

Vincent Bendix

By JASON STEIN

WHEELBASE COMMUNICATIONS

The kid's life was different. There's no question. When you are a few months past your 16th birthday, living in the outskirts of Chicago, Ill., after having moved from middle-of-the-Midwest Moline, Ill., with a Methodist Clergyman father and a farm girl mother who both came from Sweden, well, maybe "normal" isn't really normal from the start.

And perhaps that's why Vincent Hugo Bendix, later a man who made stopping the automobile so easy for millions, didn't think twice about hitting the accelerator on his own opportunity, then never letting up.

Bendix was 16. He was headed to New York (alone). And he wanted a chance.

The world can still thank him today.

From an early age, the founder of the Bendix Corporation, the company that introduced a reliable four-wheel brake system, showed the kind of spirit that comes around once every century or so.

He was creative. He was fascinating. He was outlandish and extravagant. And he was willing to take a few chances.

But then opportunity was in the Bendix blood.

An eager family spirit prompted Jann Bengtson, a native of Amaland, Sweden, to

pick up and find America with his new bride, not thinking twice about the opportunity it would present.

That same drive led Bendix to run away to Manhattan in 1898 as a kid of just 16, the scene for many entrepreneurs of the time.

But Bendix would be different.

He began working as an elevator operator in a hospital, then moved to the maintenance department where he was taught the basics of electricity. Within two quick years, Bendix worked in an accounting office, a law firm and finally as an engineer.

Early colleagues described him as "someone with the energy and aptitude of 10 men."

But it was the early American mode of transportation that fascinated him.

Bendix began to drift into mechanical engineering, specializing in automobile engine design, and eventually worked on motorcycles and cars for the Holsman Automobile Company where he learned all about internal combustion engines.

By 1907, less than 10 years out on his own, Bendix had designed and built his own car: the Bendix Motor Buggy. Seven thousand Bendix machines were built before the mismanaged company declared bankruptcy.

It would be the beginning of a legendary run that would leave Bendix as an icon of American industrialism.

After moving back to engineering – while selling

Cadillacs in Chicago to make money – Bendix struck gold.

One night late in 1909, he finished (and quickly patented) what would become known as the "Bendix Drive," which would eliminate the hand

cranking of an automobile engine. The first automobile to use the Bendix starter drive was the 1914 Chevrolet "Baby Grand."

It was an enormous hit.

By the end of the decade, the Bendix starter became a standard in all cars produced in the United States – 1.5 million vehicles – and the era of crank-start cars was essentially over.

The sudden fortune led to more money and more time for inventions, including the patent rights for a braking system, which led to the establishment of the Bendix Brake Company in 1923. With his own business, Bendix turned his energy toward perfecting the brake system of the time and, by 1926, created the first four-wheel automotive system that greatly increased the safety.

Production climbed to 3.6 million brakes in 1928 from 650,000 in 1926.

With his auto business in

good shape, Bendix expanded into the aircraft business, which was ironic given the fact Bendix hated to fly and only did so less than 10 times in his lifetime.

After creating the Bendix Aviation Company, he later invented the pressure carburetor for aircraft engines, another invention that found its way into almost every American plane.

For his many efforts, Bendix would be knighted by King Gustav V in Sweden and he would begin living an incredibly lavish and outlandish life.

Bendix built two enormous mansions, one in South Bend, Ind., not far from Chicago, Ill., and in Palm Beach, Fla., as well as his own airfield. He formed his own four-passenger helicopter company, divorced twice (the second time after reaching a settlement of \$2 million in 1932) and, by 1939, listed liabilities of \$14 million and assets of a little more than \$1 million.

In 1945, at age 63, Bendix died of a heart attack – officially a coronary thrombosis – at his home on East 57th Street in New York City.

Exactly 47 years earlier, he had come to the city with a dream.

He left in a casket, bound for Chicago and a burial in the city's Grace Memorial Cemetery.

The kid's life was different. Of that fact there was little question.



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