's our aim. Education cannot make a child appreciate life so much as life can make him appreciate education. We live our way into our thinking more than we think our way into our living.

"Talk about a planned economy! Educate every individual individually, and the mass will take care of itself. There is no system of government and no scheme of life that can relieve you, individually, of the obligation to do your own tasks.

"My experience as an employer showed me long ago that there was not enough kinship between what a man knew and what he could do. The vital connections between life and education are broken, and we aim to repair the break. We are trying to keep life in our schools as nearly as possible like life in the world."

A Note to Politicians

Gentlemen, let me remind you that liberty is not lost by revolution,
By the sudden appearance of armed men, the parade of tanks, machine
guns drumming,
And the little flowers of men's regard, made out of steel and dynamite,
Blossoming in the streets. All that comes later,
Or not at all. We can do without it. Gentlemen,
It is something else that weakens the freedom in us;
A worm in the wood, a little flaw in the flute;
It is this: that we are not sure enough that we want it.
It is this: that we give it away like bits of an old house,
For something new, a car, or a peck of potatoes.
Liberty, yours and mine, is lost by barter
Before we even begin to know we have lost it;
By trading a little here, and a little there —
For instance, the right to make such things as fences,
And to stand and speak as a man, to honor the truth,
Or even to do an honest job of work.
We can always get a price in the market for rights like these;
There are always some who will sell if we don't want to —
Sell for food, or for spite, or perhaps most often
Just for the sake of being one of the boys,
Brothers by blood, and everyone else stay out of it.
Gentlemen, let me assure you we lose our freedom
When men begin to talk and step like their neighbors,
Even before the guns begin. And as for liberty,
Or those who want it after the rest have lost it,
There is always a length of rope or a rubber truncheon.

Robert Nathan

