

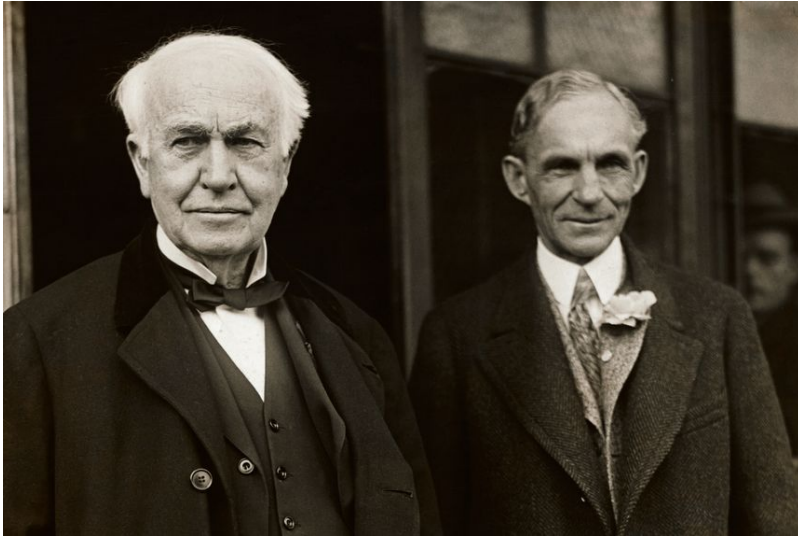
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BOOKSHELF

'Electric City' Review: Bright Lights, Big River

In the 1920s, Thomas Edison and Henry Ford dreamed of turning Muscle Shoals, Ala., into a dam-powered workers' utopia.



Thomas Edison and Henry Ford.

PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE

By Edward Kosner

Dec. 22, 2021 6:04 pm ET

Henry Ford and Thomas Alva Edison were the twin wizards of the first decades of the 20th century in America. They were paragons of industrial ingenuity and wealth—Ford was the richest man in the country, Edison the paramount inventor—even more renowned than their latter-day counterparts, Elon Musk and the late Steve Jobs. Ford and Edison—accompanied by Harvey Firestone, the tire mogul, and a retinue of servants—would take “camping trips” by car each summer to promote auto sales (and themselves) that were covered by reporters as big news. And in the early 1920s, they collaborated for a time in one of the oddest episodes in the saga of American enterprise.

The story of this pair’s vain effort to build a utopian garden city powered by a mammoth hydroelectric dam at Muscle Shoals, Ala., is all but forgotten. Now it’s been disinterred by Thomas Hager, in “Electric City: The Lost History of Ford and Edison’s American Utopia,” a well-researched, crisply written account tinged with irony.

Ford was one of the most complicated figures of his time—a barely schooled farm boy turned ace mechanic who essentially invented the American automobile industry and improved the lives of countless of his fellow citizens. At once a know-nothing and a know-it-all, a patriot and a vicious anti-Semite, Ford cranked out millions of his cheap, durable Model T's at the mile-long River Rouge plant outside Detroit, and dreamt big. He lost a 1918 race for the U.S. Senate by a few thousand votes and flirted with running for president in 1924. But he was thwarted in his grandest scheme by an American political system that worked better a hundred years ago than it does now.

Muscle Shoals, on the winding Tennessee River in northwest Alabama, was originally named Mussel Shoals, after the tasty bivalve that was a dietary staple of the Indian tribes that occupied the land until Andrew Jackson drove them away to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears. The white farmers who replaced them, many of them sharecroppers, raised quality cotton, but poverty was endemic, as were devastating floods. During World War I, the government hatched a plan to dam the river and use the electricity generated to power two plants turning out nitrates for munitions. The dam was half built and the factories equipped when the war ended and the project was abandoned.

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President Warren Harding didn't want to spend the \$30 million needed to finish the mile-wide 10-story dam and told underlings to lease the whole works to private interests. Ford had already been tempted to acquire the nitrate plants, which could be refitted to turn out the kind of fertilizer used by regional farmers. He envisioned the completed dam supplying cheap power for his blended new American community of garden cities strung for miles along the river. Worker-farmers would commute—in their Model T's, of course—

to small factories running on electricity from the dam. They would be given time off in planting and harvesting season to raise crops they could sell to supplement their incomes. It was a Jeffersonian vision of America updated to the age of the automobile and bounteous electricity.

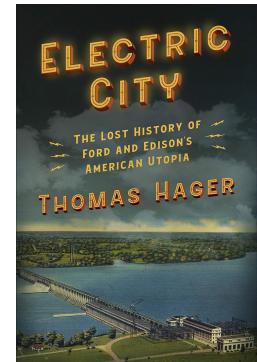
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Electric City: The Lost History of Ford and Edison's American Utopia

By Thomas Hager

Abrams

308 pages



Ford enlisted the prestige and smarts of his camping buddy Edison. They wanted, Mr. Hager writes, “to gift the nation they loved with a titanic, living example of how they thought America should work . . . The results would be new kinds of cities, new ways of making things, new approaches to labor and leisure, and improved lives for everyone.”

So began a six-year tug of war between Ford and his opponents. In 1921 he made a low-ball bid for the project—including only \$5 million to complete the dam. He enlisted the crack Ford publicity operation and savvy political hands to win acceptance from the government. He and Edison even came up with a harebrained scheme to finance the deal with a proto-cryptocurrency—“energy dollars”—backed by the value of the power produced by the dam completed with the juice money. They even invited Harding on one of their summer camping trips to sell him on the deal.

Some of Ford's rival industrialists tried to block him. But the real resistance came from the government. Secretary of War John Wingate Weeks, who was in charge of offloading Muscle Shoals, was adamant that the stubborn Ford increase his bid. But the crusher was George Norris, the unreconstructed populist senator from Nebraska, who insisted that the people, not some capitalist, should develop such a major public work. When Harding died—of “apoplexy,” a stroke in those days—Vice President Calvin Coolidge inherited the problem. Festooned with buttons and paraphernalia for Coolidge's 1924 election campaign, Ford and Edison tried to lobby the new president, but Silent Cal slyly didn't let them get in a word.

Hopes that Ford would prevail touched off a hysterical real-estate boom in perennially poor northwest Alabama. Promoters bought up huge swaths of cheap land and all sorts of folk spent their meager nest eggs on acreage they knew would make them rich when Ford's utopia materialized.

In the end, Edison faded from the picture, and Norris ended Ford's hopes—passing legislation that made Muscle Shoals a federal undertaking, although Coolidge refused to sign it. And in the wondrous alchemy of American politics, when the Great Depression propelled Franklin D. Roosevelt into the White House, Muscle Shoals became the core of the TVA, the Tennessee Valley Authority, one of the first and greatest of FDR's accomplishments. The TVA soon built more than 50 smaller dams upriver for flood control, and provided subsidies, training programs and other elements of the welfare state to many of the South's neediest.

Inadvertently, the paternalistic, authoritarian Henry Ford, who later got a plug from Hitler in "Mein Kampf," turns out to have been a pathbreaker for the New Deal.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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