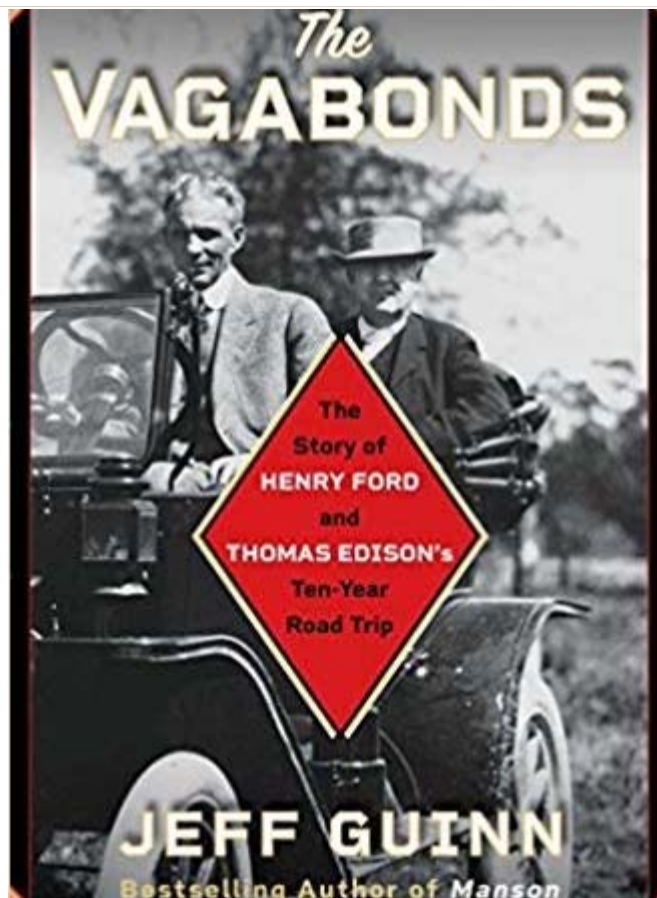


Saturday, September 7, 2019

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NON-FICTION

Are We There Yet?

Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, and the Rage for “Automobiling”

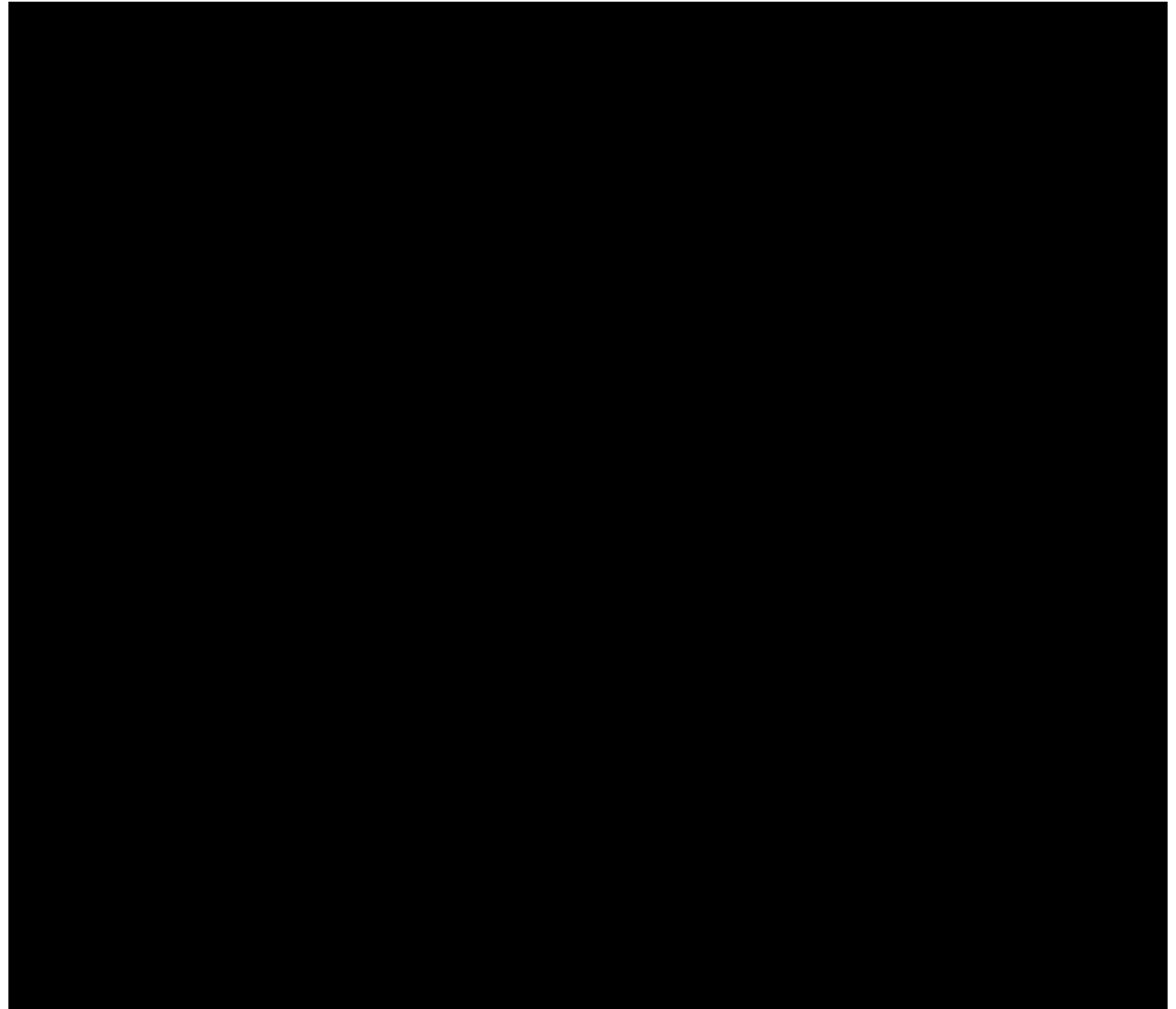
July 8, 2019 · Michael Giltz

Henry Ford and Thomas Edison were two of the most famous men in America in the early 1900s. And when they took summer vacations together for about a decade, it was headline news. Jeff Guinn documents these annual jaunts in his new nonfiction book *The Vagabonds*, which goes year by year in recounting the journey taken. He tells us who came along and assesses the general success of the outings. But he’s able to do this because, at the time, the national press documented these journeys just as carefully, as road trips gradually became an American obsession

I said “Henry Ford and Thomas Edison” but in the early days of their “automobiling” (the nickname for the novel idea of getting into a car and just going somewhere) it was almost always “Thomas Edison and Henry Ford” since Edison was initially even more famous.

The trips were a genuine desire for two men to get away, however briefly, from their business concerns. But it was also a canny bit of self-promotion for them, and especially for Ford’s trusty Model T. When they began in 1914 with an ill-advised foray into the Florida Everglades, paved roads were almost as much a novelty as

automobiles. Summer vacations hadn't really taken hold. Who could ever get far enough away and back again in a week or two?



Those bold enough to jump in a car and go automobiling were enterprising sorts who slept in their car on the side of a road (motels hadn't been thought of yet either) or pitched tents in a farmer's field and woke up with a shotgun in their face. If they were lucky, he gave them an offer to buy eggs and milk for a cheap price.

Edison and Ford pretended they were roughing, but the trips almost always included an elaborate entourage, stops in nice hotels, and more to soften the blow. Family did sometimes come along for the ride but the trips almost always included tire manufacturer Harvey Firestone and naturalist John Burroughs. They called themselves the Four Vagabonds.

Firestone was a hugely successful businessman in his own right, but the two giants saw him as little more than a factotum to arrange details, deal with the press and such. Burroughs was a naturalist they both admired who

could offer detailed info on the flora and fauna they passed. He was also a grumpy old cuss. Between his harrumphing and Edison's fitful desire to "rough it," problems of one sort or another bedeviled almost every trip.

For all the free publicity the vagabonds garnered, the friendship between Edison and Ford was genuine. Neither man liked pretty much anyone. Plus they were so wealthy and powerful that everyone they came into contact with seemed to want something. Well, Ford was richer than Edison by a mile, so he didn't want money. And he'd begun in Edison's labs and admired the inventor tremendously, so that was all right with Edison and they got along fine.

Guinn uses the narrative of these trips from 1914 to 1925 to tell the story of Ford and Edison's lives, going chapter by chapter and trip by trip to illuminate the radical impact of the automobile and posit some fascinating what-ifs. Presidents Harding and Coolidge each joined the Vagabonds on their sojourns at one point. And Ford's vehement opposition to World War I might well have been a launching pad for the anti-Semitic automaker's Presidential bid if his hesitancy and a wary wife didn't put the kibosh on that.

Ultimately, few of the trips were particularly fun for the people involved, thanks to bad weather, ill-tempered companions, mechanical failure, a too-eager press tagging along, and a thousand other reasons, with the blame usually laid at the feet of poor, beleaguered Firestone.

Often someone else's bad vacation can make for a good story. But given the outsized importance of the men involved, Guinn seems just as harried as Firestone. Rather than satisfying my interest in the men or their misadventures, it makes me look forward more eagerly to Edmund Morris's posthumous biography of the inventor due out in October.

It's not Guinn's fault each individual trip seems anti-climactic and repetitive. Yet after hearing about five or six of them in a row you start tapping your toes and wondering impatiently if we're there yet. But in this fitfully engaging, dutiful narrative, we never quite arrive.

(Simon & Schuster; July 9, 2019)

Tags: Harvey Firestone, Henry Ford, Jeff Guinn, The Vagabonds, Thomas Edison

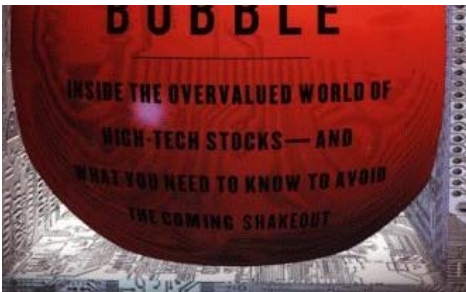
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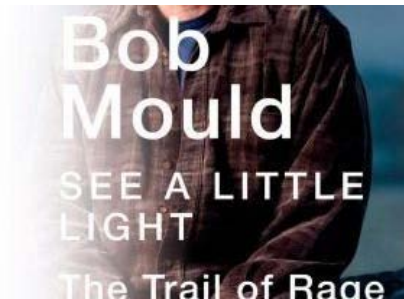
Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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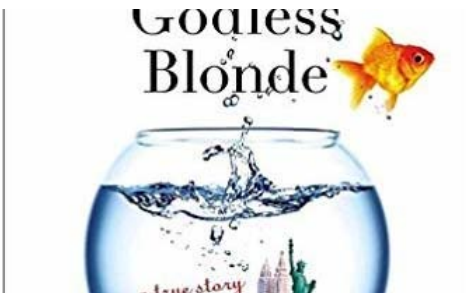
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