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‘The Vagabonds’ Review: Moguls On the Move

Every summer for a decade, Henry Ford and Thomas Edison toured the U.S. by car, helping establish the road trip as a national tradition.

By Edward Kosner

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Imagine Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg and Jeff Bezos piling into a fleet of Elon Musk’s self-driving Teslas one summer week on a pilgrimage to the Apple campus in Cupertino, Calif. People line the interstates to watch the cavalcade hum by. Vloggers breathlessly record its progress on Facebook and Instagram while TV news helicopters hover overhead. The travelers pause in Omaha, Neb., where Warren Buffett offers them Cherry Cokes, See’s Candies and investment tips. Donald Trump lampoons them on Twitter as “Tech Bozos.”

That would be today’s equivalent of the summer road trips that Thomas Edison and Henry Ford made in the early decades of the 20th century. They were among the paramount celebrities of the day, especially the rumpled Edison, who had invented the phonograph, incandescent light bulbs and the generators to power them, and an early movie camera. Ford, who as a race driver set an automobile speed record of 91.37 mph in 1904, was the father of the revolutionary Model T’s that rolled off the assembly line at his Dearborn, Mich., plant. He had become beloved to many Americans in 1914 when he doubled wages to \$5 a day at his plant—\$129 in today’s money—and cut the workday to eight hours. He ran for the U.S. Senate from Michigan and once hoped to run for president.

Jeff Guinn, who usually specializes in true-crime narratives, tells the story of their adventures on the road in “The Vagabonds.” An amiable and inconsequential book, it belongs on the shelf with tales of other American oddities, like the saga of Edward Payson Weston, who walked across America in 1909 to great acclaim.

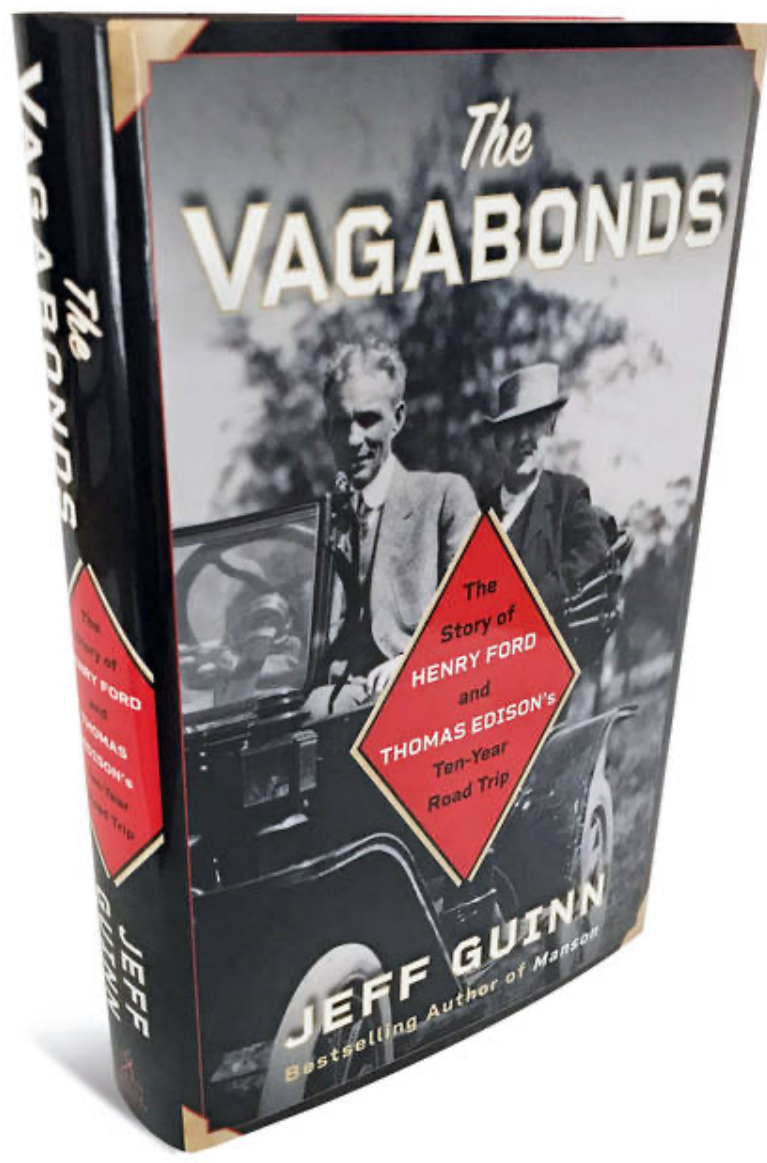


PHOTO: WSJ

THE VAGABONDS

By Jeff Guinn
Simon & Schuster, 306 pages, \$28



Edison and Ford, late 1920s.

PHOTO: TRANSCENDENTAL GRAPHICS/GETTY IMAGES

Ford and Edison grasped as few others did that their activities, if novel enough, would generate newspaper stories that could enhance their fame and sell Ford’s cars and Edison’s phonographs and light bulbs. They were joined in their “autocamping,” as it was called, by Harvey Firestone, the industrialist who made the tires on which Ford’s Model T’s rode, and John Burroughs, a cranky, bearded naturalist who came along to identify the flora and fauna.

Starting with a misbegotten trek to the Florida Everglades by Edison, Ford and Burroughs in 1914, the men, sometimes accompanied by reluctant wives, made trips nearly every summer until age, infirmity and waning interest from the press ended their adventures a decade later. The routine was the same: Ford or Edison set the dates, Firestone suggested the itineraries—the Adirondacks, the Upper South, the Michigan woods—and handled the logistics.

The idea was to popularize vacation travel by automobile in the days of deeply rutted roads and make-do campsites on farmers’ fields. The Vagabonds didn’t exactly rough it: They traveled in a caravan of Cadillacs, Packards or Lincolns for the principals, Model T’s for the support staff, and a couple of trucks with tents, a cook stove and provisions for Ford’s personal chef to whip up their meals. They were supposed to sleep on cots and bathe in creeks and streams but often wound up overnighting in hotels with comfy beds and hot showers.

Local and occasionally national reporters were ushered into the presence of the great men. Edison would entertain them with homespun wisdom, and Ford would show off his car-repair expertise and Ford-chopping skill. The naturalist Burroughs, who looked like George Bernard Shaw, gave the traveling show a certain gravitas.

Mr. Guinn has chosen to tell his story chronologically, which only underscores the repetitiousness of it all. Occasionally the tedium is broken. In 1924, the Vagabonds descended on

Calvin Coolidge—who was seeking election after succeeding to the presidency with the sudden death of Warren Harding—at his rustic home in Plymouth Notch, Vt. Emblazoned with big Coolidge campaign buttons, they had ostensibly come to endorse him. Their real purpose was lobbying for Ford’s deal to buy a huge government dam at Muscle Shoals, Ala., and Edison’s experiments to give America a domestic source of rubber. Silent Cal talked enough to keep them from promoting their pet projects, then sent them on their way.

A basic problem with the triviality of “The Vagabonds” is that it underplays the complexity of Ford’s character. The genius of the Model T was at once a bullying know-it-all and a proud know-nothing. He ran his businesses with an iron will, trying to regulate his workers’ lives and hiring thugs to fight the union. He was an America Firster *avant la lettre*, bitterly opposing U.S. entry into World War I, and smug about his philistinism. He hated jazz and modern art and liked to proclaim: “Book sickness is a modern ailment.”

But Ford is most notorious as a virulent anti-Semite. He bought his local weekly, the Dearborn Independent, in 1918 and spent nearly \$85 million in today’s money turning it into a nationwide mouthpiece for his views that an international cabal of Jewish financiers schemed to rule the world’s banks and media, start wars and line their pockets. He ballyhooed the spurious “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” in his paper and made such a splash that Hitler gave him a plug in “Mein Kampf” and awarded him a medal honoring distinguished foreigners.

Edison had a more nuanced view of the Jews. He hailed their achievement in the arts and sciences but blamed their business practices on the centuries of discrimination they’d suffered. Even so, he warmly thanked Ford for a leather-bound volume of issues of the Independent and isn’t known to have tried to temper his companion’s hatred. The author observes tepidly that Ford’s anti-Semitism “was typical of his times.”

Mr. Guinn concludes that the Vagabonds’ journeys “exemplified what they had helped make possible: See what we’re doing? You can do it, too. . . . [They] encouraged countless ordinary Americans to pursue their own dreams.” Still, in his pages their travels read more like ego trips than do-gooder missions.

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

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