

Introduction

THIS IS A STORY that has continued to fascinate people as few other epic disasters in modern history. Certainly few cars have grabbed the public's fancy as much as the ill-fated Edsel—the Titanic of automobiles, a marketing disaster whose magnitude has made it a household word. Indeed, for a parallel one must go back to the Titanic itself, which sank in 1912. Both have become metaphors for overweening management ambition and shortsightedness—or worse.

Like the Titanic, however, the true nature of the Edsel disaster is poorly understood and likely to be seen in overly simplified terms. All those people died on the Titanic because there weren't enough lifeboats to go around, or so goes the common wisdom. The Edsel, we are told, failed because it was ugly, or because Ford Motor Company relied too heavily on motivational research. In fact, there were a dozen serious errors that contributed to the Titanic calamity, the shortage of lifeboats being perhaps the least of them. A few years ago I wrote a book on the subject—*Titanic, The Story of the Great White Star Line Trio: The Olympic, the Titanic and the Britannic*, now out of print—that examined the subject in detail. There was even a major element of bad luck. So it was with the Edsel. Including bad luck, a conspiracy of factors bedeviled the Edsel project, while the most popular explanations—the styling and the

motivational research—may have been the least of them, if, indeed, they were factors at all.

Believe it or not, there were (and are) people who liked the looks of the Edsel, this writer included. I can still vividly remember my first ride in an Edsel a couple of days before the official announcement in September, 1957. A man named Harry Putt, who had formerly worked for my father, had signed on as a salesman at Ralph May's Edsel dealership in Kent, Ohio. My father went up to see him, taking me in tow, and the two of us were given a hush-hush pre-announcement test drive. The car was a large, Mercury-bodied Citation—and what an impressive-looking machine it was. As a young collector of car catalogs, I had often pressed my parents into taking me around to the car dealerships, and there must have been many similar experiences, but that Edsel ride is one of the few I can still remember with any clarity. Forty-four years later I am still impressed by that car.

The Edsel, for good or for ill, maintains a remarkable hold on the popular imagination. After a time span that has included several wars and assassinations, repeated fuel shocks and bruising recessions—even astounding acts of terrorism—it is difficult to explain this. The Edsel was not even close to being the worst business calamity of all time, or even the worst in the history of the auto industry. The Chrysler Airflow debacle in 1934 was at least as terrible a failure (and was very nearly as celebrated at the time), while the Lockheed R-1011 engine program bankrupted Rolls-Royce. The 1938 Graham—which the company called the “Spirit of Motion,” but which everyone else called the “sharknose”—destroyed that company as a viable auto producer. Despite their good looks, the famed 1953 Studebakers—which are fondly remembered for their Raymond Loewy styling—arguably did the same to Studebaker. The Edsel wasn't even necessarily the worst product failure suffered by Ford Motor Company. The inflammable Pinto in the 1970s and the Explorer in recent times probably resulted in far more real damage to the firm than did the notorious Edsel. Yet, the Pinto is almost forgotten today and the Explorer doubtless will be in time.

The reason for the enduring popular fascination with the Edsel is the same as with the Titanic. People are mesmerized by the mighty brought low. Throughout history writers have produced a steady stream of morality plays in various guises dealing with the impudence of man constantly trying to go places he was never—whether by fate or by the deity—meant to go, trying to do things he was never meant to do. The Titanic became a modern morality play. Man had reached too far, gotten too arrogant, and had, inevitably, been given a comeuppance. So it was with the Edsel. The Edsel was supposed to be

the great triumph of the Ford Motor Company and its modern marketing acumen, the car that would catapult Ford to equal status with General Motors, but which came to serve a larger function as a metaphor for the hubris of Detroit, in general.

Amazingly, given the foregoing, there has never been an important Edsel book. Quite apart from the broader implications of the story, there has never even been a narrowly defined automotive history that covered the product, how it was created, how and what was produced. This book should fill both voids. It is the result of years of research, including access to the Ford Design Center archives which unearthed some remarkable material without which the full design story would remain forever untold. Many of the key original Edsel design team stylists were interviewed and some have supplied additional archival material. The result is a unique and important treatment of the car from its first sketches in 1955 to the last, unlamented 1960 models.

My own serious interest in an Edsel book began to take root as early as 1980. I had occasion to do research into the Edsel at the time I researched my Lincoln history, *The Lincoln Motorcar*, and a projected companion volume on Mercury. Prior to my Lincoln research, I did not know that Edsel had been part of the same marketing division as Mercury and Lincoln, and was surprised (to say the least) to discover important Edsel material buried in the dark recesses of the Lincoln-Mercury Division historical files. I was further amazed and excited by the design photos subsequently unearthed. Eventually, it seemed appropriate to plan a trilogy to include all of the major nameplates in the Mercury-Edsel-Lincoln (M-E-L) Division. The Mercury volume remains a pipe dream, but the Edsel story is related in these pages.

One of the truths in writing automotive histories is that there are nearly as many views regarding how any given subject should be approached as there are writers interested in that given subject. The way this book has been organized was given a great deal of thought. Not content to describe the product and its development, this book goes further and tries to explain why the Edsel program was begun in the first place and, of equal importance, what went wrong. As a result, the story related herein may cover a lot more ground than many readers would expect.

The opening chapters, for example, cover the life of the Edsel's namesake: Edsel Bryant Ford, who died in 1943. The reader will be struck by the hopelessness of his position with regard to Ford Motor Company. He and a few others (sales manager, Jack Davis, for one) understood with crystal clarity what was happening to the company, but were almost powerless to do anything about it. This was a nightmare in the classic sense. To return to the analogy of

the Titanic, it must have been rather like standing on the bridge, seeing the iceberg dead ahead, and being unable to communicate the imminent disaster to the officer at the helm.

The third chapter deals with the development of the automobile industry in America, and of the medium-priced field, in particular, in the years leading up to the beginning of Ford Motor Company's resurgence at the end of World War II. To some, this may seem a curious way to begin a book ostensibly about a product built in the late 1950s. It is, however, the only way to tell the full Edsel story, for the Edsel story is about much more than a car.

The Edsel program was a deadly serious corporate undertaking designed to help remedy years of mismanagement at Ford Motor Company. Beginning in the 1920s, the highest growth and lushest profits in the auto industry were to be found in the burgeoning medium-priced field. Henry Ford stubbornly ignored this development—and a lot of other things besides, including the rare talents of his remarkable son—and, in the process, nearly brought about the collapse of his company as a serious auto producer. The story of Ford Motor Company in the first two decades of the reign of Henry II is the story of the massive effort undertaken to regain the momentum that had been cast away and return the company to a position of leadership in the industry. The Edsel program was the most spectacular failure in that effort. The Edsel cannot be properly understood, however, without understanding how Ford Motor Company nearly came to ruin in the first place and how it sought to regain the ground that had been lost. To put it another way, the Edsel was but a pawn in a complex, high-stakes chess game, and cannot be understood without also understanding the game of which it was a part.

Particular attention has been given to the internal politics of Ford Motor Company at the time. Back then, Ford was the most "political" of the car companies, with well-entrenched factions vying daily for control. A key reason for the ultimate failure of the Edsel program was the corrosive effect upon it by the intramural warfare between these factions. Of course, most of this was unintentional; no one within the company wanted a major disaster. Today, we would call it collateral damage but the cumulative effect was devastating.

Finally, the Edsel product itself is comprehensively covered, and there will be many surprises in that regard, even for Edsel enthusiasts. The Ford Design Center photos will prove to be a revelation to most readers, even to those who already know something about the designing of the Edsel. The little-known Edsel Comet program is included, a car subsequently produced as a Mercury. Few are aware that the initial 1960 Ford and Edsel cars were to have been reworked off the 1959 body shell. At the last minute, those cars were scrapped

and an entirely new 1960 body shell was rushed to completion. This book contains the design development of both 1960 Edsels and reveals the reason for the staggeringly expensive about-face. Moreover, the 1959 Mercury-based Edsels (which also were fully designed, then scrapped at the last minute) are also included.

This book should prove instructive in many ways not only to dyed-in-the-wool Edsel enthusiasts, but to anyone interested in the history of American business. The Edsel program was a colossal disaster that holds many important lessons for us today.