

# The story of the flivver king history essay



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In the story of the Flivver King, Upton Sinclair wrote this book from the period in the early 20th century about one of Americans most famous self-made business leaders of the 20th century, Henry Ford. The author explains the story through the eyes of a fictional character that idolizes Ford from a young age, that character is Abner Shutt. Abner is the main character in the book and from his viewpoint Sinclair shows the reader how Ford started off as a man who was thought to be a lunatic for his ideas of making a carriage that can move without the help of a horse, to becoming one of the most influential people of his time. The story follows the idea's and growth of what would become the Ford Motor Company through the eyes of the Shutt family, primarily Abner since he eventually works for Ford and advances himself in the company slowly. The story also shows how Abner grows into a family man who works for Ford for many years and how Henry Ford starts off with great intentions, brilliant ideals, and hopes for his company and the workers in it. As shown in the book, one of Ford's hopes at the beginning of the story is that he would be able to have his workers earn enough money so they may also have the means to buy a car. Upton Sinclair shows how Ford changes during the story and how at the end of the story, Ford and his ideals are changed by power and a few billion of dollars. The idolized leader of Ford had become a prisoner of his own wealth and power.

In this story, Upton Sinclair wants the worker who is Abner Shutt to gather with other workers and form a strong labor union. During the story Abner is not waiting to organize anything like a Union at Ford due to his beliefs of what Henry Ford is about as a person and how much trouble it can potentially get him in. Sinclair originally wrote this book for the United

Automobile Workers of America in the late 1930's so that people during this time period would understand that workers should have some basic rights to work in a safe environment with fair hours and pay. At this time at the turn of the century, many of the workers who would immigrate to America for work would often be exploited at many levels. This happened in all types of factories other than the automotive factories; Sinclair had seen factory worker abuse first hand in meat packing factories. Upton Sinclair was not just trying to be just another author but a revolutionary activist for the workers, who attempted to show people firsthand what workers had to deal with when they were in the factories. By creating books like the Flivver King, Sinclair was attempting to show how much power the leaders of a major company can have and how it is unethical. Sinclair also shows how the power hungry leaders can start with good intentions and then just crave for more and more power. During this time Upton Sinclair realized that during this time when America was in the middle of another major industrial revolution after Ford and the birth of the major car industry. People who had ideals like Sinclair wanted to see more federal regulations in the American auto industry and he was showing how company leaders like Henry Ford would be against regulation and power to the workers since he feels that he would want to have the most possible control over his company and workers as a whole.

Upton Sinclair felt that our nation at this time needed to establish a strong union where the workers can actually get help from a stronger organization when going against the corporations. Sinclair wanted a strong Union to help workers get what he feels they deserve, instead of becoming just another cog in the machine known as the abused industrial workforce at the time.

After reading this book one would think that the reason why there is no strong presence of a labor union in this country is because of the risk that it presented for workers at the time. In the Flivver King, Henry Ford used thugs and goons to intimidate people from not causing a ruckus and not bringing the any kind of union into his company. Upton Sinclair said this in the book, “ as a beleaguered American socialist in a society that is generally unsympathetic to the plight of the less fortunate, Sinclair pondered the question of why Socialism did not gain a foothold in the minds of the American workers.” (Sinclair, Preface viii, xi) Reading this from Sinclair makes the reader believe that since socialism did not gain a solid ground in the mindsets of the factory workers at the time prevented a chance and at a strong labor union, and it shows the reader that Americans can show little sympathetic to those who do not have a lifestyle as well as their own. After reading this, it is clear that Sinclair pities the American worker of this time period and he feels that if they could have embraced a more socialist mindset, there could have been some kind of organization to protect them from being exploited and possibly fired just by mentioning the very idea of trying to start or join anything like a union. Other issues in the work place were workers being killed by various factors like poor or unsafe work conditions, violent protest and strikes, and being beaten thugs.

Sinclair thought that because of the difficult working conditions, some kind of regulation was needed from a higher power, and that higher power would be our very own government. He also thought that the people needed to stand up and do something in order for anything to happen. In the book, Sinclair use's Abner's son Tom as an example of person trying to make a difference

by attempting to make labor unions for auto workers a reality. Tom Shutt who was a college graduate from the University of Michigan was once a worker at a Ford gear plant, he was eventually listed as a trouble maker by the company and he was shown working for the United Auto Workers. Tom would go into the towns where Ford had great influence he would try and show people how they can get the company to join the union. This proved to be a very dangerous job, especially in the towns where The Ford Motor Company had a strong impact. Also Sinclair shows us that greed that was a common theme in the book did not help any efforts to start labor unions in the auto industry. Sinclair believed that since characters like Ford had so much money and power at the time, they could also obtain political influence by attempting to urge the people to vote for a certain candidate so their policies can maintain the status quo and keep labor unions from becoming a reality. Just a few years after this book was written there was an ongoing battle for Ford to Unionize, the United Auto Workers won, and now even today Ford Motor Company is part of the UAW.

In the story, Upton Sinclair used the main characters in some way or another to support his arguments for why there should be a labor union for the workers in the auto factories. With his depiction of Henry Ford a self made billionaire who gets corrupted by the money, power, and the very empire he made. At first people thought of Ford a crackpot with lofty ideas, Abner's mother said on the very first page of the book that he is a crazy person who is just fooling around all day. After Ford proves the doubters wrong he creates a strong following, and one of his most loyal followers happens to be Abner. The strange and misunderstood inventor gained so much power in a

relatively short amount of time, and the power and wealth turned a peaceful and revolutionary inventor into a power hungry corporate leader who wanted to control everything around him. The next character that Sinclair uses is Abner Shutt, a loyal Ford follower from a young age since he saw the beginnings of Ford on Bagely Street in Detroit, and later an employee of Henry Ford. Abner appeared to be oblivious to some of things that occurred at the Ford Company at the time. For most of the book he would address Mr. Ford with the upmost respect. With the company growing into a global business powerhouse Abner saw the company rise from humble beginning and with honest intentions. Later Abner saw the company grow to have spies and gang members working for Ford to prevent any type of action that Ford himself would not like. Abner even had one of his own family members Tom Shutt, suffer at the hands of the gang members for trying to make a difference for the factory workers. If a proper workers union would have been established earlier on, maybe his son Tom would not have been beaten by the thugs at Ford.

Sinclair uses this compelling story to open the eyes of Americans to show them some of things that occurred to people who tried to make a difference in the world for all of the auto workers in America. He also shows how money and power can overwhelm people who start out with good and clean intentions to help and give products to those who cannot afford it or give good benefits to their workers. With this piece of literature, we now can understand how much of a need there is for a an auto workers union, so we can avoid falling back into a time where workers can be fired for the wrong

reasons or killed by the company thugs for attempting to create a safety net for the auto factory workforce.