

Wheeling Away

By Dennis Knight

It is hard to imagine the world not rolling on wheels, but their invention was, in fact, relatively recent. We discovered fire to cook our bacon 1.8 million years ago, and a half million years ago we moved from the cave and constructed our dream home. The wheel? Why, it was invented a mere fifty-five hundred years ago, and thousands of years after we had already come up with spears, glue, beads, bedding, arrowheads, sewing needles, bows and arrows, fabric, flutes and harps, rope, pottery, kilns, lacquer, canals, oars for rowing, and silk for our pajamas.

The invention of the wheel was recorded much later in history by virtue of its definition: a cylindrical object that turns on an axle. We had a similar idea before that, but historians are not counting those earlier centuries of moving heavy objects by rolling them on logs, presumably downhill, and likely to land on a raft waiting to float down the Mississippi.

Logs are relevant to my thesis, however, because the earliest wheels were not carved from stone but made of wood, so it's logical they were sawn from nice, round logs and it happened almost simultaneously in Mesopotamia and Europe, about 3,500 B.C. It's also logical that it came after the invention of saws, but I just thought of that. Maybe they had Swiss Army Knives then.

Of course, turning a cylinder on edge and pushing it up the avenue with a stick does not make it useful for anything. To be called a wheel, it needs to spin on an axle. Attaching an axle and wheel to a bucket produces a dandy wheelbarrow, or to a seat a unicycle. A platform on a single axle with two wheels can be a chariot or an oxcart, and putting one wheel in front and one in the back makes a bicycle. We can go on to discuss motorcycles, tricycles, tandem bikes, even triplets and quads, but you get the idea.

Buses, tractor trailers, and railroad trains are all merely platforms on wheels. There are ten wheels on a Greyhound and sixteen wheels on a semi. An Airbus A380 roars down the runway on twenty-two wheels before it lifts off and tucks them away. A coal train of a hundred cars rolls out of Wyoming on sixteen hundred wheels.

But our love affair with the wheel really begins when we attach a platform to four wheels, hitch a horse to it, add ruffles, and take a pretty girl out for a ride in a surrey with a fringe on top. Make it a hundred horses and call it a sexy little Fiat, or put it behind five hundred horses, fit it with bucket seats and you're whizzing her off in a Corvette.

Unfortunately, I don't have any of those, but I do have a few days off and, waiting in the driveway, a nice little platform on wheels called a Ford Escape. How far is it to Wheeling?