

A family portrait of the late P.E. Martin.



PETER EDMUND MARTIN AND THE MODEL T

**DOUGLAS J. GLADSTONE EXAMINES
HOW A CANADIAN PLAYED AN
INSTRUMENTAL ROLE IN THE
EARLY SUCCESS OF THE
FORD MOTOR COMPANY**

All photographs courtesy of Marvin Peter Martin

Peter Edmund Martin was born 133 years ago this past April in Wallaceburg, Ontario. Twenty-one years later, in 1903, he was hired as the fifth employee of a new start-up – the Ford Motor Company.

Five years later, in 1908, Martin and a colleague, Charles Sorenson, were tabbed by no less than Henry Ford himself to run the Ford Piquette Avenue Plant. By 1913, Martin had been officially appointed as superintendent of production at the Piquette Plant and Sorenson as his assistant.

Sorenson would later become Martin's assistant at the Highland Park Plant, too.

Listed in 2002 on the National Register of Historic Places, the Ford Piquette Avenue Plant is perhaps best known as the home of the Ford Model T – the first affordable automobile. It was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 2006.

When Edsel Ford replaced his father as President of the Ford Motor Company in 1919, Martin was named General Superintendent of the company. Five years later, in 1924, Martin was named Vice President in charge of Manufacturing.

The Fords trusted and relied on him so much that it was Martin who flew overseas to sign contracts with Russia to produce Ford tractors.

Widely credited with developing the prototype for the first assembly line – he is often referred to as the “World’s Apostle of the Conveyor Belt” – *Time* magazine reported in 1939 that Martin drew a Depression-era salary of more than \$171,400. The magazine also reported that Ford had only three company board of directors: Henry Ford, Edsel Ford and Martin.

As Steven Stanford, the publisher of *H is for Henry Publications*, says, "Henry Ford is all too often solely credited with putting the world on wheels and creating the American middle class. The truth is that he did not accomplish these feats alone. Like any visionary, Henry Ford gathered around him intelligent, talented, and hard-working men who could support his vision and help make his plans come into being. Peter Edmund Martin was one of those select few men."

"From the earliest days of the Ford Motor Company, Martin worked to improve the Ford automobile through his innovations and better production methods," continues Stanford. "As head of production during the Model T era, he was a force to be reckoned with on the factory floor."

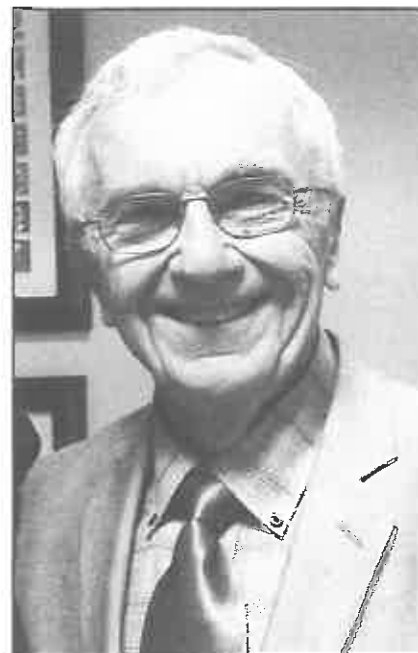


Peter Edmund Martin and industrialist Henry Ford, the founder of the Ford Motor Company, circa 1938.

"It is important to remember when we tell the Henry Ford story that he did not do it alone. He saw in people like P. E. Martin, the talents and abilities he needed to complement his own," added Stanford. "Ford's bigger than life persona meant that many of these men were left in the dark shadows of history, and that makes it even more important to tell their stories today."

Martin's grandson, Marvin Peter Martin, of Charleston, South Carolina, couldn't agree more. A former distribution chief with Adidas in Charleston, Marvin Peter Martin is the fifth oldest of the 34 grandchildren that P.E. Martin and his wife, Rose, had. P.E. died in 1944, when Marvin was five years old.

Now 75, Marvin, for the past 16 years, has been attempting to get



75-year-old Marvin Peter Martin today.

his late grandfather the public recognition he feels he did not receive while he was alive, and certainly has not received posthumously. He says P.E.'s career has been "marginalized".

According to Marvin, there is no greater proof that his grandfather has been historically short shrifted than the fact that P.E. is not in the Automotive Hall of Fame in Dearborn, Michigan.

Though acknowledging that Peter E. Martin "was indeed a key figure in the early Ford Motor Company days," the current president of the Hall, William Chapin, told the author via email that he "was not aware that the Automotive Hall of Fame has ever received a nomination" for him.

"Peter Martin and his contributions to the Ford Motor Company are worthy of consideration for Automotive Hall of Fame induction," Chapin continued. "I look forward to receiving a nomination form for him in the near future."

Marvin nominated his grandfather twice, in 2002 and 2003.

You might think that, with such an impressive pedigree to his

credit, Peter E. Martin would be a slam dunk, first ballot inductee to the Automotive Hall of Fame. But that's not the case. In fact, not a lot of people interviewed for this article even knew who he was.

Auto historian Patrick Foster, the publisher of *Olde Milford Press*, which publishes books about the American automobile, said in an email that he was "not familiar with Peter E. Martin, or his career. (I) never heard of him."

Ditto Dr. John Heitmann, a Professor of History at the University of Dayton who doubles as President of the Society of Automotive Historians. The best Heitmann could do was suggest that the author read Ford Bryan's *Henry's Lieutenants* (Wayne State University Press, 1993) and *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company* (Scribners, 1954) authored by Allan Nevins and Frank Earnest Hill.

Martin isn't even well known in his native Canada. When contacted by the author about Martin, Dr. Margaret MacMillan, the renowned historian and University of Oxford professor at St. Antony's College, said she "regrets that I cannot help you".

Randy R. Hope, the mayor and chief executive officer of the municipality of Chatam-Kent, curiously would only conditionally agree to supply a quote. As his assistant, Rosalie Wijsman, noted in an email, "it is difficult for Mayor Hope to provide a quote without first having seen a draft of the article you are writing so that he is able to understand the context in which you are writing the article".

As far as Martin's hometown museum is concerned, its curator, Michelle Bissonnette, at least admitted that, though "there has never been an exhibit specifically on P.E. Martin at the Wallaceburg and District Museum, we do make

To: Automotive Hall of Fame
Chairman, Awards Committee
21400 Oakwood Boulevard
Dearborn, MI 48124

NOMINATION REQUEST

Please place: **Mr. Peter Edmund Martin** into nomination for induction into the Automotive Hall of Fame.

Position :Vice President, In charge of all Manufacturing Industry Category: Motor Vehicle Manufacturers

Company: Ford Motor Company

Address: Detroit, Michigan

Birth Date: April 17, 1882

Date Deceased: October 8, 1944

Date Retired from the Automotive Industry: July 17, 1941 (for health reasons)

Nominator Information

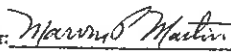
Name: Marvin Peter Martin

Company: Retired

Address: 51 Eton Rd

City, State, Zip Code: Charleston, South Carolina 29407

Telephone Number: 843.556.1741 or 843.324.8019 Relationship: Grandson
mpmartin@knology.net

Signature of Nominator:  Date Submitted: October, 2002

The 2002 nomination request that M. Peter Martin submitted on behalf of his grandfather, P.E. Martin.

mention of Mr. Martin and his contribution to the Ford Motor Company in conjunction with our display of a 1913 Ford Model T Roadster".

Only Peter Epp, the managing editor of the Sun Media newspapers in Sarnia-Lambton and Chatham-Kent, which includes the *Wallaceburg Courier Press*, seemed to have a sense of Martin's rightful place in history. Epp, who writes a weekly car column for the community newspaper group, pointed out that "when Model A production started at the Ford Company's River Rouge industrial complex in October 1927, Martin was the plant manager. The Rouge was then one of the world's

largest, if not the largest industrial complexes."

Epp added that Martin was "one of three people from Chatham-Kent who were instrumental in the Detroit-based automobile industry", including James Couzens, who developed the automobile dealer network.

In a phone call with the author, Marvin Peter Martin alluded to what he described as "a pervading component, political influence", that could be the reason why his grandfather has not received greater Automotive Hall of Fame support. And while conspiracy theorists might laugh at that idea, it is worth noting that the chairman of the board of directors of

the Automotive Hall of Fame, Michael E. Martini, whose day job is serving as president of Bridgestone Americas Tire Operations, never responded to the author's request for a statement for this article. On 19 September 2014, his Executive Director of Communications, Don Darden, indicated he was "checking on this now".

In addition, Michael Skinner, a founding member of the Henry Ford Heritage Association, as well as one of the group's past presidents, politely begged off when asked for a statement for attribution, preferring to refer the author to Marvin Peter Martin.

"He is the expert on his grandfather's career at Ford Motor," replied Skinner.

Further, Dr. David Lewis, the co-author of the seminal 2003 book, *100 Years of Ford: A Centennial Celebration of Ford Motor Company* (Publications International, 2003) who was, for two years, president of the Society of Automotive Historians, from 1981 to 1983, and whose own *curriculum vitae* proudly notes that he is the "author of more than 440 articles on automotive subjects, most of them on the life of Henry Ford and the history of the Ford Motor Company", declined repeated requests to be interviewed for this article. Dr. Lewis was named an honorary historian of the Henry Ford Heritage Association in 2004.

P.E. Martin, who resigned from Ford in 1941 due to his health, was replaced by Sorensen. Interestingly, in *Masters of Mass Production*, Christy Borth observes that it was the first time Sorensen ever held an official title within the company. Sorensen, it seems, was a huge self promoter, and rose through the company ranks, in part, because of his networking abilities.

Robert Casey, who for 21 years

was the John & Horace Dodge Curator of Transportation at the Henry Ford Museum on Oakwood Boulevard in Dearborn, agrees that, though Martin's role in Ford Motor Company is underappreciated, "it is due in part to Martin's own personality".

"He seems not to have been a self promoter," added Casey. "But it is also due to Henry Ford's dislike of job titles and organization charts coupled with his penchant for pitting executives against each other. Pete Martin was effectively the superintendent of Ford's Highland Park Plant, and Charles Sorensen was effectively his assistant, although neither carried those formal titles."

"As far as Henry Ford was concerned," continued Casey, "it was up to the two of them (Martin and Sorensen) to work out their relationship. Rather than start a bureaucratic turf war, Martin seems to have settled in to the role of Sorensen's assistant. Sorensen was big, blond and good looking, with a domineering, flamboyant personality. Martin was tough and hard-nosed, but much less flamboyant, much less likely to attract

the attention of observers outside the company."

According to Casey, Sorensen's fame skyrocketed when he headed up Ford's Willow Run bomber plant during World War II. The plant reportedly produced 8,600 B-24 Liberator bomber aircrafts.

Marvin grudgingly agrees that P.E.'s relative obscurity may have been his own fault. "I have always been haunted by the memory that P.E. did not want recognition," he says. "But he didn't know the lack of or misrepresentation that 'humility' can cause." *Hen*

DOUGLAS J. GLADSTONE

is a journalist by training, whose published articles have appeared in *The Chicago Sun Times*, *The Burlington Free Press*, and *America in World War 2 Magazine*, and *History Magazine* among others. His 2014 book, about the Italian-American immigrant who served as the chief carver of the Mount Rushmore National Memorial, is published by Bordighera Press; an extract appeared in the June/July 2014 issue of *History Magazine*.



A family photo of the late Peter Edmund Martin with his grandson, Marvin Peter Martin, dated February 26, 1940.