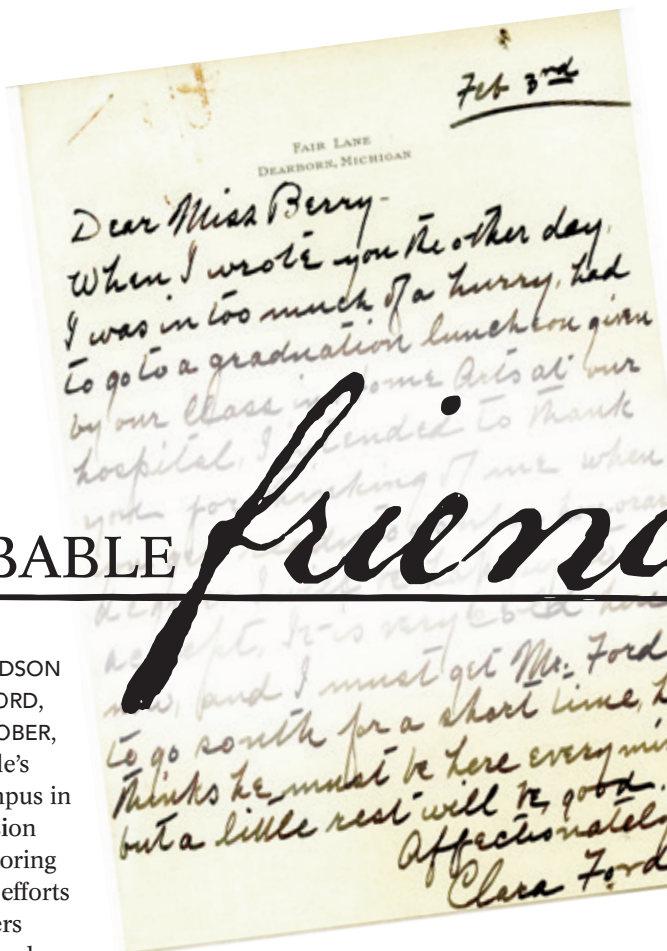




Dr. Stephen R. Briggs



## AN IMPROBABLE

# friendship

**E**DSEL FORD, GREAT-GRANDSON OF HENRY AND CLARA FORD, VISITED BERRY LAST OCTOBER, becoming the first of the couple's direct descendants to visit campus in more than 65 years. The occasion was the filming of a video honoring the outstanding humanitarian efforts of Ford Motor Company dealers around the globe, and Edsel Ford personally selected Berry College as the ideal setting.

"Just as Clara and Henry Ford used their vision and insight to improve the world around them, these dealers have shown an unwavering and relentless commitment to others," Mr. Ford stated, noting that the honored dealers "perpetuate the spirit of Henry Ford and of Martha Berry – working hard, giving back with a dedication to civic responsibility."

Martha Berry's friendship with Clara and Henry Ford was truly astonishing. When they first met, Henry Ford was the wealthiest man in America and the wealthiest industrialist in the world. He was about to produce his 10-millionth car and had already amassed a vast industrial empire. To put it in perspective, it would be today as if Bill and Melinda Gates were to take a sudden and profound interest in Berry College.

Martha was introduced to the Fords in 1916 at the New Jersey home of Mina and Thomas Edison; Mina and Martha were active members of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Martha later visited the Edisons and Fords in Muscle Shoals, Ala., and then met the Fords

again in 1922 as they passed through Rome by train en route to Florida. Soon after, Henry Ford's first gifts of tractors and a truck arrived at the Berry Schools, and the couple visited campus in 1923. Over the next two decades, the Fords stopped at Berry regularly, and their friendship with Martha grew deep. Martha was so absorbed in her work that others became believers. As Edsel Ford put it: "Henry, in particular, became increasingly enamored with Martha Berry's vision for the school, her foresight and her work ethic."

In the spirit of Edsel Ford's recent visit, it is worth considering again the shared values that shaped and cemented this improbable friendship.

### DO YOUR BEST WITH WHAT YOU HAVE

When Henry Ford first visited Berry, he was in the process of building the River Rouge Complex in Michigan, the largest factory of its kind in the world. In addition to being a progressive and humane facility with ample light for its 100,000 workers, the revolutionary complex was a model of vertical integration with its own steel mill, electrical plant and interior railroad

system. And yet, in the midst of this massive project, Henry also took delight in the homegrown Berry Schools. Although acutely aware of his wealth and power, he had not forgotten his humble origins as a farm boy. His love for the old ways and his genius for the new remain an intriguing paradox.

After a meal at the log cabin campus of the girls' school at Berry, Clara and Henry were impressed to learn that the girls who had served the meal also cooked it and that Berry boys had grown the vegetables, made the furniture and built the building. Clara asked to look at the kitchen. The stove was small and old, the floor pieced together, but everything was spotlessly clean, even after the meal. She was impressed with what they had accomplished given such limited means. Henry smiled and suggested, "Callie, maybe you'd like to give the girls a bigger stove." In time, the Fords elected to contribute far more.

Henry Ford saw in Martha Berry a fierce determination to build with the materials at hand and to carve opportunity out of adversity. It was the same mindset that enabled him to succeed during the turbulent early years of the automotive industry. Both individuals had a resolve that kept them working on a problem long after others had stopped.

### IMPROVE YOUR COMMUNITY

Henry Ford was not a talkative man, but he loosened up during sunset suppers



at the House o' Dreams. That was the place, high atop Lavender Mountain overlooking Berry, where Martha would go for extended stays to plan and to pray. Up there, she would also ask the Fords for advice about her plans, and that was where they would think with her. All three wanted the schools to succeed; Henry's advice was to keep buying land, keep working hard and keep both feet on the ground.

Henry and Martha talked a lot about education, but he did not try to tell her or others what to do. He expressed his approval in what was *being* done rather than saying what *ought* to be done. He was a vigorous proponent for practical training and hands-on learning. He provided substantial funds for Berry to buy land in the 1920s and '30s, and he had a vision for how Berry might become increasingly self-sufficient. He believed that agricultural work would strengthen Berry financially and that it was good for students to connect with the land. He sent machinery of every kind – not only tractors, but also everything students needed to use the tractors.

For decades, Martha's chief deputy was Gordon Keown, an early graduate of the Berry Schools. Keown purchased most of the acres the schools acquired and spent hours with Henry Ford exploring country roads.

One night the two men were watching a half-dozen school tractors running at 10 p.m. with lights on. They walked out to the field, and Henry praised one boy for "saving a day." The boy chuckled and responded, "We're saving a year. If we get it planted now at the right time, we'll make a crop this year. And if we don't ... we'll have to wait 'til next year." Always looking to the future himself, Henry was impressed with the young man's vision for his work.

In Detroit, Henry Ford promoted small water-power plants, and he did so at Berry as well. He funded the construction of Berry's reservoir and the overshot wooden waterwheel at the Old Mill as well as the purchase of two other water-powered mills. He also purchased a brick plant that enabled Berry students to make and lay 10 million bricks used in campus buildings including Evans (1931), Thomas Berry (1931), Laughlin (1933), Moon (1934), Cook (1937), Memorial Gymnasium (1937) and the Normandy Buildings/WinShape Retreat (1937).

#### MAKE YOURSELF USEFUL

Clara and Henry Ford were enthusiastic about Martha Berry's approach to education. Martha believed that people needed to carry their part of the burden of living, and her hope and purpose was to prepare citizens who would make a community better. Her goal in providing an education was not that someone would have an easy life, but rather that a person would work in a manner that was valuable to society.

In that sense, Martha and the Fords did not believe in charity or a free education. They came alongside young people willing to make an effort to bring out the best in themselves. The response they sought was a cheerful willingness to participate in work that needed to be done, affirming that all work is honorable if done well.

Keown once asked Henry Ford if there were still great opportunities for business. Henry replied enthusiastically that there were a hundred ways a young person could be useful and thereby both better the world and make a good living. He pointed to homes all around where only

one in a thousand had indoor bathrooms. He argued that if you focused on improving the lives of others – endeavors that would make life easier and happier for everyone, such as indoor bathrooms – you would likely prosper yourself, but he saw no purpose in creating a product just to make money.

According to Keown, Martha never asked the Fords for money. They talked instead about what the schools needed to succeed. What Martha Berry valued most "was their friendship, and their interest, and their help, and their good wishes for this place." For Martha, "What they gave of themselves was worth more to the school than what they gave of their means." She believed in her heart of hearts that people who directed money to support the deserving students at Berry were choosing to invest in the nation's most important natural resources.

Martha Berry's friendship with Clara and Henry Ford may have been improbable, but it flourished because the values she sought to instill in Berry students were the very values that invigorated the Fords' own life's work. And so we are honored that Edsel Ford returned to Berry to celebrate this legacy and to inspire another generation of citizens to be equally relentless and unwavering in service to others. **B**

On front: Henry and Clara Ford posing with Martha Berry. Far left: Henry Ford, seated next to Martha Berry on the steps of Community House at Possum Trot, accepting a drink of water from Irene Sellers (35C). Near left and above: Edsel Ford, great-grandson of Henry and Clara Ford, views family letters and photos from the Berry Archives and prepares with President Steve Briggs for a video shoot in the Ford Living Room honoring the humanitarian efforts of Ford dealers.