



# Book Chrysler

## The Life and Times of an Automotive Genius

Vincent Curcio  
Oxford UP, 2000

---

### Recommendation

Stop whatever you’re doing. Take a week off from work and read this book! Rarely is a massive biography a pleasure to read. Usually, even the most critically acclaimed biographies are long on tedious detail and short on page-turning storytelling and exquisite style. Vincent Curcio’s biography of automotive pioneer Walter Chrysler is the exception to all these norms. Fascinating, impeccably written and completely engrossing, this sweeping tale is more than just a biography. True to its title, it is also a panoramic view of Walter Chrysler’s times. Don’t be put off by the length, even though index and all, it is 699 pages long. Even if you don’t think you’re interested in the automotive industry, read this book anyway. *BooksInShort* joins the ranks of critics and industry insiders who’ve praised it and promises you will not be able to put it down.

### Take-Aways

- Walter Chrysler loved and understood machines.
- His success came from understanding engineering and being totally committed to the quality of his cars.
- Born in Kansas in 1875, he was the son of a railroad engineer.
- At 17, he became a machine shop apprentice with the Union Pacific Railroad.
- He worked as a machinist in railroad shops across the Midwest, rising in the ranks.
- He honed his management skills in the railroad industry.
- He bought a 1908 Locomobile touring car so he could study it.
- After running a manufacturing firm, he became the plant manager for the Buick division of General Motors in 1912, and was president of Buick from 1916 to 1919.
- He turned around the ailing Maxwell car company and created his first car, the Chrysler Six in 1923.
- In 1925, he transformed Maxwell into the Chrysler Corporation, the third largest automobile company in the world.

# Summary

## Working His Way Up

Walter Chrysler loved machines. An accomplished mechanic, he also had excellent management skills honed from years in the railroad industry. His success came from his deep understanding of engineering and his total commitment to the quality of his vehicles.

Chrysler began his working years as a locomotive wiper in a Kansas roundhouse and rose to the head of the Buick Division of General Motors. In a pivotal move he rescued the flailing Maxwell-Chalmers car company and developed the 1924 Chrysler, the world's first modern car. He formed the Chrysler Corporation in 1925, establishing his New York City headquarters in the world's most famous art-deco structure, the famed Chrysler Building, which he built and helped design. Chrysler, a colorful maverick, was very different from the other automotive pioneering giants of his day. His company prospered during the Great Depression because of his emphasis on "quality at popular prices." The Chrysler Corp. lost money only in the rock-bottom year of the Depression, 1932, and despite the "market fiasco" of their Chrysler Airflow (which was actually years ahead of its time), the company grew and remained profitable right up to Walter Chrysler's death in 1940.

## The Early Years

Walter Chrysler and his four children were fascinated by genealogy and conducted extensive research into family history. Their first recorded verifiable ancestor was Johann William Kreussler, who was born around 1560 in Germany. He was the chief magistrate or mayor of Niederhadamar, a little town north of Limburg-on-the-Lahn.

“All of his life Chrysler was a hard-drinking, cigar-smoking, big-eating man who loved a laugh, a joke, and a good time, and success had not dampened any of his appetites.”

The ancestor who brought the family to America was Johann Philipp Kreussler, born in Niederneisen (in an area called the Lower Palatinate) on Jan. 26, 1679. In 1708, he and his wife and sons were part of a group that petitioned the British government to transport them to the American colonies. Considering these German citizens to be industrious, the British government granted their petition, and the group became known as the First Settlement of the Palatines in America. The group set sail from Plymouth, England in the spring of 1710 and reached the port of New Amsterdam (New York) in June.

“As far as the automobile business is concerned, Walter Chrysler was the great anomaly. He was the genius of a late age, the only other man to achieve on the scale of Ford and Durant, and at a time when this should have been no longer possible.”

Throughout the 1700s and early 1800s, the spelling of the family's last name evolved until it became Chrysler. After the U.S. Revolutionary War, in 1781, a Chrysler ancestor who was loyal to Great Britain settled in Canada. Walter Chrysler's grandfather, John, brought the family back to the U.S. in 1857, settling in Wyandotte, Kansas.

“Once Chrysler had his assembly line, he went backward through the plant tying everything into it. He said his biggest cue for a needed change was the sight of a worker idled by the lack of a continuous flow of parts.”

Walter Chrysler's father, Henry, was only seven when the family moved to Kansas. As an adult, Henry worked for the Kansas Pacific Railroad, later known as the Union Pacific. His first job was as a railroad fireman on the Delaware, the second engine built for the railway line. He was promoted to engineer. Walter used to say his father was the best locomotive engineer on the division, famous from one end of the Union Pacific to the other. In 1871, Henry, then 20 and known as "Hank," married Anna Maria Breyman. Walter Percy Chrysler was born in Wamego, Kansas, on Apr. 2, 1875, his parents' fourth wedding anniversary.

“Chrysler was both a creator and victim of the prosperity consciousness of the 1920s that eventually brought everyone to financial ruin.”

When Walter was three, his family moved to a new (and often dangerous) railroad town, Ellis, Kansas. Young Walt liked to ride in the cab of his dad's train engine. He also loved music, and played drums, piano, clarinet and tuba. "To the end of his days, if it hooted or tweeted, if you could bang it or plunk on it, Walter Chrysler could play it, and play it well." In his first boyhood jobs, Walter sold

calling cards and, later, silverware. Both were great successes, but he gave them up to help his mother with her dairy business. He helped take care of the three cows and the stable, did the milking and sold the milk and cream from house to house in Ellis. He learned to track manufacturing costs in this small family business,

“He came to understand the automobile and the industry that produces it to the nth degree. In this way he became the most knowledgeable of all auto men.”

When his father wouldn't allow him to become a railroad apprentice, Walter went to work for the railroad anyway, quitting high school to become a janitor, or "sweeper," for ten cents an hour, ten hours a day at the shops where mechanics worked on locomotive engines. After six months, the master mechanic helped persuade Walter's father to let the young man become an apprentice. At 17, he began a four-year term as a machine-shop apprentice with the Union Pacific. His starting pay was 5.5 cents an hour, a little more than half what he had earned as a sweeper, but he was thrilled. In his off time, he played in the Union Pacific Band, and joined the town baseball team. Young Walter Chrysler was living his boyhood dreams.

“This was the exact opposite of the way Henry Ford approached centralized assembly.”

After his apprenticeship, Walter worked at railroad shops in towns across the Union Pacific line. In 1901, he married Della Forker, his longtime fiancée, and they settled in Salt Lake City, Utah. The next year, he became foreman at the railroad roundhouse, his first management position. In 1904, he went to Childress, Texas, to work for the Fort Worth & Denver City Railroad. He was well liked there, respected by the railroad men because he was a practical, self-made man, a machinist by trade and a good one. Those who worked under him knew that he was "just as eager to gain knowledge as they were." In 1906, he and his wife were expecting their second child when they moved to Oelwein, Iowa, where he was appointed master mechanic at the Chicago Great Western Railroad shops.

“The new Chrysler automobile was made out of whole cloth by men who had no preconceptions of what a car should be, and because they were not burdened with a preexisting corporate culture dictating design and manufacturing traditions, they were free to burst onto the world with a brand new kind of car.”

Chrysler first encountered "the romance of the automobile" at the 1908 Chicago auto show. "I saw this Locomobile touring car... I spent four days hanging around the show, held by that automobile as by a siren's song." He wanted that car, but he only had \$700 in savings, and the car was \$5,000, with no bargaining room. He recalled, "All I asked myself was: Where could I raise the money?" He borrowed the money through a banker who would go on to become instrumental in the automotive industry. Chrysler said, "I wanted the machine so I could learn all about it. Why not? I was a machinist and these self-propelled vehicles were by all odds the most astonishing machines that had ever been offered to men."

## **Chrysler and The Automobile Industry**

By the end of 1901, Chrysler moved his family to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he continued in the railroad business as superintendent at the Allegheny Works of the American Locomotive Company (ALCO). He learned locomotive manufacturing and created a system that led the plant to turn a profit for the first time. By 1911, he was earning \$8,000 per year, a huge salary at the time. He was negotiating manufacturing deals and ALCO was building engines for all the major railroads in the United States.

“No more did practically all cars have to be black, because that was the fastest-drying color. No more would it take two to four weeks for the paint on car bodies to dry.”

Soon the new automobile industry came calling. In January 1912, he went to Flint, Michigan to become the plant manager for the Buick division of General Motors. By the time he entered the automobile business, many inventors had built versions of the "horseless carriage" and the U.S. automobile manufacturing business was 15 years old. But if ever a man was suited to the tasks of such a period, it was Walter Chrysler.

## **Chrysler at Buick**

At General Motors, Walter Chrysler made crucial manufacturing changes that increased efficiency and production capacity. He reinvented the assembly line. He demanded that new items be perfected before they were added to the Buick, increasing the car's

already prized reputation for quality. He made changes quickly, wasting no time on lengthy conferences and red tape. He always acknowledged the excellent men working with him.

“Now that auto companies had something glamorous to sell in their showrooms, advertisers appeared with the ability to sell these romantic new dream machines to a waiting public.”

On June 7, 1916, Chrysler became president of GM's Buick division. On June 27 he was elected to the GM board of directors, and on Dec. 14 he became a vice president of the corporation. Yet, only three years later, on Nov. 1, 1919, 44 years old and wealthy beyond what he had ever imagined, Walter announced his departure from General Motors. Selling his GM stock brought him millions. He wanted to go into car manufacturing for himself.

## **Chrysler the Auto Maker**

On Jan. 6, 1920, the ailing Willys-Overland Company announced that Walter Chrysler would take over as executive vice president and general manager. Just as Chrysler had turned Buick into the third-largest auto company in the world, he would turn Willys into the world's largest manufacturer of four- and six-cylinder engines. But, on Nov. 30, 1921, John Willys - in a clever stock manipulation to regain control of his company - threw the corporation into receivership. Disgusted, Chrysler left the company.

“Chrysler was a production man, and as such, he knew that volume and economies of scale were what made huge profits, particularly in an era of rising costs like the 1920s.”

While he was at Willys, another group of bankers had asked him to take over the formerly successful, but now failing, Maxwell Company. Now he could, and it began to thrive again. The Maxwell deal stipulated that if Chrysler could turn things around and raise the stock price, he would be able to obtain a major stake in the company. He viewed this as the springboard from which he could manufacture a car with his name on it.

“On October 16, 1928, Chrysler announced that he would build what would briefly become the tallest building in the world, and perhaps its most beautiful expression of Art Deco architecture: The Chrysler Building.”

Employing the Zeder Skelton Breer Engineering Company (started by three former Willys engineers in hopes of working with Chrysler in his own manufacturing firm) he ultimately did just that. The Chrysler Six, a "brand new kind of car," began rolling off the production line a week before Christmas, 1923. Historian Mark Howell calls the Chrysler Six "America's First Modern Automobile," and claims that "this little machine stands second only to the Model T Ford in its revolutionary impact on the industry."

In an interview with the Saturday Evening Post, Chrysler listed all the car's features and applauded his ZSB engineers: "They began with a clean slate, and designed from the ground up. There were none of the usual handicaps - no existing machinery, tools, jigs and dies to be considered; no pre-determined plant capacity or manufacturing lay out to fit to; no executive fads or whims to be satisfied. We have made no compromises... While owners will appreciate the fine features of our design, every engineer in the industry will know that they mean the highest quality job that can be built."

In the spring of 1925, Chrysler transformed Maxwell into the Chrysler Corporation. When his company bought Dodge in July 1928, Walter Chrysler realized yet another of his dreams: his firm was now one of the Big Three, the third-largest automobile company in the world. In the industry's third decade, he had accomplished the apparently impossible: He expanded the number of enduring automotive manufacturing giants from two to three.

The Chrysler Corporation met the challenges of the Great Depression from 1929 through the '30s, the labor strike of 1937, and the growing competition in the auto industry. Walter Chrysler resigned the presidency on July 22, 1935, at age 60, but retained his position as chairman of the board and CEO. He turned over the daily running of his company to hand-picked, tried and tested associates. On May 26, 1938, he suffered a stroke at his home on Long Island. At only 63, "all the years of too much work and too much play, without enough respite, had finally caught up with him." On Aug. 8, 1938, his wife, Della, had a cerebral hemorrhage, and despite doctor's efforts, died that evening. Walter Chrysler was too ill to attend her funeral.

His health gradually deteriorated and, on Aug. 15, 1940, he suffered another stroke. He died Aug. 18, 1940, with his four children, his sister, Irene, and his doctors at his bedside.

# About the Author

**Vincent Curcio** is also the author of *Suicide Blonde* a biography of Gloria Grahame. He lives in Union City, New Jersey.

---

---